



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## WILDERNESS

There are times in our Christian lives when we come into the wilderness. Prayer becomes hard. Things do not seem to go well in our lives: relationships become difficult or non-existent, job is a problem, money does not seem to cover everything needed, the church seems more a problem than a help. Temptations we thought were gone return -- perhaps something that was difficult years ago but had not been around for a while. The things which once gave us pleasure do not any more -- either they are not available, or else we cannot find pleasure in them. We think we are backsliding as Christians, rather than growing.

It is all very frustrating. We try to get back to God. We try to reestablish what we used to do when things went well. We wrack our brains to figure out what we are doing wrong. We plead with God for help: what would You like me to change? Just tell me and I'll do it! It feels as though everything is wrong, since nothing is pleasant and comfortable. And since things were formerly better, we think we must be doing something wrong.

Welcome to life in the wilderness. It figures prominently in Scripture. Adam was driven into the wilderness when he was expelled from the Garden of Eden. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, and received the Law in the wilderness at Mount Sinai. Elijah received his vision of God in the wilderness. Jesus Himself was tempted by Satan in the wilderness at the start of His ministry.

It is not surprising that wilderness should be important to our Christian life as well. For us it is more often a spiritual wilderness than a physical one. The lessons of the geographic wilderness of Scripture are the same for our wilderness of the soul. The key is to understand how God uses our times in the wilderness to lead us on to Him.

First, the wilderness is not a nice place. It is uncivilized and wild. There we lack the comforts and pleasures which we enjoy in our comfortable homes. Life quickly becomes tiresome and boring. What a contrast between the beauty and liveliness of Eden and the toil, pain, suffering and death of life outside. Wilderness is symbolic of Satan's domain. After the fall, Satan is cursed to eat dust and bruise the heel of man: the rattlesnake in the desert. Jesus encounters Satan most directly in the wilderness.

Thus temptation is to be found in the wilderness: Satan's work in Satan's domain. In the wilderness after His baptism, Jesus was tempted in various ways to leave the path God had laid out for Him and serve instead His own interest. The lack of food in the wilderness sets the context for Jesus' first temptation -- to turn the stones into bread. (St Matthew 4:1-11)

Likewise, Israel is tempted in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. God gives the manna each day to "prove them," to see if they would obey His commandment. (Exodus 16:4) Again, they are many times tempted to go their own way rather than obeying Him -- as in the initial entry into the Promised Land after the report of the twelve spies. Israel's failure in that temptation leads to a forty-year wait for their possession of the Promised Land. (Numbers 13-14)

Neither temptation nor wilderness is pleasant for us. But Jesus goes before us in both. We can follow Him with confidence, accepting that these are means for our growth, and that even though they seem alien to God, they can nevertheless be used in His providence. Temptation -- making moral choices -- is the means for the growth of moral character.

Second, being in the wilderness has the effect of clarifying the fundamental questions of life. We are stripped of our usual distractions as well as our usual comforts. This makes the fundamental things clearer. We often need this since we are inclined to surround ourselves with noise and distractions as a way of avoiding God. So long as we are busy with things which seem important (which we can claim God has given us to do), we can avoid the more basic question of whether this is all our desire rather than His. Bringing us into the wilderness is one way God gets our attention.

No doubt this was a large part of God's mercy in expelling Adam and Eve from Eden. As long as they were able to enjoy every comfort and security in Eden, they would be unlikely to face the deadly seriousness of their sin. Faced, on the other hand, with toil and death in the wilderness, they were forced to confront the reality of their situation.

Perhaps the most fundamental lesson to be learned in the wilderness is trust. Think how Israel had to trust God in the wilderness. Life is tenuous in the desert. Water and food are hard to come by; there are few landmarks or roads and it is easy (and often fatal) to get lost; there are unfamiliar enemies (rattlesnakes, scorpions, rough desert dwellers); and the strangeness of it preys upon the mind. The difficulty

of life in the wilderness pushes us to depend on God, since we cannot survive by ourselves.

Thus the lesson: we ought not to live (or even try to live) without Him. We ought to trust Him for everything. Christian life is life in dependence upon God. We cannot learn to depend upon God without practice; and we cannot practice without opportunity. The necessary opportunities come only when we are stretched beyond our capabilities: when we cannot go on living by ourselves and our own powers. The wilderness does this. We cannot find our spiritual way; the old landmarks are absent. Trying to recreate our old comforts by the kinds of prayer we used to use fails: and then where are we? We have only to depend upon God. "I cannot see the way; You will have to carry me." This is exactly right. Israel in the wilderness was led by the pillar of fire and cloud: they did not need a map or to find their own way. Yet the cloud and fire could not be grasped and held for security. They had to trust.

It would seem easy for us to trust God, since we know He only wants what is good for us. But we are so used to trusting ourselves more than God, it is not easy. We need to learn how little we can actually do, and how much God has been doing for us all along.

We want to supply our own needs, to be independent. In the wilderness we must depend upon Him for the very basics of life. To learn to trust requires our humility -- which (for most of us) comes only by humiliation. We like to think that we do a pretty good job of providing for ourselves; in the wilderness we find out that is not so. When we cannot pray (as it seems) or accomplish anything by our prayer, we must turn ourselves over to God. We must trust that He knows what He is doing in bringing us into the wilderness, and that He will feed us and guide us through.

Likewise the temptations help us to trust God. When we attempt to defeat them by our own powers we fall with depressing consistency. Our weakness pushes us to depend on God. We learn that He cares for us by helping us to withstand the temptations when we would surely fall on our own.

Often our sojourn in the wilderness comes after a spiritual triumph or striking religious experience. This was true for Jesus, whose temptation followed His baptism, when He willed to take on our sinful human nature, and was affirmed by the voice from heaven. So, too, Elijah. After his great contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he fled into the wilderness, where he encountered God in the "still, small voice." (I Kings 18-19) Elijah is tempted to despair in the wilderness, as he feels that he is the only faithful one left on earth. God cares for him, sending an angel with food and drink to sustain him in the wilderness.

Elijah's experience shows us that there is something about the wilderness which allows God to manifest Himself. As for Israel at Sinai and for Elijah, so also the Transfiguration of Jesus occurs on a mountain top in the wilderness.

Israel receives the Law in the wilderness: the Ten Commandments, and all the details of their responsibility toward God and man. In the Law is to be found their side of the covenant which God establishes with them, their relationship with Him. The giving of the Law is accompanied by manifestations of God's presence: thunder, lightning, smoke, trumpets. This gives the Israelites a proper reverence for the Law-giver as well as for the Law.

Again, Jesus reveals Himself in the wilderness to his disciples. The feeding of the five thousand (St John 6) takes place in the wilderness whence the crowds have followed Jesus, seeking His teaching and miracles. He accomplishes this great sign (that He is the bread of life) only in the wilderness. In town, had He done the same, all would have assumed that bread was brought in around the edges of the crowd, from vendors and homes which were there. The crowd would have missed the sign. This is the fulfillment of Jesus' earlier word in the wilderness (quoting Deuteronomy 8:3) that man does not live by bread alone. (St Matthew 4:4)

Where does this leave us? It tells us that it may be good for us to follow into the wilderness -- to be tempted and to learn trust; to receive clarity about life and death, and to allow God to manifest Himself to us. The way through is the way of hope and perseverance.

Hope is possible because Jesus goes before us. We do not blaze the trail but follow. We have His promise of paradise. Admittedly, when we are in the wilderness, paradise seems remote and impossible. The promise is there to give us hope. The only way into the Promised Land (for us as well as for Jesus and Israel before Him) is through the wilderness.

We are afraid of enemies known and unknown. The spiritual enemies are more fearsome even than the material ones. Satan exploits our fear to convince us that he really is to be feared -- so that we will turn back from following God. Apart from God we have no power to face these fears; He alone is strong enough to overcome Satan. We need to learn to trust His power, and that under His protection we are safe. (Psalm 91) We need to persevere in Christian life: to keep on with our prayers and going to church, to strive against temptation, to live for God rather than self. This is the way through the wilderness even if it seems to be aimless wandering more than following a real path.

Thus we can follow Jesus boldly into the wilderness, should God call us. It will be unpleasant, but it need not be troubling or fearsome. It is our chance to learn to love and trust God as we never have before.

In a way, all our life on earth is spent in the wilderness. The wilderness is the place for sinners who (like Adam) have refused God's offer of Paradise. Yet in His mercy, He reopens the way -- but part of the way of our return is to learn to live first in the wilderness.