

THE VICTORIOUS LIFE – THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY

Background

The risen Lord Jesus has won the greatest victory on the cross, for us. Believers are to live in constant awareness of this, and to discover what flows from his victory in every area of their lives – as they sit with him in the heavenlies, as they walk with him in this world, and as they stand against ('resist') the enemy of our souls, who would seek to negate the salvation our Lord has won through his finished work at Calvary. One area of the believer's walk with him where the Lord may correct and teach, and demonstrate his grace, power, and faithfulness, is in the wilderness. Ephesians 2:6; 5:8; 6:13; Acts 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10; 2 Corinthians 12:9.

The wilderness journey is an experience many believers know, in which fresh opportunities exist to discover how to appropriate Jesus' victory in daily life, learning from and applying God's word and operating in obedience to him, with the help of the Holy Spirit, as we take the path of the cross, speaking, acting and walking in the authority of Jesus' name. Mark 16:15; Luke 9:1–2, 23; Romans 6:5-7, 11; 8:1; Ephesians 6:15; Galatians 5:25; James 4:7; 1 Peter 3:15; 5:8–9.

Wilderness situations have several features which encourage us to cry out to God. They are often dry, uninhabited places of isolation, physical or social 'deserts', with times of testing that require us to turn to God in faith and to trust him completely – and we find special places of meeting and decision. God leads his people through these places, and goes before them. He encourages them with his faithfulness, presence and grace. He will bring them into the good things that he has promised. The wilderness is a place of purpose; his tests are to refine and build up his people. Exodus 3:8; 13:18–22; 14:10–11; 15:23; Deuteronomy 8:7; 31:6; Joshua 1:9; Jeremiah 31:2; Mark 6:31; 9:2.

The Hebrew word *midbar* (wilderness) is derived from the root *davar*, meaning to speak or declare. God speaks to us in wilderness experiences and they are under his sovereign direction. They are normally times of testing and correction, to humble us, and to prove our love for him by whether we will listen to and obey his word or not. Jesus, too, was led into the wilderness to be tested and he gained victory over Satan with the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. Exodus 3:1; Numbers 1:1; Deuteronomy 8:1-5; Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12.

Wilderness Testing

The Lord gave his people Israel several strong tests as he led them out of Egypt and through the wilderness to the promised land of Israel. Some have overlapping significance; all have relevance for us today.

- They faced situations to which they sometimes responded in **fear**. Humanly speaking, there seemed to be the risk of failure, starvation, disease, poverty, death, though God was actually providing for all their needs. There is a kind of fear which is just worry, anxiety, but there is a proper 'fear of the Lord', which is the beginning of wisdom. They needed the latter, not the former, and so do we. When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, he responded. '*Fear ye not, stand still and see the salvation of the LORD*' (KJV). They saw his great work, and they then feared the Lord and believed. When they called, he answered: '*Fear thou not, for I am with you*' (KJV). A proper fear of God removes our anxieties and fears about our sustenance. When we trust him, God does what seems to us to be impossible. See Exodus 3:7–8; 14:10–31; Isaiah 41:10; 58:9; Psalm 56:3; Matthew 19:26.
- Three days in the wilderness, and no fresh water supply had been found! They would have been worried about **thirst**. The Israelites grumbled against Moses. They should have known that the Lord would provide for them. He used a tree to make the bitter water sweet. The 'tree' of Calvary will sweeten life's hardships for the believer. If we listen diligently to our Lord's voice, and do what is right, he will protect us and heal our sicknesses – Jesus bore them for us on the cross. God's grace – his unmerited favour – sustains us. No matter why it seems as though we are going through a 'wilderness' or trials, we can still rejoice in the Lord, even in the midst of our sufferings. We are to persevere, to go on believing in Jesus and so go on having eternal life. See Exodus 15:22–27; Isaiah 53:4–5; 55:1, 6; Romans 5:1–4.
- The Israelites had been miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt, yet now they grumbled about **food**! They missed the 'pots of meat' and plentiful food they used to have in Egypt, and now they complained against their divinely appointed leaders, Moses and Aaron. God would provide all they needed but they thought that they would go **hungry** in the wilderness. But the Lord miraculously provided sufficient food (*manna*), a kind of 'bread' from heaven. There was even extra provided so that they could observe the Sabbath without needing to work on that day. In all this, we remember that Jesus is our bread from heaven and we are fed by him. Jesus explains how this is about eternal life (see John 6:51). Our grumbling about inconveniences and the perceived

inadequacies of our circumstances may be a sign of a soul starved of time with God, and especially of 'rest' in him. It can also simply be a corrosive tendency to grumble about life, and we need to change (repent of) that whole attitude, if it is how we are. Something in us has to change! *Do all things without murmurings . . . that ye may be . . . without rebuke* (KJV). See Exodus **16:2–30**; John **6:31–32, 51**; Philippians **2:14–15**. Grumbling (which may be about food supply, but can be much else!) can also show that we are not really trusting Jesus and not believing his clear explanation in John chapter 6 of why he came. So we are challenged to change any wrong ideas we have about this, and come into line with what he says; we need to understand Jesus' claims, believe him, and put into practice our professed commitment to his word. Stopping grumbling is a seemingly small but actually rather important part of what our response needs to be. It is quite obvious really: we can hardly say we are giving thanks and rejoicing always and praying without ceasing if at the same time we are having a grumble!

- We have begun to see that in the wilderness period, the Israelites sometimes **doubted** God's ability to keep his promises. *Is He among us or not?* (KJV) God's provision was poured out from the rock and there is living water for his people. They doubted his presence among them, yet there is persevering intercession in faith and God released victory. We enter conflict when we doubt or despair of the Lord's presence, but with faith, walking in obedience, believing and trusting in Jesus, victory over the enemy of our souls is secure. Exodus **13:21–22**; **17:3, 7, 12**; 1 Corinthians **10:4, 12**; Romans **8:27**; Hebrews **7:25**; Matthew **28:20**; Mark **9:23**; **10:27**.

- When the Israelites lost sight of God, or rejected his appointed leader, their faith wavered and they replaced God with an idol. This opened the door to worship of other gods that snared them (and sometimes it snares people today). In these days, when there are 'multi-faith' attempts to mix religions and pressures to promote the recognition of other deities, we have to consider first the *primary* application of the biblical prohibition of idolatry. We must *never* honour or give credence to any other deities. We worship only the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; we worship him as one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Ten Commandments still apply! His claim is both universal and exclusive. 'I am the way....' *Not* one of many ways!

There is a secondary implication to this (more often emphasised these days) which rightly points to the need not to exalt wealth, human fame, human ideologies or indeed anything else. Our focus should always be on God whom we praise and worship and honour. We are to beware of stubbornness, worldliness and carnality. Jesus has told us clearly, *It is written, fear/worship the Lord thy God, and serve Him only*. He gave us a desire and a command to worship, and if we put something or someone in God's place, then that other thing will become an 'idol'. In ancient times, in the wilderness, Moses pleaded for Israel. Under the new, Messianic covenant, we know that the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus, and leads us to glorify Jesus too. Jesus is to be in the centre of our lives; and we are to go on 'abiding' in Jesus. Exodus **32:8, 23**; **31–34**; Deuteronomy **6:13**; **8:14–17**; 1 Samuel **15:23**; Matthew **4:10**; Romans **8:7**; 2 Corinthians **10:5**; James **4:4**.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray and turned to our own way (KJV). As we recognise, and are built up through what seem like 'wilderness' times, which may include tests or trials, believers in the Lord Jesus can learn to exercise faith and perseverance. Even in the face of hardship, we can learn to trust more and more in his goodness and faithfulness. We can walk closer to him who knows our infirmities, and who, like us, was . . . *in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin*. *Let us therefore come boldly unto the Throne of Grace that we may obtain mercy, and find Grace to help in time of need* (KJV). Isaiah **53:6**; Psalm **56:3**; Hebrews **4:15–16**.

Finally, we can be sure that, when we believers pray, we are not alone, no matter what the wilderness through which we may happen to be walking looks like to us. We can go on being filled with the Holy Spirit wherever we are and whatever is happening in our circumstances. We are privileged then to know the very presence of God with us, however we might feel. In his book entitled *Practising the Principles of Prayer*, David Pawson reminds us that in Christian prayer we are engaged with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is a lot going on in the heavenly places, and many Christians find that true, deep intercession involves some spiritual warfare. So the desert is far from boring! Often it turns out with hindsight to have been a time for preparation for a new level or sphere of kingdom activity, as it was for Jesus after the Spirit descended on him, but before his public ministry really began. So if your wilderness seems a bit bleak or full of temptations, don't be discouraged by that, remember that God leads his people out of it, and that you may look back on it as having been a time of training for something else; and in any event God wants your walk with him to become stronger.