

WHERE DOES YOUR PATH CROSS WITH THEIRS?

A 14-DAY

wilderness

EXCURSION

THROUGH

THE BIBLE

CORELLA ROBERTS

A 14-day Wilderness Excursion Through the Bible

by Corella Roberts

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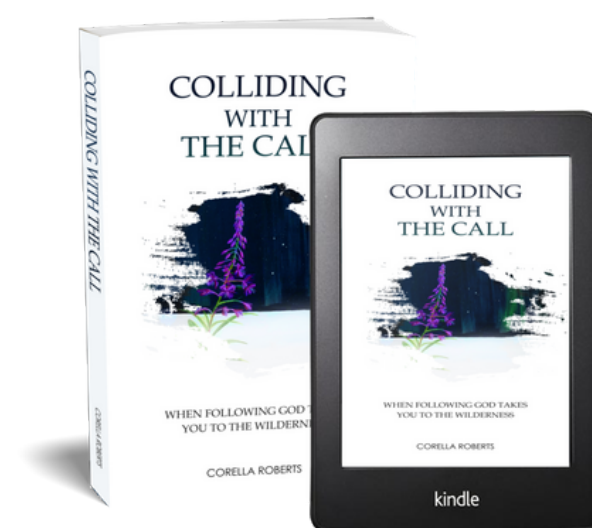
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Scripture is quoted in the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

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Read Corella's full-length account of her own wilderness season as a missionary teacher in remote Alaska and how God met her in that place of testing and transformation.

*Colliding with the Call:
When Following God
Takes You to the Wilderness*



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introduction

His dust-caked feet ache from traveling long miles; his shoulders sag under a heavy pack. Even the cattle balk, and the sheep lay down in the midday sun.

"Get them up. They'll die if we stop here now," he commands his eldest.

"Abba, can I have some water?"

He checks the gourds to stall giving the answer he already knows. They clank with a hollow shout. He finds his son's expectant eyes and shakes his head.

"I'll ask around. See if I can find you and your sister something to drink." His eyes blur, but not from tears. There are no tears when you haven't touched liquid for nearly two days. He saved the last drops for his children to drink this morning. And he knows it's the same for every other family and creature on this insane trek through the desert.

The Israelites were no strangers to hard work and distress, but this? This was too much. They'd been promised freedom, deliverance. This felt a whole lot more like misery and death. Can you feel it? Can you relate to it?

The weary travelers cried out, "What are we to drink?" (Ex 15:24) "You brought us out here to starve to death!" (Ex 16:3) "Give us water! Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die of thirst?" (Ex 17:2-3; Num 20:5)

And God answered. Every. single. time.

But not as quickly as they would have liked. Not in the way they were used to. He turned bitter waters clean with a branch and brought water from a rock not once, but twice. He drove quails into their camp, and showered a never-before-seen food substance down on them every night. Their sandals never wore out, and their clothing lasted a miraculous 40 years. (Neh 9:21)

What's more, this God of their fathers that they scarcely knew went with them the whole way. He revealed Himself through miracle and plague, fire and cloud, protection and healing.

The wilderness was where they learned His names:

I AM. (Ex 3:14)

The Lord that heals. (Ex 15:26)

The Lord is my banner. (Ex 17:15)

A jealous God. (Ex 20:5)

The Lord who makes you holy. (Ex 31:13)

And where He invited them to be His very own. "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex 19:4-6)

But here are the driving questions behind our study: Was the wilderness experience a necessary part of their sanctification and preparation? Is it intended to be part of yours?

Let's journey through the pages of scripture together, walking with beloved figures such as Abraham, Elijah, Naomi, and even Jesus, to uncover the purpose of the times of frustration, doubt, grief, and testing in their own wilderness experiences.

"Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Deuteronomy 8:2-3

MIDBAR מִדְבָּר

What is the wilderness?

One thing you must decide at the outset of this excursion, is who is in charge of your journey? Who is pointing to the next destination on the map? Who is laying the path for your steps?

Our great temptation is to believe that we are. We plan our route, pack our suitcases, and even get travel insurance just to cover the unexpected. We humans like to play god. It's been that way since the beginning: "...when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God," seduces the serpent in Genesis 3:5. So we take the bait, eat the fruit, and believe that we possess all the wisdom needed to navigate this life successfully.

But the trouble comes when the trouble comes. Suddenly, we have to choose. Did we get ourselves into this mess? And a whole heap of shame and self-loathing pounds at the door if we did. Or did God get us into this? And a terrible struggle between reconciling God's goodness with our reality breaks out within.

Unless we believe Jesus when he said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Difficulty is part of the package. While we live on this sin-broken planet, we will face trials of many kinds. (James 1:2-5)

And it would seem that the wilderness--of pain or disappointment, barrenness or doubt, transition or grief--will be part of your story.

Here's the beauty of it, though: the wilderness is not meant for your crushing. It's meant to create a deep hunger and thirst for God alone. And it's no accident. In fact, the Hebrew word for wilderness is midbar, which comes from a root word meaning "to drive", as in guiding sheep out to pasture. It's occasionally even translated to mean mouth or speech.

If sheep are being driven out to midbar, it's certainly not because the shepherd is just hoping for a good laugh at their agony. No, the good shepherd cares for His sheep, protects His sheep, and most definitely knows where He is leading His sheep. (See Ps 23 and John 10)

Take a few minutes to let this video make the desert experience of the Bible feel a little more near to you:

Preview of "Walking with God in the Desert" by Ray Vander Laan
 Visit <https://youtu.be/8AjnnhKVqsw>
 (Used with permission)

bible excursion

RESPOND

- How do you feel about the idea that God leads his people--leads you--to the wilderness?

READ

- Psalm 78

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

ADAM & EVE

The first wilderness

Our wilderness excursion today takes us all the way back to the very first humans: Adam and Eve. If anyone was ever driven into the wilderness, it was them. While the Israelite nation traded hard work for long miles, one difficulty for another, Adam and Eve gave up perfect provision for thorn-ransacked ground, ease and comfort for struggle and pain.

We all know what caused their ejection from paradise, don't we? Disobedience, pride, cravings of the flesh--in one word, sin. But in case you're of the mindset that they were booted from Eden as God's angry judgment, let's have a look at Genesis 3:22:

"And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.' "

Have you ever thought of God closing the path to the tree of life as an act of kindness? Personally, I have no desire to live forever in this broken state. Cancer that steals health, abusers molesting children, spouses that leave, water unfit to drink, greed and fear mongering and war and shame and loneliness and gossip and illness . . . I want it all to end.

And by God's mercy it does. We won't get to eat from that tree of life until we're all made new. Sinless. Pain-free and whole. Hallelujah!

Even in their wilderness, amid thistles and dust, with labor pains and fear, Adam and Eve still had one key thing.

God was with them.

Now, I'm not going to pretend to understand how this all worked. Their relationship with Him was surely different than it was in the garden, but Genesis four gives us some pretty significant clues that God still communed with them. If we follow Adam and Eve's story to that of Cain and Abel, their first children, we discover this remarkable verse:

"So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden." (Genesis 4:16)

Cain never knew the Garden. Yet we're specifically told he was sent away from the Lord's presence, which can mean only one thing: God's presence was with Adam and Eve's family even in the wilderness.

Yes, sometimes our troubles do come because of our own sinful actions. Sometimes we take ourselves out of God's perfect plan and find ourselves in the desert. But know this, God doesn't abandon you there. He walks with you, offers redemption, and waits for you to take His hand.

It's never too late to return to communion with your Father.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- Is your present situation causing you to doubt God's nearness? Even if you can't see Him or feel Him like you once did, do you believe He is still by your side, waiting for your return?

READ

- Genesis 3:21 - 4:16

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

ABRAHAM

Waiting in the wilderness

A defining characteristic of the wilderness is its uncertain timeline. Part of what makes it such a bitter experience is the waiting. You might *know* it won't last forever, you might be *certain* that God will eventually lead you to that place/dream/ministry/relationship He promised, but you simply have no idea *when*.

No figures who crossed Bible terrain have more waiting in their story than perhaps Abraham and Sarah. Let's summarize their story a bit:

- At seventy-five years old, God calls Abraham to leave his home and head to an unknown land the Lord will show him. (Genesis 12:1-9)
- After arriving at the promised destination, a famine strikes the land and they head to Egypt for a while. (Genesis 12:10 - 13:4)
- God makes a covenant with Abraham, and Abraham believes he will have a child in his old age. (Genesis 15)
- Still no baby. It's been eleven years since God first promised to make Abraham a great nation. He sleeps with Hagar, his wife's maidservant, and they have Ishmael when Abraham is eighty-six years old. (Genesis 16)
- Thirteen more years pass. *Thirteen*. God appears to Abraham again and declares that Sarah, although she is now ninety years old, will have a son. (Genesis 17:1 - 18:15)

Here are the verses, the capstone, that finish off Abraham and Sarah's **twenty-four years of waiting**:

"Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him."

Genesis 21:1-2

So, how long have you been waiting on God to show up and do that thing you know only He can do?

I get squirmy after twenty-four days, let alone twenty-four years. It's no wonder that Abraham's name is mentioned a grand total of 119 times outside of the book of Genesis, where his narrative is contained. All that waiting, all that trusting, all that faithfulness (not to mention a few huge mistakes), earned him the renown of the one whose belief was credited to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6 and James 2:23)

I want to leave you with one more word-treasure: to wait. It's original meaning strongly implies looking for something eagerly and with hope. It can even mean twisting, binding together, creating a rope.

Grasp this rope in your darkest moments of uncertainty and doubt. Twist up your hopes and your expectations in the God of Abraham, and hang on to Him for dear life.

He will pull you through.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- What are your hopes twisted up in? Are they holding fast to God's unchanging character and word, or are they being dragged through a slurry of circumstances?

READ

- Isaiah 40:21-31

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

HAGAR & GOMER

Awakened in the wilderness

Hagar and Gomer. If you know their stories, their reputations, you likely won't choose to name your daughters after them. One was a maidservant, used to bear a child; the other was a prostitute who couldn't seem to stay faithful to her husband. These are not the Sunday school stories we retell in detail.

But for all their brokenness, all their ups and downs, these two women bear the testimony of God's mercy. Let's look at Gomer's story together, then you'll explore Hagar's on your own.

This is our introduction to Gomer from Hosea 1:2-3: "When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord.' So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son."

This might seem unfair to Hosea, but as usual, there's a bigger picture to be seen. The King, in His unfathomable wisdom, is pleading for His wayward people in a poignant way throughout the story of Hosea and Gomer. The intensity of God's love for His people can't be denied.

We would do well to see ourselves less as the prophet and more as the prostitute, with hearts that eagerly grasp for security from anything and everything besides God. I stand right there convicted with you.

Later, Gomer, even after experiencing the security of Hosea's faithful love, runs away to the arms of another. Hosea redeems her and brings her back home with a plea for her fidelity (Hosea 3:1-5). I can only imagine the looks from the neighbors.

God, however, has known all along that Gomer's wanderings are actually the wake-up call she needs. Hosea chapter two captures the picture of our Husband-God allowing His people (Gomer) to chase after other lovers that will never satisfy. When we finally find ourselves in the wilderness, stripped bare of our idols and starving for something true, our prodigal hearts are ready to return home.

"And now, here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to start all over again. I'm taking her back out into the wilderness where we had our first date, and I'll court her. I'll give her bouquets of roses. I'll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope. She'll respond like she did as a young girl, those days when she was fresh out of Egypt." (Hosea 2:14-15 MSG)

The wilderness offers a merciful breaking. While we lean on our worldly comforts we can never lean on God, and He knows we won't let go of our idols until we discover how worthless they truly are. His desire is to bless us, but that blessing is only found inside the safety of His exclusive embrace. When all else appears lost, God is most near.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- What false comforts do you run to when life gets hard? How is God mercifully stripping those away?

READ

- Genesis 16:1-13 and Genesis 21:8-21

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

JACOB

Hearing God in the wilderness

Jacob was renamed Israel. His twelve sons became the original twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. He carried Abraham's promise that all the earth would be blessed through him; and indeed they were when Jesus, the Messiah, came from his family line. And now, 4,000 years later, the nation of Israel--after exile, displacement, and near extermination by war--still stands right where it started.

Although this blessing was assured before he was born (Genesis 25:21-26), none of it came easily. First, Jacob tricked his brother into selling his birthright, then, he tricked his father into giving him the firstborn's blessing (Genesis 25:27-34 and 27:1-29). It would seem he was taking after his grandfather, Abraham, by trying to procure God's promises through human means.

When it all finally catches up with him, he flees for his life by going to his uncle's house in Haran. This is a 500 mile journey. On foot. And he apparently doesn't even have a tent, because when he collapses exhausted on the first night, he simply grabs a rock for a pillow (Genesis 28:10-11). I would say that here, running from his brother, exposed to the elements, with an uncertain future miles ahead of him, Jacob is in the wilderness.

This is precisely where God speaks to him. He's not hearing God's promise second-hand through his mother. He's encountering God for himself.

"He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: 'I am the Lord . . . All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.'" (Genesis 28:12-15)

Jacob's response? He got some fear of the Lord deep in his bones and he promised God that if God would uphold His end of the bargain, Jacob would follow Him and honor Him (Genesis 28:16-22).

I don't know what Jacob believed before this encounter, but I do know God had him on a journey of transformation that would culminate in another theophany and his ultimate name-change to Israel. (You'll dig into this part of the story in your own study today.)

God has each of us on a journey of transformation, as well. Our God-encounter and name-change will come, too (Revelation 2:17 and 3:12). Until then, He is faithful to give us glimpses of His glory and reminders of His promise in our own wilderness places.

You don't have to rely on what you've heard second-hand. He desires to reveal Himself to you.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). Are you seeking God with all your heart today? What is standing in your way?

READ

- Genesis 32:22-30

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

MOSES

Prepared in the wilderness

Each of us is created and crafted with a unique piece of the fire of God deep in our souls. We are made in His image, and certain aspects of His character are revealed through the unique personality and giftings of each individual. Our multi-faceted, incomprehensible, passionate Creator uses us to display His character to the world.

Your special piece of God-fire is, however, distorted by sin and buried by the false words and narratives you believe about yourself. What does it take to mine this treasure from the stony lies it's buried beneath? You guessed it. Refinement. Trial by fire. And often a good measure of waiting for the right time and the fullness of wisdom for it to shine its brightest.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

When I look at Moses, I see a rescuer. The first piece of his adult life we're told about showcases the intense sense of justice that's part of Moses' character: he defends the defenseless. But in this same text we also see the sinful twisting of this gift when he goes too far and kills the Egyptian that was beating the Hebrew slave (Exodus 2:11-12).

Next, he intervenes in a fight between two Hebrews, again seeking justice, and a few verses later we see him protecting the daughters of Midian in the desert. He is described as coming to their rescue (v. 17), and then he even waters their flock for them. Moses is a regular knight in shining armor.

You'll notice, however, that the Lord didn't see fit to use Moses' youthful zeal and penchant toward heroism immediately. Those pieces of his personality reflect our rescuer-God, but they needed some refining. They needed some time in the wilderness, and with some stinky sheep, to boot. From the start, Moses had a heart to save the Israelites from their slavery, but first he needed to grow in the humility of a shepherd. God knew that those "stiff-necked" Hebrews would be tougher to lead to freedom than young, feisty Moses was prepared for.

Moses stayed in the desert for a long period, we're told in Exodus 2:23. How many years, I don't know, but long enough that when God appeared to him in the burning bush, Moses no longer jumped at the opportunity to rescue his people. Instead he said, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11)

The trials and the waiting of the wilderness have a tendency to produce the kind of humility in our hearts that God can use. That big, fiery piece of you that gets you into trouble? It's there for a reason. And in the right season, with a little polishing, God will use it to shine a glorious facet of His character through you.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- In what ways do you feel like you're merely tending sheep when you long to be doing something "bigger"? How can you see God using your current experiences to refine His character in you?

READ

- Exodus 2:11 - 3:17

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

NAOMI

Finding redemption in the wilderness

Naomi dipped her fingers into the acrid water and brought them, dripping, to her tongue. The bitter salt seared her taste buds. She knew she couldn't drink it, yet somehow she felt as if it belonged in her. Or maybe came from her. A pool of tears stretching for miles. A barren beauty whose very existence seemed to summon death.

She rocked back on her heels and gazed across the sea to the barely discernible mountains on the other shore. Beyond those mountains lay Bethlehem, and she could see it in her mind's eye as clearly as if she'd walked its rocky streets and danced with her friends in its fields yesterday. The rolling hills, the fields of grain, the stolen glances with her beloved Elimelech.

But it wasn't yesterday. Those moments of happiness were trapped in the past, separated from her life by the famine ten years ago. The land of Moab had not been good to them. Food, yes, but sorrow all the more. First Elimelech died. Then her two sons.

Fresh tears stung Naomi's eyes at the bitter memories, and she didn't bother to wipe them away as they found a path down her cheeks into the salt water at her toes. She sighed. At least I can go home, she thought. But when she stood and faced her daughters-in-law who watched over their supplies a few meters away, she realized that their wistful gaze was not set across the Dead Sea toward Israel.

Their attention kept turning back to the road they had just traversed. They looked back to Moab, their home. Jerked out of her own melancholy, Naomi knew she couldn't ask them to come with her any farther. She couldn't add the sting of leaving home upon the wound of losing their husbands. They were all she had, but she had to let them go. She must bear her sorrows and the rugged journey ahead alone. Abandoned, afflicted, and old, she would return to Bethlehem a widow bereaved of her children, as well.

And so we find Naomi nearly shoving Orpah and Ruth away after they have only just begun their trip to Israel. Orpah leaves, wanting a new life, a husband from her own people, a chance at a future of joy. But Ruth will not leave her mother-in-law, no matter the reasoning.

If you know the rest of the story, you know that Naomi's Redeemer was there all along. He knew her story would not end with sorrow. Ruth married Boaz, and they had a child. Not just any child--the grandfather of King David. Ruth is forever named in Jesus' family tree. And Naomi suddenly had her empty arms filled with a baby and her wounded heart restored to joy.

Our God redeems even the most painful of circumstances, and He rewards every act of obedience and sacrifice made for His sake:

"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" Matthew 19:29.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- How has God redeemed the painful parts of your story? How has He returned blessing for what you've laid down for Him?

READ

- Ruth 1:3-20 and 4:13-17

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

ELIJAH

Refreshed in the wilderness

Sometimes, even when we're serving God whole-heartedly and watching Him work and speak through us, we still crash into our human frailty. Sometimes, knowing all *about* God and doing great things *for* God leaves us frustrated and weary. Sometimes, even fire from heaven isn't enough.

We meet Elijah in 1 Kings 18 at one of his pinnacle moments: he proves that Yahweh is God and Baal is not, then, after ordering the demise of every false prophet, he prays relentlessly for the return of rain after a three-year drought, and God answers. He should be ecstatic.

"He just proved Yahweh's existence with the explicit hope that God would turn His people's hearts back to Him (18:37). Elijah is expecting a change. But none comes. He's still an outlaw. So, he runs. He goes eighty miles away, leaves his servant in Beersheba, and walks another day into the wilderness where he sits down and wants to die. He literally asks the Lord to just take his life. For all of Elijah's miracles, for all of the ways God had used him, he is still human. And like the rest of us, he faced disappointment and frustration in the wilderness. He was bone-tired, and he wanted God to release him from his calling.

But God meets him in this wilderness setting and invites him on a journey. He sends an angel to feed Elijah. Twice. Then Elijah arises, and travels for forty days until he arrives at Horeb, 'the mount of God' (19:8). And as Elijah camps on Sinai in a cave, the Lord reveals Himself in a way that I presume Elijah had never experienced before. First, He sends a rock-shattering wind, then an earthquake, and then a fire. But the Lord's presence isn't in any of these fearsome acts of nature. Elijah has already experienced God in those ways—summoning a drought, calling down heavenly fire.

No, Elijah doesn't need to know more of God's might. So, God reveals Himself in the soul-satisfying way that Elijah does need: a still, small voice. It's practically the sound of silence, but so alive it's just crackling with God's presence. God allowed Elijah to know Him, to experience Him, in a deeply intimate way." (*Colliding with the Call*, p. 233 - 234)

Notice how in this story, God nourishes and satisfies Elijah in both body and soul. He gives Elijah physical bread and spiritual bread. He needed both, and God didn't neglect one for the other. He didn't belittle Elijah's human need for rest and nourishment. In fact, He graciously and miraculously met Elijah's bodily needs first, then summoned him to a journey deep into the wilderness where all expectations of performance were far away and Elijah could simply be still and listen.

Despite its barren appearance, God uses the wilderness as a place of nourishment. When we can no longer do things for Him, we learn to receive from Him. Manna. Water from a rock. Angelic bread. Whispered questions and assurance. Like a helpless infant, we come to that beautiful place of full reliance on our Maker in the wilderness.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- When have you seen your Father nourish and refresh you in even the most trying of times?

READ

- 1 Kings 19:1-18

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

DAVID

Sheltered in the wilderness

For those who know God Almighty as their refuge, the wilderness can be a place of sanctuary, of shelter, of safety. For all its dangers and dryness, it is often the place where we are hidden from evil until the time for victory has come. We even see it in Revelation 12:14:

"The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach."

David experienced this like none other. A quick skimming of 1 Samuel chapters 21 - 26, when he is fleeing for his life from King Saul, reveal at least five different wilderness hideouts: the deserts of Ziph, En Gedi, and Maon, the cave of Adullam, and the forest of Hereth. Not tremendously hospitable places.

"David stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands. While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. 'Don't be afraid,' he said. 'My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this' " 1 Samuel 23:14-17.

Notice all God does for David in these few verses. He doesn't allow Saul to find him. He sends his best friend, Jonathan, to encourage him. He even reiterates the promise of kingship that David carried quietly since his anointing several years prior.

God shelters David under His wings the entire time he runs from cave to cave and from village to village.

David's circumstances gave him every right to be frightened, frustrated, impatient, bitter, and rash, but his trust in God prevented him from dwelling in those feelings. He chose instead to remember God's goodness, protection, love, and plans. Every cave testified to his ultimate Refuge, every hill to his Rock, and every battle to his Defender.

Your perspective in the wilderness is everything. A downcast heart sees thorns and obstacles in the trail; an upturned heart sees the blanket of stars above and the mountains of deliverance on the horizon.



Photo of the Judean wilderness by Amit Lahav on Unsplash

bible excursion

RESPOND

- What do you spend most of your energy focusing on? How can you turn your gaze upward today?

READ

- Psalm 18:1-19 and 30-36. Take special note of the introduction.

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

EZEKIEL

Prophecy to the wilderness

If you're standing in a desert valley, and all you see around you are the scattered bones of hopes long dead, take heart. You serve the God of resurrection.

Ezekiel is a fascinating prophetic character during the time of Israel's exile to Babylon. He was a priest, commissioned to both reprimand the idolatrous Israelites for getting what they deserve, and to reassure them of God's everlasting covenant and their future restoration. He saw one of the few recorded visions of God in all His glory (Ezekiel 1), with fire and multi-winged creatures and moving wheels and a throne of sapphire and brilliant rainbow-light. After this glorious encounter and commissioning, the Spirit returns Ezekiel to the exiles, where he "sat among them for seven days--overwhelmed" (3:15). I think overwhelmed is an understatement!

Ezekiel was also given a vision of a future temple. One from which a river of life flows, refreshing even the Dead Sea. And "fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing" (47:12, see also Revelation 22:1-3).

And of course, Ezekiel gets credit for one of the most oft-quoted prophecies of the Old Testament:

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (36:26-27).

I can't help but wonder if at least in partial fulfillment of the temple prophecy, the Spirit is the river and we are the trees. He is the source of our life, and as we abide in Him and He in us, we will bear much fruit (John 15:5).

We might see a wasteland of death around us, but there is nothing the Spirit can't restore to life. And, for reasons I won't fully understand while wrapped in this time-bound body, God chooses us to be the carries of His life and His healing. Let that settle into your heart a little deeper. You carry the Spirit of God, a river of Living Water, within you.

From your desert valley, look out at all those dry bones--the skeletons of your dreams or ministry or family or health or relationships--and let God lead you back and forth among them, just as He did with Ezekiel. And as you read chapter 37 in your study today, let a fresh awareness wash over you that God didn't have to use Ezekiel to prophecy to those dry bones. But He did. And maybe, just maybe, He's waiting on you to speak His words of life over your dry bones, as well.

We can partner with the Spirit of Truth by leaning in, listening to His whispered encouragement, and repeating His life-giving words.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- What dry bones are scattered around you right now? Take a good, hard look at them, then ask the Lord if He has a word of truth and life He wants you to speak to them.

READ

- Ezekiel 37:1-14

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Crying out from the wilderness

Did you ever consider that God does not have to bring you out of the wilderness to use you? The wilderness may, in fact, be your place of ministry. It may even be your pulpit.

Many of our forerunners in the faith ministered during and out of their own sorrows and struggles. Mother Theresa doubted God's nearness and battled with inward despair. Charles Spurgeon was chronically depressed. Brennan Manning was a recovering alcoholic. Joni Eareckson Tada shares hope even while suffering from quadriplegia. John, Jesus' own cousin, prepared the way for the Lamb of God from the desert.

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

'A voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." '

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." (Matthew 3:1-6)

John was never led out of the desert. He was put there on divine purpose to set him apart from the other voices of his day. He was given the privilege of calling people to repentance, of baptizing the Messiah, of sending some of his own disciples off to join Jesus, and even of dying for his conviction to speak the truth.

We look at his life now and can say with Jesus, "There has never been anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11), but I don't think life ever felt easy or glamorous from John's perspective. I imagine he faced his share of loneliness, pain, and doubt. But that didn't stop him from living out his calling.

And it doesn't have to stop you, either. Instead of waiting for the healing to come, can you comfort others who also share in the pain? Instead of hoping that you'll someday have the resources to start that outreach you've always dreamed of, can you see a small beginning to jump into right now? Instead of changing career or location in the hopes of finding peace and stability, can you encourage others to praise Him in the storms of life with you?

You might be the only voice to those closest to you crying out from the desert. You might be the one whose testimony prepares their hearts for the Lord. So don't wait until the stars align--shout your praises from the wilderness and watch for His coming.

bible excursion

RESPOND

- What part of your wilderness do you sense God asking you minister from?

READ

- Isaiah 40:1-8

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

JESUS

Proven in the wilderness

If your heart didn't connect with any of the other stories from the wilderness, perhaps it will with this one. With the one who laid aside the glories of heaven to take the form of that which He made. With the one who is like us in every way, and yet without sin. With the one who for the rest of eternity carries the scars of His sacrifice of love for you. This is, of course, Jesus.

Do you remember the beginning of His ministry on earth? First, John baptized Him, and the Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. The Father announced that Jesus was His son, in whom He was well pleased, and then Jesus went out and healed a bunch of people.

No? Did I miss something? You're right. Before any teaching or healing or miracles, the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness. Mark's gospel chooses a stronger word than "led", indicating that the Spirit drove, or forcefully expelled, Jesus to the wilderness. And while He was there, Jesus fasted for 40 days.

In his intriguing sermon, "Man Shall Not Live on Bread Alone", John Piper notes the purpose of this fasting:

"It was a voluntary act of identification with the people of God in their wilderness deprivation and trial. Jesus was saying in effect, 'I have been sent to lead the people of God out of the Egypt of sin into the promised land of salvation. To do this I must be one of them. That is why I was born. Therefore I will take on the testing that they experienced. I will represent them in the wilderness . . .'"

Jesus keenly understands all your hunger and longing in the wilderness. But more than that, He understands that perhaps the greatest threat to your victory is the battle for your identity as God's child.

Satan's primary tactic was to get Jesus to doubt His sonship by giving in to the temptation to prove it with a miracle--turn these stones into bread. Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead he quotes Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." This refutes not only His temptation to create something to eat, but also the stab at His position as God's son. Jesus must have known just two verses later in Deuteronomy 8:5 where it says, "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you."

Jesus had to stand on the truth that He was God's beloved son. No miracle could prove that. In a way, this testing in the wilderness was more proof than even turning stones into bread would have been.

You are God's child. And He loves you too much not to test you, to discipline you, to allow you to prove to yourself that you won't be shaken. It's a hard truth. Can you accept it?

"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?" Hebrews 12:7

bible excursion

RESPOND

- What hardships are you facing that might actually be God's discipline, proof that you are His beloved child?

READ

- Matthew 3:13-4:11

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

JOHN THE BELOVED

Yearning in the wilderness

"How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." (Psalm 84:1-2)

I want this Psalm to be my prayer. I want to *want* God like this. I want to genuinely sing out with the Psalmist a few verses later, "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere" (84:10)!

But, sadly, that isn't the typical yearning of my heart. I am often, as C.S. Lewis says in *The Weight of Glory*, "like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because [I] cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. [I am] far too easily pleased."

The only times I find myself truly craving the presence of the Lord are when I'm emptied in the wilderness. When I'm stripped of all the man-made things that prop me up, I feel a keen desire for God. And if nothing in this world will ever satisfy me the way He can, then the only safe place to aim my desires is right at God's heart. And if God knows we need the wilderness to rekindle our holy hunger for Him, then is the wilderness not a gift? Is the desert not profound grace?

Sliding back into Psalm 84, sandwiched between the verses quoted above, we find a pilgrim on the sacred journey to seek God in Zion. To get there, this traveler must pass through the Valley of Baka, which literally means the lowlands of weeping. But his heart is set on the courts of the Lord, and his sorrow is poured out in praise. His tears of desire transform this place of pain into a place flowing with life-giving water. He goes from strength to strength while seeking the Lord. (84:5-7)

Nothing could be greater than an encounter with the Living God. Think of the instances in the Bible when God revealed Himself in a revelatory way . . . Moses, in the desert with the burning bush and later on Mt. Sinai; Elijah, the same Mt. Sinai in the desert; Ezekiel, while in exile; Peter, James, and John, on the Mount of Transfiguration; John again, exiled to the island of Patmos.

God is in no way confined to wilderness theophanies, but it would seem that when his people are away from man's constructs with its countless distractions and idols, that we are finally in that prime space to yearn for Him, be still and wait for Him, and see Him in His glory.

The holy hunger is a gift, and so is the wilderness that creates it.

Today, we'll visit John on Patmos. Can you see him there, on a rocky hill, staring across the Aegean horizon toward the life and the work he was banished from? Can you smell the salt air and hear the gull's cry? Can you discern the furrow on his wrinkled, sweating brow? See the slump of his shoulders as he knows he is the last of the disciples? Can you hear his entreating murmur? **"Come, Lord Jesus. Come."**

bible excursion

RESPOND

- What causes you to hunger and thirst for God?

READ

- Revelation 1:9-19

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

THE PROMISE

Redeeming the wilderness

We've now journeyed for days together through the harrowing wastelands of the Bible. We've waited and hoped, been humbled and tested, cried out and worshiped. We've seen--not only through the characters of scripture, but also through our own lives--the countless purposes God has for the wilderness. And I hope that despite its rugged terrain, you've come to appreciate its beauty for the unique ways God shows up there.

But I would be amiss to leave you thinking that the wilderness is all there is. Hold on, friends, because there is so much more yet to come!

This world is not our home. It's broken, we're sinful, and, in essence, the experience of being alive in this current state *is* to live in the wilderness. But just as the Israelites were eventually led out of the wilderness into the Promised Land, we, too, have a great Promise ahead of us.

God redeems not only us and our experience of the wilderness, He also redeems the wilderness itself.

"...till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest.

My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest." (Isaiah 32:15 and 18)

This is God's heart for us: to lead us safely to our Eternal Rest. In this age, He gives us His Spirit to restore our parched souls, and in the age to come, He will dwell with us, restoring even the weary earth. He redeems and He restores all things. All things.

So don't be afraid. The wilderness is not the end of your story--it's only the beginning. A sentence in the prologue of the eternal life that is yours in Christ. A few rough brush strokes on the canvas that the Master will add layer upon layer of beauty to forever.

There will be no end to the revelation of His majesty, love, holiness, wisdom, power, or creativity. We stand on a great mountain, of which the climb to the top scraped our knees and strengthened our muscles, looking out upon a lush valley that carries on beyond the horizon. It invites our hearts to explore its glorious mystery without end. The journey to get here is all but forgotten as we anticipate the adventure that awaits us.

In the famous words of C.S. Lewis, "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. . . 'Come further up, come further in!' " (The Last Battle)

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:19)

bible excursion

RESPOND

- Meditate on the ways God will redeem the wilderness and restore all things to right relationship with Himself.

READ

- Isaiah 35

WONDER

- What questions do these verses stir in you?

WORSHIP

- How do you see God's character revealed?

WALK IT OUT

- Where does it connect with your life? How can it help you walk closer to God?

a wilderness prayer

My dear, Good Shepherd,

I find myself in the wilderness today. Again. I'm hurting. I'm lonely. I'm full of doubt and frustration. This place isn't what I would have chosen, and I know it's not ultimately where I belong, but right now, it's my reality.

But even in this desert, I know you are with me. You're leading me, guiding me, always. And so if this is where you've brought me, then I receive it. I trust you. I cling to you. I thank you--even for this.

This valley is dark. But I know we're just passing through. We're together, and I will fear no evil. We'll come out on the other side to a banquet, when all things will be restored and I'll dwell in your house forever. I'm holding on to my hope in you, with my heart entwined in your promises like a rope.

Thank you for meeting me here, for calling me out of my comfort into a place where I can truly learn to trust you. Thank you for giving me the testimony of the redeemed. Thank you for your Fatherly love and the discipline I so desperately need. And thank you, most of all, that these light and momentary troubles are producing an eternal weight of glory.

I am always and forever yours.

Amen.

I AM
MAKING A WAY IN THE



Wilderness

ISAIAH 43:19

further reading

For the inspirational story of Corella's wilderness experience in bush Alaska and the incredible redemption God gave her through it, read *Colliding with the Call: When Following God Takes You to the Wilderness*.

For a powerful testimony of God's pursuant love in the midst of physical pain, read Michele Cushatt's book, *Relentless: The Unshakable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*.

For a theological look at the apparent conflict between the problem of evil and the goodness of God, read C.S. Lewis' book, *The Problem of Pain*.

For an encouraging work on how our places of desperation can lead us to deeper trust, read Brennan Manning's book, *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin's Path to God*.

For a look at how to navigate the struggles and sorrows of living "between the gardens," read Lysa Terkeurst's book, *It's Not Supposed to Be This Way: Finding Unexpected Strength When Disappointments Leave You Shattered*.