

How Can the Wilderness be a Gift?

Why does God take us into the wilderness?

I have asked that question numerous times, especially when I've been surrounded by fears and doubts with no clear way out. I have wondered how long I need to stay in the wilderness and if I'll even make it through. ***The wilderness isn't just a physical place- it symbolizes periods of darkness and struggle, when life feels impossibly heavy and everything looks gray. We enter when our lives aren't unfolding as we planned, often when we feel lost, useless and alone.***

For two decades, I've had intermittent seasons in the wilderness but the longest continuous stretch lasted four years. Four years when I begged God daily for deliverance. Four years when I cried almost every single day. Four years when I learned to lean on God.

Those four years were unspeakably hard. Yet as I've seen in Scripture and experienced in my own life, *God meets us in the wilderness more than anywhere else.* **In the wilderness, we learn to depend on God, we sense his presence and we grow to love his word.**

The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. This wilderness came after a great victory, as the Lord parted the Red Sea so they could escape the pursuing Egyptians who were right behind them. Yet this stunning display of God's power wasn't enough to maintain the Israelites loyalty and trust; they soon doubted God's provision and complained. ***The Lord then took them into the wilderness where he taught them about himself.***

When the Israelites entered the wilderness, they had no way to provide for themselves. They fondly remembered Egypt, where they were slaves, because in Egypt they knew what was happening. Life was hard, but predictable. Now day-to-day life was uncertain. In the wilderness, they were constantly moving so there was no way to plant crops or have a reliable source of food. **Yet even in this uncertainty, God took care of them, so they needn't worry. When they were hungry and thirsty, God gave them manna to eat and brought water from a rock. (Exodus 16-17) They lacked nothing.**

I couldn't provide for myself in my four-year wilderness either. At one point, I was a single parent and my body was failing, so I had to rely on God for the things I could not do for myself. Friends would unexpectedly bring meals when I didn't have the strength to cook. People offered to drive me to appointments when I was physically depleted. Others dropped by unannounced just to see if they could fix anything. God sent his servants to help when I needed it.

The children of Israel not only depended on God for their physical needs, but they also needed him for direction. They had to keep their eyes on the Lord because without his guidance, they didn't know where they were going. God went before them, as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night so that they would know when they had to leave and where they were supposed to go. (Exodus 13:21-22) They weren't given any information beforehand so they couldn't make plans; they were forced to wait for God, only moving when he moved. In my wilderness, I did the same thing. There were so many decisions before me, with so many unknowns, that I didn't trust my own judgment. So I kept my eyes on the Lord, and he showed me what to do every day.

The pillars of cloud and of fire indicated that the Lord was with the Israelites: they were visible signs of his invisible presence. When they saw either, they knew that God was with them. **One of the greatest gifts of the wilderness is God's presence – it becomes electrifyingly real and deeply intimate.** *We know he is with us. We sense his love and his comfort, often because the love and comfort of others feels conspicuously absent.* In the wilderness, I feel God's presence in ways that I can't experience elsewhere. It is one of the elusive treasures of darkness. (Isaiah 45:3)

In the wilderness, God taught the Israelites to listen to his word. They learned that "man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." (Deut 8:3) ***Through their wanderings, God's people learned that while manna was important, God's word was essential. God's word would satisfy and sustain them in the desert in ways that food never could.*** As Jeremiah 15:16 says, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart."

God's word is what has sustained me in my wilderness. I learned to love Scripture in ways I'd never loved it before. God spoke to me as I poured over the pages, searching for his promises and encouragement. *My time with him grew richer and longer because I was not merely reading for information - now I was reading for direction, wisdom, and life-giving connection.* Connecting with the Lord surpassed any joy I had ever felt before.

My years in the wilderness were the hardest of my life, but they were also the most precious. In them, I learned to trust God and not myself. I learned that God will provide for my every need, though often he redefines what I need. I learned to love Scripture and to see God more clearly.

So if you are in the wilderness today, don't despair. God has brought you to this difficult place "to do you good in the end." (Deut 8:16) In this wilderness, God can teach you his ways, provide for your needs and draw you to himself. One day you will see how God has used every minute in the desert to showcase his glory and to maximize your eternal joy.