A Way Through The Wilderness

Coming Out of the Wilderness

God does not want you to stay in the wilderness forever. There is a land of promise for us where we will experience peace and the abundance of God’s blessings. God intends for us to come out of the wilderness, enter His rest, and live in His promises.

As noted before we all go through wilderness times. If you’ve dedicated you life to following Jesus you’ll probably have even more wilderness times. After His baptism Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit … was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil,” Luke 4:1-2. There He was tested and proved, and began His earthly ministry. Even God’s own beloved Son was tested and tempted in every way we are.

Today is the Sunday before Easter Sunday – we know it as Palm Sunday, recalling Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem when people cheered Him and laid palm branches before him, like a red carpet rolled out for a head of state. They cheered him as the great miracle worker, the messiah, as the blessed One come in the name of the Lord. What a wonderful day it was! Think of those wonderful days you’ve experienced – when all was right in your life, your joy was complete, your success acclaimed. Maybe it was a day of graduation, a day of promotion, your wedding day, the birth of a child, a sports victory, your retirement party etc. We’ve all had those moments when you feel like you’re on top of the world… How quickly we can come sliding down!

At the beginning of the week Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph. By the end of the week he was leaving Jerusalem carrying the cross for his own crucifixion. The cheering crowd became a jeering crowd. Though Jesus had already been through a wilderness of testing, suddenly He was plunged into it again - tempted by the devil. This was His final entrance into the wilderness, this time to accomplish God’s plan for Him and for us. Remaining faithful to the end, Jesus emerged from his darkest hour. He won the victory over sin for us. He emerged victorious and we too can emerge from our wilderness times as victors. Here’s what we can learn in our wilderness experience…

The Wilderness Will Reveal Your Heart

The wilderness will put pressure on us unlike any other times in our lives. When the pressure is on the truth comes out. It’s just like a sponge: put the squeeze on the sponge and you’ll see what comes out. The wilderness will reveal who we truly are.

Every decision we make, good or bad, flows from our character – who we are when no one is looking. Jesus taught this truth when he said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander,” Matt. 15:19. When life is going well we can guard our words and catch our mistakes. But when the wilderness bears down on us, our true nature comes pouring out, just like it did with those Israelites long ago who complained and whined to Moses and rebelled against God.

When you look back on your wilderness experiences you may notice that when you were in it deep, you filled with pride, believing you could handle it all yourself, cutting others out of your life. You may observe that you were all wrapped up in yourself and your problems, even more self-centered than you normally are. You may observe that you were angry and bitter, thinking no one cared about your predicament or that people were out to get you. And maybe, while you thought you could handle everything yourself, you began to doubt that you’d make it out of the wilderness without help.

The wilderness is like the brutally honest feedback you get from time to time (sometimes it comes from friends, family, or even critics), telling you exactly what you need to know about yourself – where you’re strong, where you’re weak, and where you need to grow so that you can become more like Jesus.
But if you don’t really care about growing in faith, if you’re content with a complacent spiritual life, then you won’t care about learning the uncomfortable stuff about yourself. That way you can be the same ole person you are now in 10, 20, 30 years.

On the other hand, if you’ve decided to live for a spiritual purpose, if you want to genuinely serve God and follow Christ, if you want a deeper faith; then the wilderness experience can be your teacher. It is telling you exactly what you need to know about yourself so that you can become more like Jesus. Tuition is very high, but the lessons learned in the wilderness have eternal value.

The Wilderness Will Change You

No matter the nature of your wilderness experience, how you make your way through it will change you. **You will always come out of your wilderness experience different than when you went in.** You will be stronger or weaker, full of faith or full of doubts, closer to God or farther away, more like Jesus or more self-centered. You heart will have been softened or hardened. **You will come out either better or bitter.** Which do you want?

Some of you may know the story of Louie Zamperini. Several years ago I read: *Unbroken, A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption,* by Laura Hillenbrand.¹ It is the true story of Louie Zamperini. They recently made a movie of his story. He was a USC track star who competed in the 1936 Olympics and was headed for a stellar athletic career when WWII came. Louie entered the Army Air Corps. In May of 1943 his plane crashed into the vast South Pacific Ocean. He survived 47 days on a raft, punctured with bullet holes from a strafing Japanese aircraft, circled by sharks, beaten by the sun, withered with thirst and hunger. The worst was yet to come.

During two and half years as a POW and slave laborer in Japan, Louie suffered daily beatings and degradation. One guard – whom they called “The Bird” – singled him out for especially cruel treatment too horrible to tell. Miraculously, he survived. Louie returned to his loving family in Torrance, CA. He married and prepared to settle into life.

Here’s the part the movie left out: his life, broken by the suffering and cruelty he had endured, was tortured by his past. Every night he relived the cruelties of “The Bird.” His descent into alcoholism, insomnia, and rage slowly destroyed his marriage, his financial standing, even his ability to be the semblance of a father to his infant daughter.

At last, after months of despair his wife Cynthia was able to drag him to a Billy Graham tent revival in Los Angeles. Reluctantly Louie took his seat in the tent and heard Graham preach on John chapter 8 [the woman caught in adultery].

Describing Jesus rising from his knees after a night of prayer, Graham asked his listeners how long it had been since they’d prayed in earnest. [How long has it been for you?] Then he focused on Jesus’ bending down, his finger tracing words in the sand at the Pharisees feet, sending the men scattering in fear.

“What did they see Jesus write?” Graham asked. Inside himself, Louie felt something twisting. “Darkness doesn’t hide the eyes of God,” Graham said...²

Louie felt indignant rage flaring in him. Somewhere under his anger, there was lurking, nameless uneasiness, the shudder of sharks rasping their backs along the bottom of the raft. There was a thought he must not think, a memory he must not see. With the urgency of a bolting animal, he wanted to run.

When Graham began to say, “Every head bowed and every eye closed,” Louie grabbed his wife’s arm and bulled his way out of the tent. That night Louie lay helpless in bed as his nightmare enveloped him again. “The body that hunched over him was that of the Bird. The face was that of the devil.”

The next day – Sunday – Cynthia, after much argument, coaxed him into seeing Billy Graham again that night. Louie finally agreed to go. When Graham got to the invitation Louie felt enraged, violent, on the edge of explosion. He wanted to hit someone. He pushed his way toward the exit. But a memory, from which he had long been running, overtook him. He was on the raft again. The endless ocean stretching away in every direction, the sun lying over them, the cunning bodies of the sharks, waiting, circling. He felt words whisper from his swollen lips. It was a promise he had allowed himself to forget.
until just this instant: *If you will save me, I will serve you forever.* And then, standing under a circus tent on a clear night in downtown Los Angeles, Louie felt rain falling.

It was the last flashback he would ever have.... That night for the first time in five years, the Bird hadn’t come into his dreams. The Bird would never come again. Now it was not the suffering that had power over him, but the divine love that Louie believed had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that the Bird had striven to make of him. His rage, his fear, his humiliation, and helplessness, had fallen away. He arose as a new creation. Louie went on to live a beautiful life, profoundly enriching the lives of others. Not many of us will ever live through the horror that Louie survived – and thank God for that. But our difficult times are still ours: serious illness, tragic accident, apprehension about tomorrow, next week, next month, how will I pay all the bills?

**Letting the wilderness change us for the worse is the natural, the easy route.** That requires no faith, no effort, no intentionality, no strength. You just say to yourself, “I shouldn’t have to suffer like this. No one understands. No one knows how I feel. No one really cares.” Or you carry your anger, your outrage at the injustice you’ve suffered, carry it through every other time of your life. Some of us, after we’ve made it through the wilderness, we’ve reached better times, some of us still carry the wilderness inside us. We’ve returned to life but we remain emotionally crippled and spiritually empty. Cynicism has replaced compassion. Fatalism has crowded out faith. The poisons of bitterness and anger linger on. That’s not God’s plan – you can come out better. Turn to Him and come out better.

**The Wilderness Will Give You a Gift to Share**

The most profound impact we will have on the lives of others springs from what we have learned from our struggles and failures. Christians are often afraid to share their faith. Yet, you have a story to share telling how you came out of a wilderness time and what God has done for you. Everyone goes through dark and troubled times in life, so everyone can identify with your struggle. Your witness is simply to share how your pain and struggle was carried by God; God who came to us in person in Jesus, and who knows your name.

“**Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed,**” Isaiah 53:4-5.

What you have to offer other broken, wilderness-wandering people is not your knowledge of the Bible, or of psychology, or of anything in particular. What makes your words healing – not just interesting or thought-provoking – is the power they convey from one who has come to the end of his/her rope and being able to say, “God got me through.” Tell people about the God who was with you in your failures, your devastation, your despair, and they will be encouraged. “**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ,**” 2 Cor. 1:3-5. When life has thrown you to the ground and you crawl to God, and come out of the wilderness strong of spirit and soft of heart, then will you be able to impart hope to others with power and grace.

People need hope. Every night we go to bed without any assurance of being alive the next morning, but still we set the alarm to wake up. That’s HOPE. We all need hope.

**If you are in the wilderness now, let me assure you that God has not forgotten you.** He will answer your call, He will get you through this time. You will not be the same, but that can be an incredible gift. In the wilderness God can transform your character in beautiful ways, making you stronger in faith, better equipped to help others who are hurting. It won’t be easy, but it will be worth it.

**We “... are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit,”** 2 Cor. 3:18.

2"God takes down your life from the time you were born to the time you die. And when you stand before God on the great judgment day, you're going to say, 'Lord I wasn't such a bad fellow,' and they are going to pull down the screen and they going to shoot the moving picture of your life from the cradle to the grave, and your are going to hear every thought that was going through your mind every minute of the day, every second of the minute, and you're going to hear the words that you said. And your own words, and your own thoughts, and your own deeds, are going to condemn you as you stand before God on that day. And God is going to say, “Depart from me.” Excerpted from “The Only Sermon Jesus Ever Wrote,” sermon by Billy Graham © 1949 Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.