

“What to Do when God Has You Waiting”

Exodus 17:1-7 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

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In the Wilderness by Michael Card

Chorus:

In the wilderness; in the wilderness;
He calls his sons and daughters to the wilderness.
And he gives grace sufficient to survive any test.
And that's the painful purpose of the wilderness.

Chorus

In the wilderness we wander. In the wilderness we weep;
in the wasteland of our wanting where the darkness seems so deep.
We search for the beginning, for an exodus to home.
We find that those who follow him, must often walk alone.

Chorus

In the wilderness we're wandering for a way to understand
In the wilderness there's not a way for the way's become a man.
And the man's become the exodus, the way to holy ground.
But wandering in the wilderness is the best way to be found.

Chorus

Groaning and growing amidst the desert days
The windy winter wilderness can blow the self away

Chorus

And that's the painful promise of the wilderness.

I have often wondered why the LORD took the Israelites wandering forty years through the wilderness of Sinai after delivering them from slavery in Egypt. If I were God I would have turned north and headed up by the Mediterranean

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Sea and taken the King's Highway. The trip would have lasted only a couple of months and there would have been plenty of food and water. But hey, God is God. He is who he is and he does what he does. But God is not arbitrary. He had a reason for taking them into the wilderness, to teach them faith by providing for them in the most extreme of circumstances. The same hard lesson that Paul had to learn by his thorn in the flesh – My grace is sufficient for thee, for (my) power is made perfect (brought to its intended end) in weakness. Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message* and an otherwise righteous dude, says God did it to teach them how to worship.

So, God took the Israelites through the wilderness to teach them faith and to bring forth worship in them. This is a hard one I think for us Presbyterians to grasp. You see, we are not accustomed to saying that God brings hard times upon us, that God causes or lets suffering to happen so that we can come to know him better and increase in faith and let worship begin to well forth from within us. We find it very difficult to say that God brings suffering to his people, his daughters and sons, that they might come closer to him. We like to say that bad things happen because this is a messed up world or because we brought them upon ourselves and God will somehow work things out because he loves us. Rarely, if ever will you hear a Presbyterian say, “The LORD has brought me out into the wilderness. The LORD is doing this to me. Why?”

But, you know, if we are going to be truly biblical about things; if we are disciples of Jesus Christ in him born from above in him by the free gift of the Holy Spirit so that we are God's children; if we are such, we are going to spend some time in the wilderness and it's going to happen because he is going to take us there. If we have been raised from death to new life in union with our resurrected Lord by means of his very life dwelling in us by the gift of the Holy Spirit, he will indeed lead us into the wilderness, into the valley of the shadow of death where our souls are ripped to pieces rather than take us where he makes us to lie down in green pastures beside the still waters so that our souls are restored. He will leads us to painful places where we are forced to ask him, “Who are you LORD and why have you brought me here?” In a world so utterly broken and corrupted by sin, the LORD must bring us to places where in the depths of despair, of grief, of poverty of spirit, of loneliness, of boredom where our only resort is to turn to the LORD and ask, “What kind of God are you? Why are you doing this to me?” His reason for leading us into suffering is so that in the midst of it he can reveal his own very self to us. In, through, and as Jesus Christ our God has taken into his own very being all our brokenness, all our unforgiveness, all our hate and anger, all our idolatry, and all our inner turmoil and self-deception and there in him it dies and from it new life begins to sprout and we find ourselves a bit more healed than we were before the wilderness. In the wilderness we discover that God's grace is all we need. In fact, we begin to experience ourselves standing in the grace of his presence. In the midst of wilderness suffering we begin to learn patient endurance which molds our character to be more Christ-like. In the knowledge of that reality we find ourselves having the abiding hope of knowing God is present with us because he has poured his very love into our hearts.

In the wilderness we float. We wander. We wait. We cannot help but ask “how do I survive out here?” By nature we like the Israelites will complain. We will want to turn back to the way life was before instead of moving forward. We will doubt the LORD’s motive of love. We will take matters into our own hands and serve and worship things that we believe will make us feel better. We will try to bargain with the LORD, but the LORD is not one to be trifled with by bargaining. He’s got bigger plans that just wanting to get us to behave a little better or come to church more often. The grace behind the wilderness is that it is not punishment. It is the only healing way for us to move forward in Christ Jesus and the new life he has for us.

To endure the wilderness we must keep asking the questions “Who are you Lord and why have you brought me here?”; basically, to keep coming before the LORD in prayer. We don’t come asking for what I perceive I need for things to be better. You see, the LORD brings us into the wilderness to show us our true needs and meet them. So it is important to pay attention to what you are feeling for chances are you have felt these painful feelings before and buried them but now the LORD is bringing them forth from the tomb to heal you. Feel free to rant at the LORD for sooner or later he very cleverly turns our rants back on us and reveals to us the truth about ourselves. Read the Bible listening for something to stick out to you and then spend the day or days pondering it. Keep a journal of those things. So that you can see the patterns arise in both what you hear so you can discern what is actually from the LORD rather than things you want to hear.

The wilderness is a good place to draw together with our brothers and sisters in Christ to worship, to share, to pray and to study. For it is by the love of our brothers and sisters that we are built up in Christ and equipped and nourished for his service. The thing to note about the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites was that they all went through it together. There were no Lone Ranger sufferers. They all went through it together. This is the single most strength of the small congregation. If one of us suffers we all feel it. This fellowship and support is what the church is all about.

The fellowship in the LORD is something I really appreciate about this church. Many churches have lost their Christian fellowship amidst a culture that is consumeristic. People visit churches asking what programs this church has that can meet what they think they or their family’s religious needs are, religious rather than actual faith needs. If the services aren’t there, they go elsewhere. Fortunately, we don’t have the resources to meet every perceived need that comes through the door. What we have is a home to offer those who come here asking who is the LORD and why has he brought me here. Well, the LORD is the mystery of the loving communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who dwells here richly and who calls people here to meet him. You know, one thing that I’ve noticed over these past five years is that the people who have come here looking for the LORD have stayed and grown. Amen.