

Lies You Hear in the Wilderness

Many of the things I dreamed about 20 years ago are now happening, and it's wonderful. But the joy of satisfied longings is ordinary compared to the joy I receive when I am alone with God.

Some people think, *Lord, one day when I have a wife or husband, I'll be happy*, or, *Lord, I'll be really fulfilled when I get an invitation to preach in stadiums*. They are waiting for their experience in order to have their joy.

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These are good dreams, and it will be amazing when God fulfills them. But the joy and sense of fulfillment from those desires will not even come close to the fullness of joy God wants to release in your heart moment by moment in the process of getting there. He wants you to be happy now—in Him—even as you're waiting in the wilderness for the other things He has in store for you. Otherwise, God's joy would be available only at certain times of life, and we would go through long seasons without any sense of fulfillment.

The heart set on Him, no matter how many other desires it has, can be satisfied at any time. There is a deeper joy than seeing your dreams come to pass, a deeper joy than knowing God's promises and having them fulfilled. It's the deep, satisfying joy of knowing Him intimately in any season. Nothing can satisfy as He does.

Knowing and experiencing the truth that only God Himself truly

satisfies is essential because as God imparts dreams to us and gives us His promises, and then we seek Him, declare the promises and wait for their fulfillment, we will go through a wilderness. That's almost always the pattern in Scripture, and it's still true for anyone who receives His word by faith.

There is often time between promise and fulfillment, and how we respond during that time often determines what we experience. The problem is that the journey can seem so dark at times, so hopeless and discouraging, that it's easy for us to lose sight of who God wants us to be. Our wanderings are often worrisome experiences. But they don't have to be.

Lies You May Hear in the Wilderness

People get nervous when talking about blessing and favor, as though we aren't preparing each other well enough for suffering. Believe me, I have some understanding of suffering, but it was hope in His goodness that helped me get through the hard places.

In those times, we must be careful not to lean on our own understanding in trying to explain why we or anyone else is going through a hardship. God said He was well-pleased with Jesus right before He led him into the desert to be tempted. Job was not being punished when he went through suffering. For all the trials the disciples endured, it was not because they needed to be corrected.

Yet in our ignorance and arrogance, sometimes we can assume we know the purpose of pain in our lives or in the lives of others. Suffering does not mean God is not pleased with us, just as blessings don't necessarily mean He approves of everything we are doing.

In times of intense pain and trial, I have found people I thought would sympathize with me behaving more like Job's misguided friends, suggesting in the midst of my agony that I must have done something wrong to have such horrible things

happen to me or my family.

When I went through a really difficult situation with one of my children, I had people who hardly knew anything about our family suggest that I must have sacrificed my children on the altar of ministry. Adding insult to injury, these people magnified my pain. As it was, I was spending night after night until the wee hours of the morning agonizing with God and desperately trying to think of what I could have or should have done or not done to prevent the circumstances I was facing. The enemy was using these false assumptions to fuel the fire of condemnation.

We can all be judgmental. The disciples fell into this trap. When they saw a man born blind, they automatically assumed his blindness was the result of someone's sin. They asked Jesus who was at fault—the man's father, mother or the man himself. It was a ridiculous question considering that the man had been born blind! But Jesus stopped all their whys by responding that it was for none of those reasons, and He proceeded to tell them that He was going to heal the man.

It is not up to us to try to work out the why. Our job is to look to what God is going to do. God is more interested in helping us focus on Him as the answer than on the tormenting question of why the difficult circumstance arose in the first place. And trying to judge the why in others' circumstances is rarely helpful, when Jesus just wants to be their answer. We can learn from our mistakes, but in the midst of pain, our best focus is not on the why but on who Christ is to us in the midst of it all.

During this time of pain and sadness, my first reaction was to give up ministry altogether. But as I agonized in prayer, God spoke to me from the book of Matthew. I read the story of how Jesus responded when He heard of His cousin John's death. He went to a deserted place by Himself, probably to grieve. But the crowds followed Him, and Jesus had compassion on them. He

healed them, taught them, and fed all 5,000 of them.

God spoke to me not to withdraw but to have compassion on the people and continue ministering. I praise God now that I did because the trial lasted five years. I could have spent five years in depression, doing nothing but mourning. Instead, those five years became part of the most fruitful season I had ever had. Then God began to gloriously redeem the time and circumstances to make the situation better than it had ever been.

God gives double for our trouble when we choose to keep our eyes on Him rather than on the pain we are feeling. And the comfort we receive from the Holy Spirit in those times is comfort we can then share with others. God does make miracles out of messes for those who will trust Him.

The Key to Thriving in the Wilderness

In this world, we do have troubles. But Jesus tells us to take heart and be encouraged because He has overcome the world (John 16:33). He makes all things work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). That means we can be happy—even in the middle of a wilderness.

Don't let the enemy convince you that you're disqualified from experiencing the promises in any of these verses. I used to read Romans 8:28 and think, "Well, do I love Him enough to qualify for this promise?" That was the enemy, of course, once again trying to put an impossible standard on me and telling me I didn't measure up. But nothing we bring to God, including our love, comes from us in the first place. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). In fact, even if our heart condemns us, He is greater than our heart (1 John 3:20).

There have been a lot of lies told about Jesus, and when you're in a wilderness, it's tempting to believe them. As human beings, we tend to judge God by our circumstances rather

than judging our circumstances by Him, and our circumstances can be a very unreliable measure of who He is. The religious-sounding words about why you're in the wilderness or how God wants you to remain there and endure it paint an unfair picture. God is for you. If you want to talk about unfairness, know that it's unfair how very much He loves and adores you.

By human standards, this isn't justice. But because of what Jesus did, God gets to do for you what He has always longed to do—to give you the kingdom as a co-heir with Christ and love you with such a strong love that you need supernatural strength to handle it. Regardless of any other voices you've heard, this is the truth about Him.

Spend some time thinking about who God is and who He is for you. It's always good to do that, but it's especially important when you're going through a dry and barren place. That is when distortions about Him are easiest to swallow. Choose to believe the truth. When you wake up, remind yourself that His mercy is new every morning.

Know that He isn't looking to see how well you do; He's waiting to see whether you'll have faith in His goodness so He can come in, overwhelm you and fill you with joy and strength, allowing you to arise and shine as one of His glorious ones. Instead of buying the lies that you're supposed to walk around weak and frail, yield your weakness to Him and let Him clothe you with power from on high. If God is for you, who can be against you?

You are meant to thrive in the wilderness, not just survive in it. And receiving God's love—looking into His eyes and seeing how He really feels about you—gives you power to thrive in even the driest places. Until you get a revelation of His love that fills you to overflowing with His fullness, just as Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 says, you won't experience His joy. You won't be able to live in the confidence that He wants to do ridiculously good things for you. Until you allow Him to

lavish love on you, you won't be able to enter into the fullness of His desire to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all you can ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

This is why so many believers are wandering in the wilderness without experiencing hope or joy. Sadly, for some people, the wilderness has become a place of distortion, full of lies about God, when, in fact, it is where faith gets tested and grows strong. But it can only grow strong when we know God's love because love is the root of faith. We can only trust someone we love, and we can only love God in response to His love for us. So getting His love is not just a nice thing to encourage us. It isn't just a celebration without any fruit. It's vital. It enables us to receive God's promises by faith, and those promises become our food in barren places.

When you really get the love of God, you actually open doors for faith to be released to see the kingdom of God established on earth.

The busier I become, the more I recognize that I need to schedule time to be loved—to simply look into God's eyes and receive His goodness. You can never be too busy to receive. The busier you are, the more of Him you need. His pleasure over you is like a river, and it never stops flowing.

If you've ever wondered how someone can be satisfied and fulfilled while still in the wilderness, this is the secret. The dreams God has given you will be satisfying and fulfilling but not nearly as much as He is. Those dreams may take a while to unfold; mine took years, as did the dreams and callings of Joseph, Moses, David and many more. But God is available now. His love is for every moment, no matter how barren the landscape is. And only He can truly satisfy.

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