

Living in the Wilderness

Introduction

Life provides us with defining moments, moments which set the course of our lives, whether for good or evil. The events of 9-11-2001 were a defining moment for President, George W. Bush. During his presidential campaign, Mr. Bush advocated a “hands off” international policy. In his debate with Al Gore, he argued: “We are not the world’s policeman.” George W. Bush suffered from a very marginal election victory. One could hardly say that his election provided him with a popular mandate. But the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers changed all that. The President suddenly became “presidential,” and his leadership during our time of crisis has propelled him to a prominent place in history.

We can see defining moments in the lives of men and women in the Bible. Joseph experienced a defining moment when he chose to reject the advances of his master’s wife. Another defining moment came when Joseph grasped his God-given responsibility toward his family. Daniel’s defining moment seems to be described in the first chapter of the Book of Daniel, where he purposes, along with his three friends, not to be defiled by the king’s choice food. Peter’s “great confession” was one of his defining moments. Even Judas had his defining moments (John 12:1-8; 13:18-30).

I believe that our Lord’s baptism and temptation was a defining moment in His life and ministry. Here, the course of His life and ministry was proclaimed, tested, and confirmed. Every one of the Synoptic Gospels includes an account of our Lord’s baptism and temptation. John’s Gospel also includes an account of our Lord’s baptism, but does not mention His temptation. This may be due to the fact that John emphasizes the deity of our Lord, beginning in the very first verses of his Gospel. Who needs to be convinced that God cannot be tempted (see James 1:13)?

What has been your defining moment? It may have been situation at school where you stood up to the bully. It may have been when you passed your qualification exams or your first job. It may have been your marriage or your encounter/conversion for Christ.

As I look back on my life, there have been a number of defining moments that have shaped who I am and prepared me for my life.

Last week we looked at one of Jesus' defining moments, his baptism. Interestingly the next one came straight after that; his temptation. Over the next weeks we will be looking at Jesus' temptation and what we can learn from it to help our Christian walk with God in a world where Satan is very active.

Let us begin by calling attention to several important observations about the wilderness, the setting for our Lord's temptation.

First of all, our Lord's wilderness experience identified Him with the nation Israel.

Our Lord's ordeal in the wilderness for 40 days and nights certainly links Him with the nation Israel. Israel first underwent its "baptism" ie going through the Red Sea, and then was led into the wilderness for 40 years, where God tested them. Paul would write later to the Corinthians

Jesus was baptized by John and the Holy Spirit, and then He immediately went into the wilderness, where He fasted for 40 days and nights and was tempted by Satan. Jesus is the "true Israel," the "true Son of God," which is evident by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Him, and by His victory over the temptations of the devil. Whereas Israel failed their testing, Jesus was victorious, which shows Him to be qualified for the atoning work that He had been appointed to accomplish at Calvary.

Second, the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1).

The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness (Mark 1:12).

It would seem, then, that the Gospel writers wish us to understand that the first prompting of the Spirit was to direct Him to the wilderness, where He would be tempted. Mark goes further than Matthew, adding the significant detail that the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. It was no mere impression Jesus received; it was a compelling directive.

Third, the Spirit led Jesus through the wilderness:

Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness (Luke 4:1)

It is one thing to be sent out to the wilderness by the Spirit; it is quite another for the Spirit to have guided Jesus day-by-day in the wilderness. The Spirit did both.

Fourth, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for the entire 40 day period. It would be easy to assume that Jesus was led into the wilderness for 40 days and nights and then was tempted at the end of this period. We might come to this conclusion based upon Matthew's Gospel alone. But we dare not overlook the words of Mark and Luke:

13 He was¹ in the wilderness forty days, enduring temptations from Satan. He was with wild animals, and angels were ministering to his needs (Mark 1:13).

1 Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River and² was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he endured temptations from the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were completed, he was famished (Luke 4:1-2).

Luke is particularly clear on this point: Our Lord endured Satan's temptations for the entire 40 day period and not just at the end of 40 days. The three temptations that Matthew and Luke record took place at the end of 40 days, but if we are to take Luke's words seriously, we must also conclude that there were other earlier temptations as well.

I would understand Matthew to be informing us that the Holy Spirit played a significant role in the life of our Lord during the 40 days of fasting and temptation. Yes, Jesus did rely on the Word of God for His strength and guidance during His temptation. But Luke also makes it clear that Jesus was Spirit-directed during those 40 days. Thus, it was both the Word of God and the Spirit of God that guided and enabled our Lord as He prevailed over Satan in His temptation. It is, after all, the Spirit of God who enables us to comprehend and apply the Word of God (see 1 Corinthians 2; John 14:25-26; 16:12-15).

Fifth, the wilderness itself was a part of our Lord's testing. It was a dangerous place where you met wild animals that could do you damage. While most of us do not travel in the woods or desert, we do swim in waters that are dangerous with currents and sharks!

Just try to imagine what it would have been like to have been alone in the wilderness with all those wild animals around, especially if you have already committed yourself to relying on God the Father rather than on your own strength? (If Jesus would not act on His own to feed Himself, why would we think He would use His divine powers to defend Himself from these wild creatures?)

Sixth, during His 40 days and nights in the wilderness, Jesus voluntarily fasted. Nowhere are we specifically told that Jesus refrained from drinking any water, but we are told that He refrained from eating any food.

There are two different views concerning our Lord's "fasting" in the wilderness. There are those like Chrysostom and John Piper who believe that Jesus' fasting gave Him spiritual strength, preparing Him to be victorious over Satan's temptations. And then there are others, like Calvin and Luther, who do not see our Lord's fasting as strengthening, but as weakening. I include myself in this latter group. I believe that God is contrasting the temptation of Eve with that of our Lord. Adam and Eve had no lack of food or water in the garden, and they fell by choosing to eat the one forbidden food. Jesus had no food, and yet He resisted Satan's temptations. Matthew is endeavouring to show that our Lord withstood Satan's temptations, and thus he focuses on our Lord's victory at His weakest moment rather than at His strongest moment.

The wilderness was the training ground for the nation of Israel and Jesus.

In the Bible, the wilderness was both a geographic place, barren and harsh, and a metaphor for those times when life is difficult and filled with adversity. Wilderness experiences are seasons of loss, opposition, betrayal, abandonment, despair or failure.

The question isn't if you are going to have a wilderness experience in your life but rather

1. How will you respond?
2. What will you receive and learn from it?

Wilderness experiences will either push you away from God or draw you closer to God. It's there that we can experience God's presence in a special way.

If we let them, wilderness experiences can be a rich time of personal and spiritual growth in both our understanding of God and ourselves. It's not that God causes wilderness experiences, often they're the result of

1. Personal crisis- which is usually the result of sin in our lives and causes us to re-evaluate our life. Your life isn't over, but you begin to feel the pain of your sin, its impact and begin to see the errors of your ways. Yet, the truth is that a personal crisis has its roots in your desire to control rather than let God control your life or you have rebelled against God's ways or pride where you think that you are not accountable for what you see and do. It may have been a genuine mistake but you still have to wear the consequences of your actions.
2. Relational crisis- We are lied to, hurt or betrayed by someone closest to us, sometimes we even think it might be God. The reality is that we are often wounded the deepest by those closest to us. But a relational crisis can also occur when God often uses a friend to confront what is wrong in your life.

3. Circumstances crisis- There may be a looming catastrophe when the bottom is about to fall out of your life. Alcoholics Anonymous calls this “hitting rock bottom.” You’re at the end of your rope, the pain of your ways is too great and you are about to lose it all.

Jesus says to us: *“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God.”* □ *Matthew 5:3* □ *The Message translation*

Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich in their book, “The Critical Journey” calls this “The Wall.” Others have called it the “dark night of the soul.” This is a time when we are confronted with who we are and what we have done or what others have done to us. In the midst of the wilderness, so often, our response is either to become a victim or a victor.

But it’s in the wilderness that we are forced to wrestle with whether we are willing to surrender to God and let Him direct our lives. This was Paul’s lesson learned in His wilderness, “when I am weak, then I am strong

Hagberg and Guelich identify Four Phases of the Wilderness Experience

1. Self-awareness

It is in the wilderness that we have to come to grips with who we are and what we have done. God brings a renewed sense of self-awareness and the parts of us that need healing and transformation. It means realizing who we really are as opposed to

Frequently, anger, bitterness and sadness accompany these insights. God begins that healing as we come before Him and begin to follow His agenda. Many times in the wilderness, something has to be given up

This is where healing begins. We are not left in the darkness or the pain but we have to face it.

The wilderness is a time when we are confronted by the disparity between who we are and who God calls us to be, between how we live and how God is calling us to live. In the wilderness, we come to realize we have been living as we want and in our own strengths and will. And so when we encounter God, we see ourselves as we really are and the denial that we have permitted in our lives.

This can be a frightening and yet pivotal moment as we feel drawn to surrender, and yet still want to have control. It is not easy and in fact, may even be the most pain filled experience of our lives as we die to ourselves so that a new person and situation can be formed By God.

It is at this moment that we have to choose to let God be God and to surrender our lives to His will or continue living in denial as we are. When we choose God, we are healed

We become open to considering anything that God brings before us. We suspend judgment, analyzing and reverting to the tried and true. It means taking a risk and really listening to God in new ways. Thus, we must set aside time for solitude so that we may hear from God more clearly.

2. Forgiveness

We not only need to forgive ourselves but also give and receive forgiveness from others. It's also here that we receive God's grace to offer to others and ourselves. We need to be less critical and more gracious to ourselves and others. This is a time for a grace awakening in our lives.

3. Acceptance

This doesn't come easily for us. Acceptance means looking at ourselves impartially and accepting not only who we are but who others are as well. It means embracing the clown in us, the devil in us, the frightened child in us, the wicked witch in us, the lonely lover in us, the

intellectual snob in us, the over-achiever in us, the attention seeker in us, the insecure boy or girl in us, the addicted one in us, the perfectionist in us. If we don't, then they control us.

We must continually and humbly ask for God's forgiveness and acceptance so that healing may come and we can accept the discipline that is needed; the change of thinking and perspective that is needed; the transformation that God offers us.

4. Love. for ourselves, for others and for God. This leads us to love others, even when they have hurt us. We can honestly pray for them. We have let go to God our bitterness, anger, envy, jealousy etc so that we can become more like God ie Love.

The wilderness can lead us to experience God in a new a different way. Even when we feel alone and that God is absent, there is a sense of being "kept" on the journey. Though we may feel naked, defenceless and vulnerable, it is because of this that we sense God's love and presence in a new way.

What we need to know and learn from the Wilderness experience.

1. God is more concerned with our character than our comfort.

The OT reading indicates what God was doing with the people of Israel and hence with us.

2 Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. 3 Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. 4 For all these forty years your clothes didn't wear out, and your feet didn't blister or swell. 5 Think about it: Just as a parent disciplines a child, the Lord your God disciplines you for your own good.

It is about humility, obedience, living by the very word that comes from the mouth of God, discipline.

2. Growth takes place in tension

Like going to the gym to lift weights and cause growth in our muscles, the wilderness experience can cause tension in our lives and circumstances which can lead to change and growth. They can become a catalyst for change. God doesn't cause pain but can use the pain of the wilderness experience to challenge and change us to become a new creature. It is always a death experience so that resurrection can occur. You can't have resurrection without crucifixion. Growth in the wilderness is never easy but happens when we do the hard yards of change in every way with the Holy Spirit.

3. God wants us to walk through the wilderness and not walk away from it.

Most of the time, we would rather avoid the wilderness experience. We call on God to remove us. We try everything we can to go around it, avoid it and sometimes even simply ignore it rather than experience it. But the wilderness still remains and must be dealt with. God doesn't remove us.

Like the people of Israel when it got hard they wanted to go back to Egypt. It seemed easier then. But don't be fooled. Egypt was a place of imprisonment not freedom.

The Apostle Paul's experience where in 2 Corinthians 11:24 he writes about his sufferings which included beatings, being stoned with rocks, being shipwrecked, in danger from rivers, bandits, fellow Jews, and Gentile. sleep deprivation, hunger and being cold and naked. And on top of that he says, "I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But God said:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness...when I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Cor. 12:9-10

4. God gives the Holy Spirit to walk with us through the wilderness. Like cloud and fire, the Spirit guides us and beckons us to follow. Like the cloud and fire, there are times when you stay put even for a few weeks and there will be times when you will move forward at a fast pace. It will be both the Spirit of God and the Word of God what will direct you, sustain you and help you walk through this time.

This was Jesus' experience. He was not alone in the wilderness. And neither are you even though it seems and feels that way. The Holy Spirit was with him for the whole journey through the wilderness and so the Spirit is with you.

5. God gives us the promised land only after we have walked through the wilderness and not before it.

The people of Israel only reached the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey, once they had walked through the wilderness. Their disobedience to God caused them to go round in circles until they had learnt their lessons.

There is no short cut or easy route to the promised land. You have to walk through it with God obediently. Many people stay longer than they need to because of disobedience and rebellion against God.

Our hissy fits and anger against God can side track us and we stay longer than we need to.

And it is through all of this that we experience the words of the hymn, "Spirit of the Living God, Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me, melt me, mold me, move me, use me, Spirit of the Living God." It is here that we can become like surrendered clay and become more like Jesus.

And thus, as painful as the wilderness can be, it can be an immense blessing in our life and a watershed event in our spiritual journey. Amen.

