

## Forty Days in the Wilderness

“Defining the Wilderness”

February 15-16

### Introduction

Hey everyone! I'm Mark if we haven't met and I want to welcome you to our service! We are so glad that you're here because today we are starting a very timely series called, *Forty Days in the Wilderness*. How do we navigate seasons of spiritual dryness where God feels distant and our steady rhythms are disrupted? I don't know about you but 2025 has had a different vibe to it and I'm not sure I was feeling it. I'm just going to be honest — I wasn't feeling it. It feels tense. So many things have happened in just the first part of this year that it's hard to keep up. Brush fires, tariff wars, egg shortages, and the worst flu season we've seen in a while. Plus the older I get the more I recognize signs of recession. Terrible recession...along my hairline! If it doesn't stop soon I fear it will lead to a great depression. With the weight of everything it's no wonder many feel anxious! But we know that worry and anxiety are not of the Lord since scripture tells us,

*6 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus,” (Philippians 4:6-7).*

In other words, if we worry about everything it's because we pray about nothing! So what is the proper response to everything we see happening in the world around us? Anxiety? No. Urgency. As I was praying about everything happening God led me to a verse.

I was reading in Exodus about the very first Passover. This was a meal that the Israelites ate to commemorate when the angel of the Lord *passed over* their homes and brought judgment upon the Egyptians. This was the final plague before they were to be set free. As I was reading it was as if God highlighted this verse in bright bold lettering.

*11 “This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover,” (Exodus 12:11).*

What jumped out at me was not *what* the Israelites were instructed to eat but *how* they were instructed to eat it.

Recently we got some pretty heavy rain. Every Sunday my parent's come over for Shabbat (Family Dinner). This particular Sunday was pouring rain. Everyone hurried into the house, kicked off their shoes and started shedding layers of soaked clothing. But how weird would it be if my Dad came in, kept his crocs on, sat at the table with his jacket soaking wet and started eating with his car keys in hand? I'd probably say something like, “Dad, let me take your jacket, put your keys away, stay awhile, make yourself at home.”

But that's not the picture we get in Exodus 12. In Exodus 12 God's people weren't settling in — they were getting ready to move! This was the original dine and dash! And I sensed the Lord saying, “Too many Christians have kicked off their shoes and made themselves at home here in Egypt.” We cannot settle for comfort when God is preparing to move! God is saying, “Buckle up, lace up your sneakers, and pack light. Don't get comfortable in the place I'm getting ready to call you out of!” God is preparing to move and He wants His people ready to move with Him. Turn to your neighbor and say, “Get ready to move!”

## **A Wilderness Season**

How does God prepare a people for His next move? Often it is through a wilderness season. But when we look at the wilderness through our natural eyes, we see a place of pain, punishment, and purposelessness. However, when you see the wilderness through God's eyes, it becomes a place of power, or preparation, and promotion!

## **Additional Resources**

When it comes to navigating this unfamiliar territory, God has given us the greatest guide known to man and that is His Word. We are going to meditate on the stories of those who have experienced victory in the wilderness.

Two other resources that have helped me navigate the wilderness are John Bevere's, *"Victory in the Wilderness"* (Which was recommended to me by Pastor Theresa) and "Jeff Manion's, *"The Land Between"*. Both are filled with powerful teachings and encouraging stories of those who found themselves in a wilderness season and discovered God's power in the midst of it.

## **Jesus, Israel, and You**

Perhaps one of the most famous wilderness stories is found in the book of Exodus. God has delivered His people, the Israelites, out of Egypt in stunning fashion and has led them through the Red Sea. But Pharaoh and his soldiers didn't take that lying down. They decided to pursue the Hebrews through the waters.

*19 "When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.  
20 Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. 21 Miriam sang to them:*

*"Sing to the Lord,  
for He is highly exalted.  
Both horse and driver  
He has hurled into the sea," (Exodus 15:19-21).*

So God delivered His people from their enemies in a decisive victory! Imagine being there that day standing on shores of the Red Sea as the waters swallowed up your former slave masters. And Egypt is just a distant speck on the horizon. There's a reverent hush as your new reality sinks in. And all of a sudden the silence is broken and you hear singing. You look and it's Whitney Houston, "There can be miracles when you believe," and Mariah Carey, "Though hope is frail it's hard to kill." (A little *Prince of Egypt* reference). Suddenly the whole sea of people breaks out in singing, dancing, and worship!

And every single one of us experiences a moment like this in our Christian journey where God delivers us out of of slavery and bondage, He leads us into the waters of Baptism where our greatest enemies sin and death are soundly defeated once and for all, and we emerge out of the water to celebration, leis, and a potluck. Like Jesus, the clouds part, the Holy Spirit descends, and we feel the loving embrace of our Heavenly Father. But there is another part of the story that every believer shares. Because *immediately* after emerging from the waters God leads both Israel and Jesus into [you guessed it] the wilderness.

Let's read *the very next verse* in Israel's story in verse 22,

<sup>22</sup> Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. <sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) <sup>24</sup> So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?” (Exodus 15:22-24).

Immediately after emerging from the waters of salvation the Israelites are led, where, into the wilderness. How about Jesus?

<sup>16</sup> “As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased,”  
(Matthew 3:16-17).

<sup>1</sup> “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry,” (Matthew 4:1-2).

Are you seeing a pattern? Both Jesus and the Israelites go into the waters and emerge to joyous celebration! But in the very next verse we’re told that they immediately entered into a wilderness season. For Jesus it was 40 days, for Israel it was 40 years.

What does this have to do with us? Well I’m sure all of us can remember our moment of salvation. The weight of sin and guilt lifted off your shoulders, feeling more alive than ever, like everything was brand new, like you’d been reborn. But maybe these days the sounds of timbrels and dancing has faded into a distant memory. Maybe it’s been a while since you heard the Father say, “This is My child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Maybe the life and rhythms that once brought you joy now ring hollow and empty. Perhaps you’re in a season where your prayers seem to echo back in silence, clarity feels out of reach, and you can’t seem to get your footing. If any of this rings true, you may be in that space in-between — after what was but before what will be. You may be in the wilderness. And if you are, you’re not alone.

### **Where is Here?**

So why the wilderness? Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, Israel — 40 years, for 40 days and nights God flooded the earth while Noah and his family were in the ark, the city of Nineveh had 40 days to repent before judgment came. These are just a few of the many instances where we see 40 in scripture but 40 typically represents a significant period of testing, preparation and transformation.

In his book, *Victory in the Wilderness*, author John Bevere writes,

*“The procession of wilderness travelers in long, for the wilderness is a necessary time, a season in the life of every child of God. We wish it could be bypassed; we watch for a shortcut or detour, but there isn’t one. It’s the route to the promised land, and the promised land cannot be attained without passing through the wilderness. Our understanding of this time or season is imperative if we are to make it to the promised land.”*

Let me read that last line again. “Our understanding of this time or season is imperative if we are to make it to the promised land.” This is why I believe these six weeks will be so important — imperative in fact. Because unless we understand the purpose of the wilderness and have a vision for what God will accomplish through it, then like the Israelites our wilderness will only make us bitter not better.

### **The Wilderness is Fertile Soil**

You see contrary to its appearance, the wilderness is actually a place of fertile growth. Fertile growth? The wilderness? Absolutely. Things grow like crazy in the wilderness! It is a place of fertile growth. For those who understand its purpose God can produce some of His best growth in your wilderness season. He can grow your faith like crazy, He can grow your intimacy with Him like never before, your character and perseverance will grow in the wilderness unlike in any other season. It is a place of miraculous growth. But as we see in scripture, not all of the growth that happens in the wilderness is positive. Without an understanding of what God is doing in this season the wilderness can be a place where our doubt grows like never before. Because they lacked proper vision, the Israelites grew in complaining and unbelief during their time in the wilderness. They became bitter not better. So it is imperative that we understand the purpose of this season. Though the wilderness is a necessary time for every believer, not every believer is necessarily prepared for it. We want to be prepared if we are to see the promised land.

### **What the Wilderness is Not**

So the wilderness is a necessary time in the life of every believer. It is the unavoidable route to the Promised Land and the place where God does some of His best work in our lives. Next week we will begin to unpack some of the many ways the wilderness prepares us for God's work. But as we prepare to embark on this journey it is important to understand what the time of wilderness is not.

The wilderness is not an indication of God's disapproval or abandonment. It doesn't make any sense for God to tell Jesus He is His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased only to lead Him into a time of punishment and abandonment. That's psychotic! The wilderness was not a manifestation of God's disapproval but His approval of Jesus. The Bible assures us that times of testing are evidence of God's faithful love for us.

My kids always ask us why we correct them so often. And I assure them, "Kids, if I didn't love you I'd let you do whatever you want. It is *because* I love you that I instruct you. My correction is evidence of my love for you." Sometimes they say, "When I'm a parent I'm going to let my kids do whatever they want." But could you think of a more unloving thing?

God wouldn't go through all the trouble to deliver the Israelites through miraculous signs and wonders only to lead them to their deaths in the desert. Yet that's exactly what they thought!

*11 "They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?" (Exodus 14:11).*

In the midst of the wilderness, when faced with hopelessness, it's natural to question how we ended up there. Is God angry at me? Has He abandoned me? God did not send His only Son to die on the cross for Your sins only to leave you and abandon you. But God cares more about our character than our comfort. He cares more about our holiness than our happiness. He knows what we need and every season is an extension of His love.

[Abandoned Video]

### **Conclusion**

God was always there. He never abandoned us. He hasn't rejected us. Even when we don't see Him, He's working. Even when we don't feel it, He's working. God created us for so much more than we could possibly realize. He has placed so much in us and it is in the wilderness that He pulls all of that potential out.

### **Group Discussion Questions**

1. In Exodus 12:11, we get a picture of the Israelites eating with their sandals on and their staff in hand ready to move. In what ways do we as Christians get too comfortable or complacent in our “Egypt”? In what ways can we cultivate a heart that is more ready for God’s move in our lives?
2. Through both Jesus and the Israelites we see a pattern of salvation followed by a time of testing (wilderness). Have you experienced the swing from mountaintop to valley in your spiritual walk? How did you respond and what did you learn from that experience?
3. The wilderness is often seen as a place of difficulty, but through God’s eyes, it’s a place of preparation and transformation. How might reframing your current struggles as preparation for what’s next change your perspective? What practical steps can you take to grow spiritually during a wilderness season?