

“WILDERNESS JOURNEY”, by Keith Kelly

In Job 23:8-9 we read;

*But if I go to the East, He is not there; if I go to the West, I do not find Him. When He is at work in the North, I do not see Him; when He turns to the South, I catch no glimpse of Him.*

Do you remember what it felt like when we first gave our heart to Jesus? When we decided to truly start to follow Him and read the word of God? It felt like Jesus was right there with us. We felt great. We felt like the world wasn't such a bad place. After a while we started to think, “Hey God; where are you?” We felt like God wasn't listening anymore. Perhaps we found ourselves in a wilderness journey.

Now, some may feel like this is a penalty box. They've done something wrong and God is giving them a time out. That is simply not the case. God uses the wilderness to grow us; to prepare us for the next step in our faith journey. Now, God isn't literally sending us into the wilderness like Jesus was to prepare Him for His ministry. But rather, it is a spiritual wilderness. Let's look at some wilderness journeys from the Bible and see how God used them.

In Exodus, God has freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. He has brought them across the Red Sea leaving Pharaoh and his army in ruins. Exodus 13:17-18a;

*When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though it was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.*

God knew that the Israelites were not yet ready to take control of the Promised Land. He needed to prepare them, so He led them into the wilderness. During this journey, God gave the Israelites manna and quail, water from a rock. He gave them the 10 Commandments and rules to follow for worship, sacrifices and celebrations. He gave them the plans to build the tent where the ark would be kept when they made camp and sacrifices would be offered.

Eventually, God leads the Israelites to the edge of the Promised Land. Twelve spies are sent to explore the land and bring back a report. Joshua and Caleb brought back a favourable report. But the other 10 did not, Numbers 13:31 says;

*We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”*

The Israelites then rebel against God. They didn't believe that He could give them this land. They think the people living in the land are stronger than God. The same God who led them out of Egypt and fed them in the desert. Moses prayed to God asking Him to forgive the Israelites.

God replies in Numbers 20-23 (*read now*)...and God led the Israelites back into the desert for another 40 years.

So what can we learn from the Israelites' wilderness journey? First, we can see that God knows us. He knows our abilities and what we can handle. He knows when we need time to prepare for what is coming next. We see that when He takes them the long way to the Promised Land.

Something else we can learn, is the price of disobedience; the price of not embracing our wilderness journey and trusting in God. Our wilderness journey can be extended. We see this after the spies come back from exploring the Promised Land. Caleb and Joshua give a favourable report, but the other 10 give a negative report. Israel rebels against God; that is they do not put their trust and faith in Him. As a result, the whole nation is sent back to the desert to wander for 40 years. Because of their faith and trust in God, only Caleb and Joshua live to enter the Promised Land.

In Isaiah 40:3-5 we read;

*A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up; every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

In Luke 3, we see these verses again in reference to John the Baptist. John lived in the wilderness, literally. John preached a baptism of repentance. People knew there was something special about John. They took a journey into the wilderness to hear John preach and to be baptized by him. In Luke 3:8-14 we can read what John told the people (*read now*).

So, the people went into a physical wilderness to hear John. Those who would listen to John and take to heart what he preached would now have to travel through a spiritual wilderness. Repentance takes work, and prayer.

Of course we cannot talk about wilderness journeys without looking at one of the most well-known. Of course that would be Jesus in the desert, following His baptism. We understand that this was a time where God prepared Jesus for His ministry. Unlike the early Israelites, Jesus' wilderness journey lasted for 40 days and not 40 years. Jesus' wilderness journey is a perfect example of how we should approach our wilderness journeys. Jesus spent his time in the wilderness fasting and praying. Now, fasting may not work for you, but spending time in prayer, reading and studying the word of God will help us to go through our journey and come out stronger on the other side. We will be prepared for what God has in store for us next. Our journey may last a short period of time or it could last quite a while. It all depends on what God is preparing us for. It also depends on our willingness to surrender to God and listen to Him, to trust and have faith in Him.

At the end of Jesus' time in the wilderness, both physically and spiritually, Jesus is tempted by Satan. Jesus would have been quite tired and weak after fasting for 40 days, but He took strength in the word of God, and rebuffed Satan's temptations.

God has a plan for each and every one of us. Will we embrace God's plan for us, or will we run the other way like Jonah? We will most likely not understand the purpose of our wilderness journey until it is over. But at the end, we will feel much closer to God, and hopefully we will feel like Job in 23:10:

*But He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as Gold.*