

What to Do When You Find Yourself in the Wilderness of the Soul

I distinctly remember, as a new believer, the first time that I felt as if God had left me. There I was, navigating an emotional valley, seemingly on my own. It was a weighty declaration, as I recall, to tell a fellow believer that I was going through a wilderness season. Though a bit more mature today, after being a Christ-follower for over four decades, I am still completely undone by wilderness of soul—the desert encounters.

Natural deserts are a part of the ecosystem known as drylands. The primary characteristic is a lack of water. Drylands cover 40 percent of the world's land surface, and contain thirty percent of the world's population. Cultivating crops and life resources is doable, but more difficult. Onward to our spiritual application.

Learning from Our Choices

The experiences of Israel in the wilderness are clearly formulated into a divine exhortation. They are nearly chilling reminders.

“They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness” (1 Cor. 10:3-5).

When God gives a clear warning or an example for us to note, wisdom says I need to pay attention.

Before you say, “This will never happen on my watch,” consider

this: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

Thankfully, the next verse offers hope:

“No temptation has taken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful, and He will not permit you to be tempted above what you can endure, but with the temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

You mean that Israel had a way out of the wilderness other than the fate they experienced? Precisely.

They made wrong lifestyle choices, clearly put forth in the passage: idolatry, sexual immorality, testing Christ, grumbling (1 Cor. 10:7–10).

These remain killer choices today. Perhaps you are personally aware of some in the present day whose faith did not endure in the wilderness. They may have deemed God unfair and no longer worthy of being followed, investing instead in what seemed to be more palatable options.

God’s Weight Room

The wilderness is God’s weight room, his training center, to develop us. Standing up under temptation is the first ministry process that Jesus went through. Human logic would dictate that following His baptism and a public proclamation that the Father was pleased with Him, a ministry launch would be in order.

It actually *was* a ministry launch, just not the kind we might desire.

The top man from each team needed to face off. This set the tone for all who would follow. If Jesus was led there, might not Holy Spirit lead each of us into wilderness testing as

well? Going “from glory to glory” is indeed our destiny, but we must not mistake that to simply mean “from one high point to another.”

Wilderness interludes are an integral, balancing component, undergirding us more than we know.

I have found that the turbulence of the wilderness is not only sourced from around me but from within me. The circumstances are a real contributor, no question, but it's my inner response that reveals the real issue. Anxiety and insecurity for example, may exist in my soul, but I can compensate by comforting myself in other ways. The wilderness however, offers me no props. When God takes away your water and says, “The only place to satiate your thirst is in Me,” you must find a way to believe that the wilderness is not devoid of God.

” My heart is in pain within me, and the terrors of death have fallen on me. Fear and trembling come into me, and horror has overwhelmed me.

I said, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! For then I would fly away and be at rest. Indeed, then I would wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. Selah I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest” (Ps. 55:4-8).

My creation of this tranquil wilderness shelter would be a quiet mountain cabin with a great view, running water and a strong internet connection. Yes, let's get away into the wilderness! God's version is akin to stretching me to the max, causing me lean into Him, breaking new ground for my faith and planting my roots deeper into His heart—creature comforts as we know them not on the top of His list.

‘Directed’ vs. ‘Wandering’

Through personal experience and observation, I find two broad categories by which to understand the wilderness. A “directed

wilderness” is a desert season through which I am learning God’s ways. I am embracing the opportunities for growth that God puts before me.

On the other hand, a “wandering wilderness” is a desert season in which I am resisting the leading of the Lord, and mostly camping out in grumbling and discontentment. Jesus was directed into the wilderness and did not wander while there. This is my desire, to be like Christ.

The wilderness is not a “one and done” proposition. God will lovingly guide us, patiently overseeing our stumbling, always giving us a chance to try again. The drylands, then, are a place of thirst—a resource that we must learn how to mine and harness. Author Sara Hagerty describes it well:

“the degree to which I allow weakness to become thirst for more of God, and the degree to which I allow myself to lean into that thirst rather than run from it, is the degree to which I am becoming my best self ... Our thirst is how God allures us. The thirsty don’t just find God, they thrive in God.

The writer of Hosea offers a similarly promising picture: “Therefore, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.

From there, I will give her vineyards to her, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope. She will respond there as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt” (Hos. 2:14-15).

Partnering With God

There has never been a time when I’ve ardently partnered with God in the wilderness, that He hasn’t been faithful to speak tenderly, release a greater fruitfulness (vineyards) and a more hopeful outlook, and renew my first-love heart response.

I like prayers that hit the bullseye, prayers that I know stand a good chance of getting results. Here's one of my favorites: *God, increase my thirst for you. Do whatever it takes to increase my yearning for you. Refresh my vision and enlarge my desire to please your heart.*

When I sprinkle a little fasting onto this prayer, I often find myself in a state of wonderful deprivation, the chamber of my soul fueled to seek the face of God. {eoa}

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