

'In the wilderness'

v1 'Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan'-so is the wilderness a good place or bad?

There are many references to the wilderness or 'desert' as it is also called in the bible. It wasn't only empty waste land, burning hot and arid like the Sahara Desert. It was largely uninhabited areas, well outside of towns and villages. In such places, there can be loneliness and desolation, a sense of being completely on your own, but there can be food, water and shelter.

From the bible we learn these are places of **formation, transformation, revelation and trust**. Isn't this what **discipleship** is about? Being formed as a Christian, becoming more like Jesus, being transformed to be who he has created us to be, experiencing more of God, new, deeper experiences in prayer and bible study, trusting God more completely? So they are **good places**, places we should explore by choice or accept that we are in right now.

The word '*tempt*' is understood these days to mean *to seduce or entice to do wrong*, but here the Greek word means *to test*, so what Jesus experienced and what we experience isn't meant to make him or us sin. It isn't to

make us bad, nor to weaken us but to make us stronger and better for the ordeal.

God works through wilderness experiences to bring about in our lives and behaviour **growth and maturity**, not as punishment but because he loves us and wants to see us know and love him more. In these lonely, empty places, where God may seem distant or silent, a new humility and contentment in God grows as we rest and don't strive.

Moses spent 40 years being prepared by God to lead his people out of Egypt to freedom. **Abraham and Sarah** found a new direction for their lives in the desert, **Elijah** discovered the power of God's presence in the still small voice whilst in the wilderness, and **David** hid from King Saul in the desert. **Saul/Paul** was on the desert road to Damascus when he met Jesus.

It is understandable to think God has abandoned us initially but actually the opposite happens, **God draws closer and reveals something new to us** during these times. It becomes clearer that God is preparing us for something new in our lives. We mustn't shy away from these times and opportunities.

Perhaps you have talked to Miriam, Robin, Rachel Cryer, Mary Dowswell, Gillian, David, Don or Esther, David &

Ann Cumins about their wilderness/desert experiences of recent months and years. Trusting God in all and any circumstances really does grow 'spiritual muscle' as Michael Green puts it! To learn that apart from God you can do nothing, moves us into a deeper dependency on our heavenly Father. Ask them what they have learned in these times.

Isaiah 43:19-20 "I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the desert...I give water in the desert, rivers in the wilderness,... to give drink to my people." **God is in the wilderness and desert experiences.** Here we experience the mystery of God, remember? the deeper things of God, the sometimes harder things we can't explain?

Jesus going into the wilderness was part of God's plan, and not a mistake. He was led or even compelled by the Holy Spirit to be prepared for his 3 years of mission and ministry, to be trained and strengthened in his calling.

Can you see that we too can be given new direction and guidance, refreshment and quenching in these places? Notice he wasn't tested immediately but after 40 days and nights-now Jesus is weakened by hunger and then Satan comes to him.

Satan thinks he is going to break him at a time of weakness. Satan often comes and we need to watch out for this, when we are feeling weak or low spiritually and yet also when we are on a spiritual high.

But Satan isn't interested in trying to make Jesus sin, rather he wants to **pull Jesus off course**. Satan doesn't want Jesus to reveal the love of God through preaching and healing people. He wants to distract him and lead him away from God's calling on his life.

It easy to think **temptation** is all about sinning or not, but actually if Satan only distracts us and keeps us busy and wasting time then he will be achieving a whole lot more, because we won't be getting on with our vocation and calling, being Jesus at work, and to our neighbours and friends, serving our church or community.

Satan is continuously trying to thwart God's purposes in our lives. If we have heard God's calling to love and follow him, we will also hear the enemy whispering to pull us away-we need to be wise to this and ready for him and know how to deal with him.

Don't see these times of testing and challenge as you losing your faith but rather as you **growing stronger**. See these times as when the heights of a spiritual high are grounded in real living, real depending on God, so you can

be confident of growth and a deepening experience of God, not just froth and bubble.

[Satan tempts us by making us **doubt**-‘if you are the Son of God’ he repeats 3 times. This is after Jesus’ baptism which has affirmed him of who he is-‘this is my son in whom I’m well pleased’. Satan tries to take that away. Satan always diminishes us, tries to make us small.]

So **what keeps us going and feeds us** whilst we are in these wilderness times in our Christian life? It’s not being hungry physically that weakens us, but wondering if God really loves us? Jesus has been assured of his Father’s love. Are you confident and assured of how much God loves you? Do you doubt God really cares for you, will he protect you?

At times like these **we go back to the bible** and find the promises that have been made. Psalm 23 ‘The Lord is my shepherd I’ll not want. His rod and staff they comfort me.[I don’t need a thing. You walk by my side. I feel secure]

[Satan comes along and says, ‘you have unmet needs and desires’. I can meet them for you’. What came into your mind right then? What do you long for? Hunger painfully at times for? Surely God knows our needs? Could it be that we have been depending on ourselves, being self

reliant and not depending on God? It is an easy mistake to slip into.

Satan offers Jesus power, importance, respect, recognition, authority, control. Are these things you desire, or make an effort to have in your life? ‘You can have all this if you will worship me’, says Satan. Who do you worship? Often it is ourselves.]

How did Jesus resist Satan’s temptations? By using the word of God. Jesus tells Satan, ‘It says, Love the Lord your God-and have no other gods but me.’ It is so powerful to use God’s word. Jesus knew them well and when he needed them he could use them in this spiritual warfare .Unless we spend time with the scriptures we can’t use them. Read them, know them, learn them please-you do need to be well equipped.

Jesus will have learnt the OT scriptures like this one, Deuteronomy 8:2 ‘Remember the long way the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments ‘.

Can you see here God is saying this experience is good for you and your faith. This will help you grow as a disciple of Jesus. Just as the Israelites reacted to hardships with doubt and complaints, we too find it

difficult, but we are to stay close to God in the midst of our hardships, and God will strengthen and sustain us for our journey through this life.

So what is your desert or wilderness? Prolonged sickness? Being stuck in a boring, unfulfilling job? Living with a rebellious teenager or an unbelieving spouse? Sometimes we are compelled or thrust into a wilderness. Other times we go of our own accord like Jesus going to be alone with God early in the morning

Wilderness times won't always be major life experiences like those I just mentioned. Just to choose times of silence and aloneness can be a wilderness. These sacred places are for growing a more intimate relationship with God.

Jesus went into the wilderness because he knew the importance of time by himself with God, time alone to pray. He did this again and again in his ministry.

We all need wilderness experiences. We all need to get away alone by ourselves. Perhaps we would all be more effective, know the scriptures better and know God better if we took time to be away in our own 'wildernesses'?

When are you alone with God? Is this something you could work on during lent? 10 minutes of quiet and bible

reading for 6 weeks could revolutionise your Christian life? Could you go to work 5 minutes earlier and sit in the car before you go in and read your bible or pray? Go to bed 5 minutes earlier than your spouse so you can pray alone or read your bible? Take a walk each day for 5 mins to pray?

Can we see **Lent** not about the things we have to give up, but as a **time of learning more, a time for receiving refreshment, healing and restoration, a time of growing closer to God?**

Lent is a time to get away from the distractions of our busy world to discover the blessings of a greater intimacy with God. God is calling His children out of the 'world' and into the 'wilderness' to spend time in relationship with Him.

This wilderness journey can take us away from the normal flow of life so that we can spend time examining ourselves and our walk with God. Or the hardships and long term difficulties challenge us to look into our very being and our willingness to totally trust God with all our cares and concerns.

Jesus ministers to us like the angels did to him, to give us confidence, strength, renewed energy, faith, refreshed spiritual vision, and a restored sense of

direction and purpose, as we seek to follow where he leads us.

Please take some quality time to be with God in the wilderness this Lent, seeking Him in the solitude, praying that He will renew you for the journey. Amen