

The Wilderness Journey – Lenten Bible Study 2021

Week 1 – On the Edge of the Wilderness

Standing on the edge of the wilderness can often be overwhelming. When you think of the “wilderness” what word(s) come to mind or what images come to your mind when you think of the wilderness?

This six-week study is design for you to explore and learn:

Week 1: On the Edge of the Wilderness-What is the wilderness and it purpose?

Week 2: Stepping into the Wilderness-How do we get into the wilderness?

Week 3: Walking Together-What do you expect to happen in the wilderness?

Week 4: Walking with God-What can we learn when we are in the wilderness?

Week 5: Wrong Turns-How to turn to God and avoid listening to wrong voices?

Week 6: Exiting the Wilderness-How do we leave the wilderness?

Week 1: The two faces of wilderness

Read Genesis 16:1-15, 21:1-20, Exodus 2:11-23, 3:1-12, Exodus 13: 17-22

In the Old Testament there are two reasons for venturing into the wilderness: it is either running away from one’s problems into what is seen as a safe haven, or being driven against one’s will into what appears quite inhospitable and dangerous. These two faces of the wilderness can alternate within a given story, sometimes inseparably.

In two stories, paralleling one another to a remarkable degree, the two aspects can be easily be separated. This simplicity makes for an easier analysis of the themes, which can then be generalized to other wilderness experiences. For these reasons, we begin with the parallel stories of Moses and Hagar. Incidental themes of slavery and abuse tie the stories together, as do geographic locations. For example, Sarah did to her Egyptian slave what the Egyptian slaves would later do to her offspring. But there are more important parallels.

Moses and Hagar each entered the wilderness twice. First, they *ran away from* oppressive situations and family conflicts involving ambiguous roles. Moses ran from certain punishment for murder, after finding himself caught between his Jewish heritage and his royal Egyptian status

gained through his adoption. Hagar, impregnated in place of the master's wife, had been abused by Sarah, so she ran away into the wilderness.

In both cases, Hagar and Moses encountered God, understood God by new names, received a promise, and were told to return to their difficult situations (Gen. 16 and Ex. 2-3). Hagar returned to be a slave, and Moses returned to take his place with the enslaved Israelites, and to free them from Egypt.

What is the meaning of this initial wilderness experience?

Hagar was found by a spring of water, and Moses, even better off, was married and tending sheep before his theophany. It was hardly a time of purgation for either of them.

The wilderness has been called a place of "temporary escape, transformation" in light of this first entrance. The wilderness, not yet dangerous, is, however, an isolated, quiet place. It allowed God a chance to have a private conversation, giving both Moses and Hagar a first glimpse of God and his plan for them.

Secondly, both Hagar and Moses were driven into the wilderness a second time, but this time the wilderness was more threatening than inviting, and provisions were packed before setting out (Gen. 21 and Ex. 12).

It became "a location outside of civilization, where entire nations can live at risk with God {...in} the borderland between civilization and chaos." Also, when Hagar and Moses were driven out by their original oppressors, God was evidently the orchestrator, verbally directing Abraham (Gen. 21: 12-13) and hardening Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21 and 11:10).

In both cases, God used family and political conflicts in order to separate people that trusted in his promise. Trusting in that promise and love for God developed through various life-threatening trials, and the community tightened its ties precisely because all other help and distractions were absent in the wilderness. Speaking of this second face of the wilderness, "In the wilderness, everything becomes 110 percent what it is. Without all the usual background noise and distraction, there is nothing to dilute reality. All of the ordinary filters do not work." Another exegete put it this way:

Wilderness is life beyond redemption, but short of consummation; but the former seems ineffective, and the latter only a mirage. The promise has been spoken, but who can live by words alone? The hope has been proclaimed, but the horizon keeps disappearing in the sandstorms. And so trust in God often turns to recalcitrance and resentment. Faith erodes with

the dunes. Commandments collapse into the disorder that shapes daily life. And judgment is invited in to share one's tattered tent.

More often, the two faces of the wilderness alternate ambivalently within a given story. For example, Israel left the slavery of Egypt willingly, but they were also driven through the Red Sea by fear of Pharaoh's chariots. The wilderness was a safe haven from one kind of danger, but it was immediately inhospitable, too. Israel's wandering inseparably walked the line between intimacy with God such as no one had ever experienced and, on the other hand, temptations, insecurity, and discomfort. The wilderness is not the kind of place one normally chooses for oneself, but it is God's favored place from which to show his care and concern. It is a place that one enters by cutting off one's past in an attempt to make a fresh start, and one is utterly vulnerable. God's preferential love for the poor combines with the ripeness of the occasion, and the time is usually one of deepened understanding about the mind of God. Regardless of the individual outcome, we can argue that God desires that effect.

Week 2: Stepping Into the Wilderness

Week 3: Walking Together

Week 4: Walking with God

Week 5: Wrong Turns

Week 6: Exiting the Wilderness