

Have you ever been driving when a nasty storm hit? The kind where you can't hear anything but rain or see more than a few feet in front of you? It's in those times where the grace of God shows up in the form of an overpass, a place of refuge where you can pull over under cover, wait out the storm, and then return to normal along the path you were taking.

We have been in a storm of our own these last few weeks and have rightly sought shelter under the cover of the Gospel. We have been reminded that Jesus has overcome, that he is in control, that his grace is sufficient, and that our eternity is secure. That has allowed us to catch our breath and holdfast to our hope in this time. But are we supposed to just stay here? I'm not talking about moving ourselves out from under the cover of the Gospel. Never! But what I am asking is, like sitting under an overpass, are we supposed to just wait this out until the storm blows over so we can return to normal? To that I would also say "Never!"

In times like these we are tempted to just get through it until things go back to normal. We see trials as an exception, a footnote in the story of our lives that have to be tolerated. But that is not how Scripture talks about them. God's Word says trials are vital and should be expected. They are used by God to reveal himself to us and change us. If that's true, then I believe that, in this current storm, **God wants you to come out of this different than when you went in.**

That's why this morning we begin a new series called "A New Normal". We are going to see how God uses a trial as an opportunity to grow our faith and redirect our lives by looking at how he did that with the nation of Israel in their 40-year journey through the wilderness. It was there where they came to the end of themselves only to find a loving, faithful God who wanted to build their faith and prepare them to live out their purpose. That same God is present today and he wants to use this time to do the same thing with us. We have an opportunity to come out of this different, but only if we join with him and let him go to work.

In Deuteronomy 8, Israel is at the end of their wilderness journey, about to enter the Promised Land, and Moses is looking back at what God was doing with them for the last 40 years.

**[Deuteronomy 8:1-3] "The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. <sup>2</sup> And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. <sup>3</sup> And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.**

A little background: In 1876 BC, the Jewish patriarch Jacob moved his people to Egypt due to a famine in the land. Eventually they became slaves of the Egyptians until 430 years later when God raised up a leader named Moses. God sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and demand he free his people. God brought a number of plagues on the Egyptian people, ultimately taking the life of all their firstborn, but God commanded the Jews to place the blood of a lamb on their doorframes so that the angel of death would pass over their household. Pharaoh finally relented and let them go. They got out in a hurry, but in his rage and hardheartedness, Pharaoh changed his mind and

sent the Egyptian army after them. The wilderness experience began when Israel found itself pinned between that army and the Red Sea. They had nowhere to go, and their 40-year journey to learn to trust God commenced. Moses looks back at those 40 years and gives commentary to what it was about. While our circumstances are different, the opportunity of the wilderness is the same; to get us to a new normal. Here's how it does that.

**The wilderness reveals.** Moses says God took them into the wilderness to know what was in their hearts. Would they trust and follow him, or would they mistrust and rebel? If you know the story, they mistrusted many times, turning an 11-day journey into a 40-year journey.

Wilderness trials always bring us to a fork in the road where our faith is tested. One path is the path of faith. The other is the path of faithlessness. Tests are never neutral. In the New Testament, trial and temptation are same word in Greek. Every test is an opportunity to prove our faith or a temptation to fail. God uses the test to prove our faith. Our flesh, and our Enemy, use test to destroy us. Tests show us where our trust is because tests are where faith becomes real. I can have all the faith in the world that this chair can hold me up, but it's not until I sit in it that my faith is tested and proven.

We might bristle at this idea of testing because we know how hard the wilderness can be. We may try to opt out because we don't want to see what will be revealed, or we don't want to fail. That's because we look at exposure as a bad thing. God sees it as a good thing. Think about crash testing for cars. They don't do it to fail the car and get rid of it. They do it so that every time it hits the wall, an evaluation is made, weaknesses are addressed, and the car comes out the other side better, stronger, and more capable to withstand next time it's run into a wall. Tests of patience...my favorite! Going through any of those now? I'm scoring about 32% on those tests. They expose what triggers our impatience and allow us to address those areas. The wilderness does the same thing. It shows where your faith is strong and where your faith is weak.

Martha and I journeyed through a two-year wilderness around 11 years ago. I'll tell you more about in a few weeks. The catalyst was material need, but what it revealed were a good number of idols in our lives. Martha's hope and security were in account balances. I personally struggled with a fear of failure and coveted the praise of man. The wilderness brought all of those things to light, and Martha and I had to go through the painful realization they existed, and, to a great extent, they owned us. But that revelation began the journey to our new normal.

This opportunity is too important to pass up because the wilderness reveals what's holding you back. It shows you what's come between you and God and what's keeping you from living out your purpose from God. And if you struggle with the idea of opening yourself up to the opportunity the wilderness provides, you have to understand God's intent. Not only does the wilderness reveal, it revives and refines.

**The wilderness revives and refines.**

Testing is not for your demise but for your development. It is to build your faith and character. God does not allow us to be tested with the hopes of failing us. He does so because he wants to draw us to himself, show himself to be faithful, and pour out his grace to strengthen our faith.

Moses tells us God took the Israelites into the wilderness where they had no means to provide for themselves. He let them hunger so that he could miraculously feed them day after day after day. They were humbled because they realized they were fully dependent on him, and he showed himself to be a faithful provider not just in bread, but in all things. Ultimately their faith grew and their relationship with him was revived. The same can happen for us.

**[James 1:2-4] <sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

As we remain steadfast/endure in our faith, God uses the difficulty of the wilderness to revive our spirit and refine our character. I've always been fascinated by how a muscle grows through resistance. That resistance actually tears muscle fibers and, as they reconnect, the muscle becomes larger. The wilderness tears us down, but if we remain faithful, God builds us back up bigger and stronger and to know him more deeply. It becomes our new normal. You will grow incrementally through spiritual disciplines, but you can grow exponentially in times of trial.

There was a moment before Martha and I entered our wilderness where I believe God was telling me we were headed for a difficult season. He doesn't do that all the time, but I believe it was an act of mercy to begin to prepare me. I remember praying to God something like this: "It's ok, God. I understand the lesson you want to teach me. You don't even have to worry about taking us there. I get it." Can you believe God didn't listen to me?!?!

The days ahead for you may be very difficult. While I challenge us to take this opportunity, I also pray for God to overwhelm us with grace and mercy because I know it will be tough. But I also tell you it's worth it because your relationship with God and your character will never be the same. I rejoice in my suffering because it changed me. I know God more intimately and I am more of the person God made me to be. The very same can happen for you, if you let you it. **We may not be able to choose if we are in the wilderness, but we can choose what we'll let God do in us when we're there.**

### **The wilderness redirects.**

The Israelites had been saved from Egypt, but they still had to get to the Promised Land. In v1 Moses says to trust God, do what he says, and the result will be life, multiplication, and the land God has for them to be the people God calls them to be. If you are a follower of Jesus, you have been saved from sin and death, but there's a new life God wants to save you into. The more we trust God, the more we'll follow his ways, and the more we'll flourish in what he made us to do.

If I tried to do what I'm doing now 10 or 12 years ago I would've been eaten up. God would've been calling for my attention and devotion, but so would my idols. But because I allowed God to reveal and refine, and as my relationship and devotion to him was revived, I was prepared to go in a different direction, and fulfill the purpose he has for my life. None of that would have happened without my wilderness experience.

As the wilderness reveals our hearts, draws us back to God, and conforms us to the image of Jesus, life can take on a new direction, a new normal, that looks more like the life God has for you. The wilderness can be a reset, an opportunity to evaluate how you are spending your life and ask God if there is anything that needs to be changed or left behind. There is a way of life on the other side of this that is better than the one before. **God wants to take you somewhere new, but you have to go through the wilderness to get there.**

**Have you trusted God more or less these last few weeks?** Where are you looking for guidance, hope, truth, to know how to feel? There is no shame in that question. It is vital question to answer because it shows where your relationship with God is, and it's a great time to declare it. It's where we all have to begin. The best way to start to dream about a new normal is to have clarity on what will become the old normal.

**How has God shown up in the wilderness previously?** How has God shown himself to be faithful in the past? He never changes, and he may show up in different ways, but he will remain faithful. Hold fast to that as your faith is tested. My own wilderness experience strengthens me for now. **I'm at peace today because I have been sustained by God's mercy and grace before.** And if you have experience in the wilderness and have a story to tell about God's faithfulness that will help someone else, particularly those in it for the first time, do so. They need to hear about our good God so they can endure in this time.

**Where in your life do you believe God wants to do some work?** We are all a work in progress, and the wilderness continues to reveal, even in the most mature of us. This can be an impactful time between you and God. To that end, I want to invite you to a few things. I want to call us all into a season of prayer where we humble ourselves before the Lord, ask him to examine and change our hearts, and ask him to use us to bless others. We will be offering a Training Experience on prayer. It's easy for me to tell you to pray, but maybe you'd like to know how, or learn ways to develop an even more intimate relationship with the Lord. Additionally, as you think about being redirected by God, we will be offering Repurposed for you to spend six weeks seeking the Lord about why he put you on this earth. We believe these will help you maximize the faith opportunity found in the wilderness.

**Pain is purposeful when we respond to God with open and receptive hearts in the midst of deep trial. God intends to grow something beautiful and deep and lasting, but we must cooperate with God for the season of hardship to work its intended transformation. Don't let your detour go waste. You are in training, and God is up to something good. -Jeff Manion**

The wilderness is ultimately an opportunity for us to answer the question God is always asking: Will you trust me? **This is about more than changing behavior. It's about knowing God more and building our faith.** How we answer that question will determine how this wilderness journey impacts our lives and makes possible a new normal. I pray you say "yes" to that question and let God go to work. I can't promise it will be easy, but I can promise it will be worth it.