

Job 23:8-10 *Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.*

- Is this your heart's cry? You long to hear from God but all you sense is silence. In frustration, you remember the time you merely whispered His name and His presence was immediately there. Now in the stillness you want to shout, "God, where are You?" Welcome to the wilderness!
- You are in good company ... Moses, Joseph, David, Job, even Jesus. The procession of travelers is long, for the wilderness is a necessary season in the life of every child of God. It cannot be bypassed, for the Promised Land cannot be reached without passing through the wilderness!
- Understanding the wilderness is absolutely crucial to your spiritual survival.

1 Chronicles 12:32 *And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:1 *To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:*

Luke 12:56 *Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it that ye do not discern this time?*

- Jesus rebuked the multitudes because they looked for the wrong thing at the wrong time. A farmer must understand the purpose of the seasons in order for his crop to benefit fully from God's plan.
- Many Christians behave without wisdom when they enter the wilderness season; in constantly searching for an escape route, they unwittingly prolong their time in the wilderness.
- The wilderness is not negative for those who obey God! God's purpose in leading Israel to the wilderness was to test, train and prepare them to be sanctified warriors. But instead, the Israelites erroneously perceived the wilderness as punishment, so they murmured, complained and lusted constantly. What was to have been a brief wilderness journey became a lifetime experience.

1. The wilderness may be a time of correction, but it is not a time of disapproval.

Luke 4:1 *And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan (AFTER HIS BAPTISM), and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.*

2. God doesn't "set us on the shelf," but works in our lives all the way through the wilderness.

Deuteronomy 8:2 *And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.*

3. The wilderness is not a place of defeat to those who obey God.

Under instruction from the Lord, Israel defeated the Amorites (Number 21), the Midianites (Numbers 31), and the people of Bashan (Numbers 21) while wandering in the wilderness. If God's purpose was for them to experience defeat, He wouldn't have told them to defend their position!

- THE WILDERNESS IS NOT GOD'S REJECTION OF YOU BUT HIS PREPARATION OF YOU!

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WILDERNESS:

- You cannot sense God's presence** (don't misunderstand and think you have missed God). A newborn child gets more attention, but struggles (i.e. feeding oneself) are part of maturity. As we grow, the level of assistance we receive changes to encourage our growth.
- You appear to be going in the opposite direction of your dreams and God's promises.** You perceive no growth, you may feel you are regressing, you may feel unloved or ignored. But you are not! God is constantly working for your good behind the scenes.
- You receive what you NEED (daily bread), not what you WANT.** God only provides what you need to survive the wilderness. We call this "LACK," but our wants are not needs! Neither should a season of "abundance" be viewed as God's permission to advance your agenda!

HOW DOES GOD TEST US?

Deuteronomy 8:3 *And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.*

Israel never missed a meal, but it was the same menu for 40 years! Their clothes and shoes never wore out, but their wardrobe was quite outdated after 40 years! And the scenery stayed the same every single day! That's how God tests us - we get only what our flesh NEEDS, not what it WANTS. They were HUNGRY because God removed what they DESIRED.

Psalms 106:13-15 *They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel: But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.*

The "leanness of soul" made them unable to pass God's test, and ultimately unable to enter the Promised Land. God still wants to know whether His people will seek His face (relationship) or just His hand (provision). If you seek only His hand, you may not recognize His face.

Many in the church are happy as long as they get what they want from God, but upon entering dry times, the motive of their hearts is revealed. Anytime the focus is self, complaining begins.

Paul understood this principle of "need vs. want."

Philippians 4:11-13 *Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

DO YOU GET EXCITED ABOUT GOD'S WAYS, OR JUST HIS WORKS?

4. **In the wilderness, the fruit of the Spirit is cultivated, watered by a desire to know Him!**

Isaiah 43:18-19 *Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.*

Changes that brings us closer to the Lord are not always easy, but they are always good.

Luke 5:37-39 *And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved. No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.*

There is a reason for your wilderness, which you perceive as the absence of His presence. God is preparing a new wineskin (you!) for a fresh move of His Spirit!

Wineskins in Jesus' day were made of sheepskin, which were flexible and pliable when the wine was first put in. They stretched easily and would yield without resistance. However, as the years went by, the atmosphere would absorb all the moisture out of the wineskin, leaving it brittle and hard. Now if the wine was poured out and new wine poured in, the skin could handle neither the weight of the new wine nor the fermentation process, because it was now rigid and brittle and could break easily. What they did was soak the skin in water for several days and then rub olive oil on it. That made it flexible and pliable again. But in order to rejuvenate the old wineskin, they had to pour out the old wine! That meant no wine in the vessel - no tangible presence of God! A wilderness! The reason God withdraws His presence is to cause you to seek Him, for seeking makes you flexible and pliable again, ready for a move of His Spirit!

No man who is used to the old wine (habitual prayer, worship, etc.) will immediately desire the new wine. Therefore, God allows us to go through a period of NO WINE! We then become very thirsty for the NEW WINE!

Psalms 63:1-2 *O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary.*