

# THE 'WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE' EXPLAINED

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## **PART I – THE PROBLEM**

### **(a) Bewildered Christians**

#### THE REASON FOR THIS ARTICLE

Christians can get bewildered, discouraged and guilt-ridden when – usually following a time of spiritual blessing – their lives seem to get turned up-side-down. They often don't understand what's happening because they have been given no guidance or teaching on the **Wilderness Experience**.

### **(b) Bewildering Experiences**

#### 1. WHAT SORT OF THINGS?

Here – to give you some examples – are the sort of the things that bewildered Christians say: -

- *'I don't know what is happening. The foundations of my life seem to be shifting...'*
- *'I've experienced evil as never before...'*
- *'So many of the things that supported me have been removed...'*
- *'I daren't tell other Christians, but sometimes I now doubt whether God is really there...'*

- *'Some things cause me a deep pain and anguish now that used not to touch me...'*
- *'My relationship with God as a loving Father blossomed but then all awareness of his presence evaporated.'*
- *'My tears just come – its very embarrassing. I feel so silly and guilty.'*
- *'I now feel uneasy about things I have always done, which somehow now seem wrong...'*
- *'It is as if all my priorities are getting changed – whether I like it or not.'*
- *'I'm not sure that I'm really praying properly any more – things are different... What used to seem essential now isn't.'*
- *'Life has been much more painful since I was blessed in the Spirit than it ever was before!'*
- *'What's wrong with me? Why am I different from other Christians?'*
- *'I just know that it must all be my fault somehow.'*
- *'All the things that I had grown to rely on seem to have been removed one by one...'*
- *'I'm having to face up to things that in the past I have always avoided.'*
- *'I thought that Christian blessing would give greater peace, but I have deep angers bubbling up now which never troubled me before.'*

That's not to depress you! Christians are bewildered because in some Christian streams the '**Wilderness Experience**' is not known, recognised or understood, even though it has a firm place in Scripture and in Christian Experience.

In the absence of proper teaching, the '**Wilderness Experience**' can be interpreted as a victory for evil and may even lead to a loss of faith. A right understanding of it is, therefore, essential.

## 2. BEWILDERED TEACHERS ?

The '**Wilderness Experience**' – like so many other aspects of the Christian life – is not automatically or instinctively understood simply because one is a Christian. Scripture has to be studied and pondered; experience needs to be shared and gained; it has to be understood, taught, grasped, and worked through.

The average Christian is poorly served by the majority of Christian teachers and writers who avoid the subject.

[If you want to know why they do – see some further thoughts in **Appendix A.**]

Although every Christian pastor must encounter the symptoms of the '**Wilderness Experience**', few ministers (Protestants in particular) will be able to put such Christian experience into its wider spiritual context.

**This article is one of the few places where the Biblical understanding of the Wilderness, and the Christian understanding of the 'Wilderness Experience' are set out.**

### 3. THE END OF BEWILDERMENT !

Take heart! When Christ was *thrown out* into the **Wilderness** it was not the work of Satan but of the **Holy Spirit**.

[Mark 1:12. *And the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness.* My use of 'thrown...out' is deliberate and accurate, as the Greek word translated *drove* consists of the verb 'throw' with the prefix 'out' (Greek *ek + ballo*)! Mark uses it a dozen times for exorcisms 1:34 39; 3:15, 22,23; 6:13; etc., and for driving the traders out of the Temple, 11:15. Unlike Christ's Temptations it was not a mere suggestion.]

What the Spirit felt necessary to do for Our Lord he will do for his followers.

- The '**Wilderness Experience**' is not a denial of God's blessing.
- The '**Wilderness Experience**' is the outworking of God's blessing.

All this is nothing new – only that the term '**wilderness**' may be unfamiliar. Countless Christians sincerely sing a petition to the Holy Spirit that he should -

**make me,  
break me,  
mould me,  
fill me.**

[Sometimes the tough word '**break**' gets changed to something less painful. But in both the Old Testament and the New Testament writers liken us to clay in the hands of a potter for God to do with as he wishes. (See Isaiah 29:16, 45:9 and Romans 10:20-21.) When I was a boy, I had the unusual experience of a doctor deliberately breaking one of my arms! Earlier another doctor had set it wrongly. It looked as if it had two elbows! Had the second doctor not broken it, it would now be deformed. It is now whole. Some remaking and healing may first require breaking!]

Some may pray to the Holy Spirit in this way unthinkingly. Others may feel that the words are just vague religious sentiment. They're not! For whatever reason, many are bewildered when such a prayer begins to be answered. An understanding of the **wilderness experience** will help them to interpret what is happening to them, for **making, breaking, moulding** and **filling** are long-established items of Christian **wilderness** experience and of growth.

### 4. GROWTH NOT GUILT

The wish of all normal parents is that their children should grow up, change, develop, get stronger and mature. Our heavenly Father feels the same about us, and the Christian comments listed above (in section 1) are best regarded not as 'signs of failure' but positively as a list of '**growing pains**'. They are not about guilt - but *growth*!

As the **Wilderness/Desert Experience** is about Christian **growth**, so it is not a one-off thing (like adolescence, mumps or learning to read); aspects of it will be – and probably should be – always with us. (This must be seen in the light of this life being but a preparation for eternity with God himself, of which the 'Promised Land' is a verbal picture.)

### (c) Terminology

To reduce bewilderment even more, we need to make clear the use of a few words.

#### 1. TWO WORDS FOR ONE

In the New Testament there is basically one word, an adjective, that is capable of being translated by two different English words –

- **Wilderness**
- **Desert**

This means that they are interchangeable, and I shall use them that way in this article.

[The Greek word behaves more like our word **desert** than our word **wilderness**, since it can refer to: **a desert-ed person,**  
**a desert-ed place,**  
**a desert,**  
**the Desert. ]**

#### 2. TWO PLACES

'**The Wilderness**' (with a capital 'W') will, in this article, refer –

In the Old Testament to

- Israel's places of wanderings

In the New Testament to

- Jesus's place of temptation.

## PART II – WILDERNESS/DESERT-EXPERIENCES TODAY

### (a) Some Examples

Here are half-a-dozen typical examples of Christian experience.

#### 1. BACK TO BASICS

One of the commonest experiences is that of being thrown back to basics. In our usual crowded busy lives, it is difficult – sometimes impossible – to ask the big questions, let alone find their answers. What am I here for? What is life about? Where am I going? What am I doing – and why?

Those who find their meaning in fame or beauty or health or status go through a 'wilderness-type' experience when what they have built their life upon lets them down. Illness frequently pushes us – and those around us – back to basics. In the desert there are fewer, if any, distractions. Things become simpler, clearer and are seen in a different perspective. Reality is recognised and faced.

#### 2. HURTS UNCOVERED

Some who expect to experience *the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace*, etc. [Galatians 5:22 also patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.] may find that following a time of spiritual blessing some very deep-down angers, resentments and perhaps hatreds begin to emerge which are the very opposite of the Spirit-fruits!

Like splinters in a finger, our healing requires their removal. We cannot be whole or holy while such things fester away within us. It is the outworking of blessing that they should surface, be recognised, be treated and removed.

#### 3. PROPS REMOVED

Some who hope to experience the Holy Spirit as a 'Comforter' (in the modern sense) find life very *un-comfortable* seemingly as a result of being blessed in/by the Holy Spirit. People and things they have relied on in the past may, for instance, seem to be taken from them or are no longer available. This can be experienced by a group when, as so often happens, the 'wonderful' leader is removed, and the questions of dependence and over-dependence have to be recognised and worked through.

When children first ride bicycles they often have two small extra back wheels to help prop them up until such time as they can balance themselves and ride without them. God usually gives Christians an abundance of things to support them. The danger has always been that we come to rely on them, and don't grow up. It is a sign of growth, therefore, when God feels that he can remove things. Christians can too readily assume that because God gives us things, that he exists to do so! He does not exist to coddle us! God is firm in his purposes for our growth and our holiness.

#### 4. GOD'S 'ABSENCE'

After a wonderful experience of God's Presence some folk suffer the pain of the experience of God's Presence withdrawn. Only by gritting their teeth and trusting like mad do they hang-on even to their belief in God's existence. They dare not admit it to some of their Christian friends— they might think they had cracked-up or were even demon-possessed!

This is a development of the 'Props Removed' theme of the last point. It is God's most severe test, and has been experienced by Christians in every age. (Concepts like *'The Cloud of Unknowing'* and *'The Dark Night of the Soul'* are related to this.) Are we so grounded in God that we trust him utterly even when he withholds signals of his Presence? Or is God like those friends whom we really love when we are regularly in touch, but who get forgotten once we've mislaid their phone-number and cannot regularly be aware of them?

#### 5. SPIRITUAL PAIN

Some, after a renewing experience of God, find many things now give them a deep inner pain. Facets of human life that earlier just passed them by they now feel acutely. These are invariably the things which are not of God's kingdom: distortion of good things, injustice, cruelty, evil, blasphemy. Tears may be a new, and embarrassing, experience [see the article **Tears – Gift of the Holy Spirit?** also on this website].

#### 6. EVIL'S REALITY

A greater awareness of God is usually accompanied by a greater awareness of the invisible world – and the battle between good and evil. The better we see the light, the deeper will the darkness appear.

Evil is experienced. The picture-language of Scripture concerning evil, which might in the past have seemed out-dated and out-of-touch, suddenly seems contemporary, relevant and apt – and at times scary!

If evil is real then it is a growth in maturity to recognise it for what it is, the better to fight it. Jesus promised us that his Holy Spirit would **lead us into all truth**. [John 16:13] We should, therefore, assume that under the Spirit's leading our understanding of God, the things of God, and of ourselves - will grow and develop.

#### **(b) Right Judgement versus Guilt**

Folk undergoing such traumas invariably ask themselves what has gone wrong. Many assume that it is somehow *their* fault. God, they think, cannot love me any more. In this way, enormous blessing can be replaced by enormous **guilt**. The devil will encourage guilt at the slightest opportunity since it diverts a Christian's energy inward away from God, worship and witness, to a preoccupation with themselves.

**It is surely among the most tragic things that God can be working in Christian lives for their growth and maturity yet because of a lack of teaching and understanding, the experience can riddle them with guilt and grind them to a spiritual standstill or breakdown!**

Time and time and time and time and time again we need to go back to the great petition for Pentecost (as in the Book of Common Prayer) –

- **grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things.**

It is precisely when Christians make a **wrong judgement** about their **wilderness/desert experience** that they invite disaster, by not recognising it as the place of the Holy Spirit's leading.

### **(c) The Spiritual Life**

When people turn to God their journey may be smooth and gradual, or it may consist of some momentous leaps forward. The snag about **leaps**, glorious as they are, is that they may throw the Christian – without preparation – deeper into the spiritual life without the necessary understanding to go with it.

When a blind man's life was touched by Jesus, he said '*...once I was blind now I can see.*' And there will be readers who have spiritually experienced much the same spiritually. But pause a moment and consider.

Imagine that a blind man is given sight for the first time! Glorious! But he would view both a hungry lion and a large family dog in much the same way. A red light and a green light would be an equal delight but neither would convey any message. Signs of danger and direction would be of no use until he/she had progressed from reading by touch to reading by sight—and that would take time. Initially the person could be very **vulnerable** until they had learned to interpret correctly what was going on around them.

In a similar way folk who come quickly and deeply into the spiritual life need to learn and learn fast about the new invisible realm into which they have come. They are very vulnerable and easily lost and misled. For all is not what it seems, and real discernment is necessary.

[See the article **Discernment: Tool for Spiritual Survival** and the many other articles on this website bearing on the spiritual life e.g. **Growing Daily in the Spirit, Spiritual Warfare & the Ordinary Christian, Tears – Gift of the Holy Spirit?**, etc.]

So far I have highlighted a few of today's experiences of the **wilderness**, and given a brief interpretation of them. I have sorted out the terminology, and raised the problem of false-guilt and the need for a 'right judgement'. In Part III we shall begin by summarising Jesus's Baptism/Wilderness event, and the light the Old Testament will have shed on it.



## PART III - JESUS'S EXPERIENCE

### (a) Jesus and the Spirit

#### 1. MARK'S ACCOUNT (1:1-13)

Let's start with something familiar - Mark's early account of Jesus's Baptism. (More detailed accounts appear in the other Gospels.)

[Matthew 3:13-4:11, Luke 3:21-22, 4:1-13, John 1:29-34.]

#### i) John the Baptizer

Mark starts by telling us that John the Baptizer was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy –

*‘the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”,  
John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (vv. 3-4)*

John proclaims that a greater one will come after him, saying -

*‘I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ (v. 8)*

#### ii) Jesus from Nazareth

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee  
and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*

*And just as he was coming up out of the water,  
he saw the heavens torn apart  
and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.*

*And a voice came from heaven,  
‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ (vv. 9-11)*

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.  
He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan;  
and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (vv. 12-13)*

#### 2. THE BASICS

I shall return to this event again, but meanwhile let's note some important basic points from Mark's short account.

#### i) The Place of Breakthrough

John the baptizer, took his lead from the Old Testament, and so knew that the *wilderness* was the best place for spiritual break-through.

#### ii) The Father loves me

Jesus's experience at his Baptism was not primarily of the Spirit, but of his *Father's* great love and affirmation: *‘You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased.’*

This preceded Jesus's experience of the *wilderness/desert*, and – I believe - needed to do so.



The work of the Spirit among us is never to bring attention to himself, but to point us to the Father and his love and to the Lordship of his Son, and to make them personally real to us.

### iii) Being driven out by the Spirit

As I have noted above it was not the devil, but the *Holy Spirit* who *immediately drove him* [Jesus] *into the wilderness*. It was no mere suggestion. Jesus had no choice. Mark tells us how the Holy Spirit literally **threw-out** Jesus into the Wilderness – a verb he regularly used of expelling demons.

[Mark 1:12. *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness*. My use of 'thrown...out' is deliberate and accurate, as the Greek word translated *drove* consists of the verb 'throw' with the prefix 'out' (Greek *ek + ballo*)! Mark uses it a dozen times for exorcisms 1:34 39; 3:15, 22,23; 6:13; etc., and for driving the traders out of the Temple, 11:15. Unlike Christ's Temptations it was not a mere suggestion.]

Matthew and Luke each used Mark's account, but both independently found his **throwing-out** verb too harsh, and 'softened' it to one of *leading*.

### iv) Spirit-Baptism and Wilderness

For Mark, and (later) for Matthew and Luke [I regularly use as the Gospel author's names those that the general reader will be used to, unless the question of authorship has a bearing on the topic concerned], Baptism and Wilderness are both of the *Holy Spirit*.

The insertion of *immediately* between the account of the Baptism and the account of the Wilderness is Mark's way of expressing urgency and tying the two together as closely as possible.

Many churches world-wide have in recent decades focused on Spirit Baptism, but need now to turn their attention to the Spirit and the Wilderness, for they belong together not only in Christ's experience but in ours.

### v) A Place of Opposites

The English word '**wilderness**' derived originally from 'wild deer', and Mark mentions the *wild animals* and *Satan*. The **Wilderness** was certainly the place in which Jesus encountered *Satan*, and the *animals*. It was the place to which the demons drove Legion [Luke 8:29]. It was the place where Jesus was hungry, as, later, were the crowds of five- and of four-thousand [Mark 6:35, 8:4]. The **Wilderness** was where the traveller was beaten up in Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. [Luke 10:30ff. The Wilderness of Judea lies between Jerusalem and Jericho.]

In contrast to this, it was the place to which Jesus deliberately retreated, especially after high points in his ministry or after a miracle.[Mark 1:45; 6:32; Matthew 14:13, 23; Luke 4:42] Luke tells us *He would withdraw to deserted places and pray* ('deserted places' simply being another translation of the same basic word for **desert/wilderness**). [Luke 5:16]. Furthermore Jesus would instruct his disciples to do the same: '*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves*' [Mark 6:31]

Because it is a place of opposites, so Jesus not only experiences **Satan** and the **wild animals**, but also *the angels waited on him* throughout the forty days. [The Greek verb suggests that they were present throughout.]

The wilderness was a place of opposites, of negatives *and* of positives. The failure to keep the two together has contributed to the widespread lack of understanding about it. As we shall see, the wilderness is –

- never just about loss, but also about gain
- never just about testing but also about being strengthened
- never just about loneliness, but also about presence
- never just about danger but also about deliverance
- never just about exposure, but also about shelter
- never just about fasting, but also about refreshment
- never just about deprivation, but also about enrichment

## (b) Jesus's Understanding

Unlike most of us Jesus was in a culture which knew well the significance of the **wilderness**, and he was also steeped in the Holy Scriptures which recorded the role of the **desert/wilderness** in God's dealings with his people.

### 1. A USEFUL SUMMARY

Deuteronomy 8:11, 14-16 neatly summarises the role of the **wilderness** –

*Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God . . . who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.*

I hope you didn't miss the important punch-line at the end!

This – and much more - Jesus will have known. He will not have resisted the driving of the Spirit; indeed I am sure he will have expected it. John was in the **wilderness**, and Jesus had gone there for Baptism. He must have known what he was letting himself in for.

### 2. CURRENT MISCONCEPTIONS

Before we look briefly at the understanding of the **wilderness** that Jesus will have inherited from his culture and religion, we need to rid ourselves of the common western world's view of the **wilderness/desert**.

### i) Not 'Solitary'

While Jews have a week-long feast every year to remember their time in the Wilderness, in many Christian circles its significance has been all but lost (even among some of those who observe Lent!). This is reflected in English translations of Scripture.

When, for instance, Jesus chooses to pray in the early morning in a *desert/deserted place* most translators nowadays opt to translate the New Testament word for 'desert' not by **desert/wilderness** but by words like *solitary, lonely, and secluded*.

[Mark 1:35. New King James has *solitary*; Good News, New Century Version, have *'lonely'*, NIV has *secluded*. Although the New Living Translation has *wilderness*.]

They thus miss the richness of the **desert/wilderness**-connection because, I suspect, they themselves are not that aware of it.

### ii) Flat Sand

Westerners can wrongly assume that the **wilderness/desert** means an endless stretch of flat sand on which nothing can live. The desert of the Old Testament and New Testament is not like this.

In Jesus's parable of the Lost Sheep, according to Luke, the owner would *leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness* to search for the missing one [Luke 15:4]. The desert, then, is an area that can contain pasture, especially after rain. Indeed the root of the original Greek word is nothing to do with being solitary but is derived from **pasture**! The pasture is scarce, but enough to graze your cattle if you are a nomadic herdsman and don't mind moving from place to place in search of it.

The first three Gospel-writers locate the Feeding of the Five Thousand in *a desert place* [Matthew 14:15, Mark 6:36, Luke 9:12]. Two mention **grass**, and Mark even mentions that it was **green** – a welcome sight in a hot climate [Mark 6:39]. John's Gospel also stressed that *there was a great deal of grass in the place* [John 6:10].

The **desert** is *not* invariably flat. When Matthew retells the same parable of the Lost Sheep as Luke [mentioned in i) above], he writes: *does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains*, [Matthew 18:12ff.] not the **wilderness**. John says that Jesus was *up the mountain* when he fed the 5,000. [John 6:3]

## 3. JESUS'S SCRIPTURES

**In this section we come to the heart of the matter, whether it is understanding the Wilderness in the life of the Jewish nation, in the life of Christ, or in our own lives. They cannot be separated.**

What explained the desert experience to Jesus –

- explains it also to us.

What Jesus knew –

- is what we need to learn.

**Here then are some of the major themes that Jesus inherited for his understanding of the wilderness.**

**i) No U-Turn**

Jesus knew that the key events in his nation's history began with them being enslaved by the Egyptians. God heard their cry, and had enabled them to make their 'exodus' through the Red Sea waters on dry ground. [Exodus 14] While the waters flooded back and destroyed their enemies, it put the Israelites in a place of **no-return!** The Promised Land was nowhere in sight! They were standing on the vast wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. [For convenience I shall refer to the various wildernesses of the Sinai peninsula simply as the Wilderness of Sinai, and not distinguish between Shur, Paran, Ethan, Sin, etc.]

**ii) A Long Time**

- The Israelites came out of the waters of the Red Sea to be in the Wilderness of Sinai for forty years.
- Jesus comes out of the waters of Jordan to be in the Wilderness of Judaea for forty days. The parallel is obvious and deliberate. Jesus will have used the earlier experience to interpret his own. (The parallel is not weakened if, as some think, the word 'forty' is used much as we'd use 'dozens', i.e. to indicate not a precise number but a very considerable one.)

Our **wilderness-experiences** take as long as God allows and as long as he wishes. The Scriptures suggest (see **viii** below) that if we rebel against them we may be prolonging them, and going against our own interests. Don't assume that it will end on day forty-one!

**iii) Daily Obedience**

With no routes to follow they had to learn to obey God. So he led them by a cloud. ***At the command of the Lord they would camp, and at the command of the Lord they would set out.*** [Numbers 9:23] How frustrating they must have found it; for God acted irregularly! Sometimes God paused for a day, sometimes for a couple of months! [Numbers 9:18-23] Thus they were forced to learn the need for daily guidance, and not to rest on established man-made predictable patterns.

We feel secure when things are predictable, or if they are variable we want to retain overall control. This false security gets exposed when events take their own turn, and that can cause us great anxiety. This often happens with life's traumas, especially sickness.

**iv) Provision and Testing**

The Israelites then grumbled at the lack of food and drink. [Exodus 16:2-3] God met their need but in his own way. He supplied them with sweet water, quail and manna. [Exodus 16:9-15] Of the manna, the Lord said, ***'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.'*** [Exodus 16:4, see also vv.4-35]

The Lord provided for them, but if they didn't obey him they would cause themselves to miss out!

They had to learn – as we may have to – to live a day at a time, as Jesus taught us. [Sermon on the Mount – ‘*Do not worry about tomorrow...*’ Matthew 6:34.] That simplicity can be extremely difficult to those whose pattern of living is over-complex. **Wilderness experiences** are often marked by things being made less complex and clearer.

The same themes of provision and testing occur in Jesus's experience.

According to Matthew and Luke, Satan tempts Jesus to use the stones to make bread.

[Matthew 4:3-4, Luke 4:3-4] The Israelites' experience of **Wilderness** and Jesus's provide a parallel of contrast:

- The Israelites are wonderfully fed by God to meet their needs, but in a way that teaches them *dependence* on him.
- Satan tempts Jesus miraculously to feed himself to meet his own needs, to try to make him act *independently* of God.

Jesus, in trusting God, had already learned what God was trying to teach the Israelites – so Satan's suggestions could not get anywhere.

There is no doubt that Our Lord was mentally reflecting on the Israelites' experience of the **Wilderness** when he was in it, since he foils Satan and resists temptation by recalling a Scriptural verse about the **wilderness** and God's provision!

*He [the Lord God] humbled you by letting you hunger,  
then by feeding you with manna . . .  
in order to make you understand that  
one does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord* [Deuteronomy 8:3]

Jesus used this text against Satan to overcome his first temptation [Luke 4:4].

In his **desert**, Jesus's main weapon is his memory and knowledge of God's ways as revealed in his Scriptures [Luke 4:8, and 12].

We can do no better than to try and follow his lead and ensure that we are sufficiently familiar with God's Word that we too can resist temptation in our **desert places**. The now old-fashioned learning of Bible verses is to be encouraged. When we are under stress and strain, when we are weak or even semi-conscious, verses implanted by memory come again to bloom. They refresh and sustain our minds, souls and bodies to bring God's presence and his promises closer when we need them most.

#### v) Idolatry or Worship?

Jesus knew that Moses, the Israelites leader in the Wilderness of Sinai, went to Mount Sinai on a forty day fast, to encounter God and receive guidance (the Ten Commandments). Meanwhile the people indulged in false-worship of the Golden Calf in the desert plain below. [Exodus 32:4-8, 18-25, 35]

In Matthew's account when Jesus was in the Judean Wilderness on his forty day fast he was taken to *a very high mountain* and Satan promised to give him *all the kingdoms of the world*,



... *'if you will fall down and worship me.'* [Matthew 4:8-9] Jesus combats this temptation by reflecting on Moses' words in Deuteronomy 6:12-13 *'take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ... The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.'*

Idolatry and worship are closely related, since they are both prompted by love. Idolatry is wrong worship, and in every era Christians succumb to idolising the things of God rather than God himself. The greater we appreciate God's gifts such as the Bible, the Sacraments, the Prayer Book, our Christian tradition, our pattern of ministry, our Christian leader, our style of worship – the easier it is for such things to usurp the position of God himself. In our **wilderness experiences** it is not uncommon for there to be a dramatic shift or temporary removal of such things.

There is a hymn which runs:

*The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be:  
Help me to tear it from thy throne  
And worship only thee.*

When the Spirit drives us into the **wilderness** he frequently does the demolition for us! We can wonder what on earth is happening unless we begin to understand God's purposes for us in the school of **wilderness-experience**.

#### vi) **Poison and Healing**

At one stage in their **Wilderness** trek when the people complained about the lack of food and water, the Lord 'sent' snakes with a deadly poison among them.

[The Jews, in their stress on the sovereignty of God, and aware that nothing can happen without his consent, tended to describe God as the *direct* 'cause' of things - even of those which he merely allowed. For example God is described as *hardening Pharaoh's heart*. When the writer described the poisonous snakes as *sent* by God it is an affirmation that evil is not sovereign, and that it only operates under God. Our use of language today tends to distinguish between what God *wants* and what he *allows*. That is why I have used 'sent' in inverted commas.]

*So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'* and so it was [See Numbers 21:4-9]. The Lord allowed the danger of death, but then gave life!

Mark does not describe Christ's temptations in the **Wilderness**, since he sees Christ's conflict with evil as a theme of his life. His Passion, the Agony in Gethsemane, and the Cross are the most vivid of Jesus's **wilderness/desert** experiences. (Among his '**wilderness experiences**' nearer to our own were Jesus's rejection by his family; his rejection by his home-town; his rejection by the religious leaders; having nowhere to lay his head; his battles against sickness and evil; his pain when contemplating Jerusalem; his 'Cleansing' of the Temple; his denial and betrayal by his friends.)

John's Gospel makes the parallel between Moses and the Old Covenant and Jesus and the New-

*'...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'* [John 3:14]

The Cross - which includes the pain of God not responding or making his presence felt – [*'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* Matthew 27:46 ] was the climax of Jesus's **wilderness/desert experience**. In the Old Testament the **Wilderness** was always only the route to God's Promised Land: it was only the journey. The **Wilderness** was never the destiny or the goal. The **Wilderness** was never the end.

So too in the New Testament, in Jesus's **wilderness-journey**, God does not allow the Cross to be the end. Christ's 'Promised Land' was the new life of Easter morning – which alone made sense and put into a new perspective all the pain that had gone before.

The **desert experience** is always easier to interpret and realise in hindsight! Since we cannot look- back on what is and is to come, the role of Scripture and the Christian community is vital. They can – and should - interpret for us what is going on because they are already familiar with it.

#### **vii) Death and Deliverance**

God and his people were made at-one by repentance and faith, symbolised by outward rituals of sacrifice. The High Priest used two goats; one to burn as a sin offering to God on the altar. As for the other *then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel . . . putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness . . . to die.* [Leviticus 16:21, see also vv.6-10, and 20 & 22] Centuries later, Isaiah would look forward to the time when atonement was made not by an animal but by God's Servant – one who would be *wounded for our transgressions. . . by his bruises we are healed . . . and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* [Selected from Isaiah 53:4-6]

In John's account of Jesus's Baptism, the Baptizer exclaims: *'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'* John's account has a different animal (perhaps because of Christ being our Passover) but its role is the same. [If you wish to unravel John's meaning of *'the Lamb of God'* I would refer you to a Bible Dictionary, since it is far too complex for me to summarise here – even if I were able!]

The **wilderness** is not only the place where we will be tempted to sin, it is also the place where sin is dealt with. The **wilderness** of the Cross. It is the place we need to come to in our lives to see more clearly, to repent, to have our sins forgiven and to find freedom.

Many Christians are not in doubt that God forgives sin, but in the busy turmoil of their lives they never stop long enough to consider where they have fallen short of God's purposes and



need his forgiveness. It may take a change of circumstance that makes life simpler and clearer for a while before they can see themselves clearly, and avail themselves of the deliverance that God offers.

### viii) Punishment and Forgiveness

God then led his people to another desert, where they again complained about food. When they approached the Promised Land, a reconnaissance was made, but the report was so discouraging that the majority thought that it would have been better to have died in Egypt or the Wilderness, so they wanted different leadership and to return to Egypt! [Numbers 14:1-4] Moses asked God to forgive his people this, and God said –

*'I do forgive, just as you have asked; nevertheless . . . none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land...'* [Numbers 14:20-22]

God, therefore, delayed for a whole generation and led them round in circles in the **Wilderness** for forty years. His postponement worked! The mistrust, disobedience and ingratitude of the first generation under Moses gave way to trust and rejoicing in the second generation who had used the long delay to come to know God. They became united as a God-led community in a covenant-relationship with him. Their **wilderness experiences** meant that they had learned to trust God to -

**feed** them,  
**lead** them,  
**defend** them.

This provides us with an example to follow in our **wilderness experiences** today.

It was important that they remembered their experience, learned from it, and the reason for it: *Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God . . . who led you through the great and terrible wilderness. . . He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna . . . to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.* [Deuteronomy 8:11-16]

### ix) Testing and Tempting

As the previous verses show, Jesus knew that God used the Wilderness *to humble and test... and in the end to do...good*. Jesus was **tested** in his Wilderness, and will have expected it. Nowadays our word 'temptation' is much narrower in meaning than the Greek.

The aim of such testing is to strengthen us to do good, not to undermine us to do evil. Paul's words are most comforting [1 Corinthians 10:13] -

*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*

### x) Refreshment and Renewal

The Israelites' experience in the **Wilderness** was not a one-off. It featured in the lives of later individuals, whose experience also teaches us something of God's ways with it.

Take Elijah, for instance, when he was exhausted and in fear of his life, he . . . *went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life...'* [1 Kings 19:4]

He knew that the **Wilderness** was the place to go to get sorted out – and was sufficiently serious to travel a whole day to get there! Alone, thwarted, and drained, Elijah was physically and psychologically exhausted, and felt that he had been a failure.

But just as God had sustained his people with manna and water in the **Wilderness** three hundred years earlier, so God's messenger/angel comes twice to Elijah while asleep, wakes him, and provides for him a baked cake and a jar of water. [The full story is in 1 Kings 19:4-18.]

Thus strengthened, Elijah deliberately re-enacted what Moses had done centuries before. He went for *forty days and forty nights* to Mount Horeb, to encounter God as Moses had done. He experienced the wind, earthquake and fire, in which Moses *had* experienced God, but for him, God was not in them. Elijah had to wait for the now-famous '*still small voice*'. [1 Kings 19:12 – KJV translation].

So Elijah learned of God's gentleness, and God gave him a new mission that would shape the destinies of two great nations. God heard his request to die but, rather typically(!) did not grant it! [*'Why doesn't God answer my prayers?'*] God knows best! God did not grant him death, but gave him new life instead!

#### **xi) Love and Betrothal**

My summary of Jesus's understanding of the **desert-experience** reaches its climax.

In Hosea's time, a century after Elijah, the Jews had turned away from God. In Hosea 2, we see an encouraging sequence.

- a) The **desert** is the place where God will chastise his people with a view to turning them back to him.
- b) Their experience in the **wilderness** would turn from a time of punishment to a time of purification.
- c) God, likened by Hosea to a husband, says of his nation:  
*'I will now allure her, and bring her to the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. . . On that day you will call me "My Husband". . . I will make you a covenant on that day . . . I will take you for my wife forever: I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.'*  
[Selected from Hosea 2:14-20]

God promised to renew his covenant with his people.

The Wilderness is a place not just of chastening and purifying but of God's

- forgiveness,
- love,
- betrothal.

Since Hosea's day, God has declared his love for us in the person and death of Jesus Christ. God's New Covenant has been established, and gives us the context in which, as Christians, all our experiences take place.

### **xii) Remembering and Renewing**

The word 're-member' is interesting. To 'dis-member' is to take something apart and split it up. When Christians 're-member' as we do at the Breaking of the Bread, that which time has scattered, we re-create again. 'Re-remembering' is one of the tasks of the Spirit, of the Scriptures, of Christian worship and of Christian hymns: making *now* what *was*.

It is not surprising that the **wilderness/desert** theme featured in Our Lord's hymnbook. The Psalms often retell and ponder the nation's **desert experiences**. Thus, in song as well as reading, God's use of the **Wilderness** is recalled by Jewish and Christian worshippers. Psalms 78 and 106 in particular, while many others make shorter references to it [Psalms 105:40ff., 107:4-9, 136:15-16]. One of these is Psalm 95, with which the Book of Common Prayer starts the daily morning service.

The first six verses are a call to worship and a proclamation of God's greatness. The last four verses run -

**O come, let us worship and fall down: and kneel before the Lord our Maker.  
For he is the Lord our God: and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.**

**Today if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts:  
as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness;  
When your fathers tempted me: proved me, and saw my works.  
Forty years long was I grieved with this generation and said:  
It is a people that do err in their hearts, for they have not known my ways.  
Unto whom I swear in my wrath: that they should not enter into my rest.**  
(BCP translation)

In the light of what we have read above, we can understand its context, but taken just by itself the Psalm ends on a negative note rather than moving on to God's blessing and the Promised Land. For 350 years it has, sadly, given Christian worshippers a partial, and lopsided view of the **Wilderness**, and perhaps re-enforced its *negative* aspects.

Although more and more churches are omitting Psalms from worship, the **wilderness** still gets sung about. The writer of '*Lead us heavenly Father, lead us...*' wrote his three-verse hymn about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Surprisingly, his verse on Jesus Christ is about the **Wilderness** and little else.

**Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us  
All our weakness Thou dost know;  
Thou didst tread this earth before us,  
Thou didst feel its keenest woe;  
Lone and dreary**

**Faint and weary,  
Through the desert Thou didst go.**

Were the hymn not about asking for God's guidance, one might feel that this was not ideally suited to weddings – at which it is most often sung!

Of the many points about the Wilderness that could be made, this familiar hymn makes an important one. Christ's **wilderness-experiences** demonstrate that we have a God who knows us and knows what our human living is like at first hand. The writer of Hebrews comforts his readers with these great words -

*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens,  
Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.  
For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses,  
but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.  
Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,  
so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

[Hebrews 4:14-16]

**xiii) Voice in the Wilderness**

- a) John the Baptist is an Old Testament figure who appears in the transition to the New Testament. He is in many important ways 'B.C.', Before Christ, and so rounds-off the Old Testament as well as introducing the New.
  - b) John deliberately slotted himself into the desert concept, by calling and choice. He chose the Judaeon **Wilderness** for his ministry, and even dressed like Elijah to underline his message. [Compare Mark 1:6 with 2 Kings 1:8.]
  - c) All four Gospels regard him as fulfilling Isaiah's words, being *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'* [Quoting Isaiah 40:3. See Mark 1:3, Matthew 3:3, Luke 3:4 and John 1:23]
- The desert was the place in which a turnaround could be made, and sin dealt with. He proclaimed *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* [Luke 3:3]

Forgiveness changes things. For many Christians the turn-around of repentance and the cleansing of forgiveness herald a fresh start and a new direction far more profound than anything that secular therapy and counselling can ever reach. Society's increasing belief that anything you want to do is all right because you want to do it, does not bring long-term health or happiness, but frustration and bondage. Don't be afraid to believe – as God teaches us – that some things are wrong! And in the **wilderness** you may learn that afresh. Repentance is not possible if sin isn't real. But if sin is acknowledged as real, and confessed, then that sets free God's cascade of forgiveness and the waters of new life.

**xiv) Summary of the Jewish Understanding of the Wilderness**

What Jesus knew about the **wilderness**, which prepared him for it, and which enabled him to interpret it and use the experience positively, is the Old Testament material that I have just outlined above.

That same material that served Jesus so well can do the same for us when we find ourselves, or others, spiritually in the **desert**.

Jesus experienced **Baptism and the Wilderness** not as a preparation for adult life at, say, the age of twenty, but about ten years later as a preparation for his ministry. In Luke's account [Luke 4:1-14, compare especially 4:1 and 4:14] Jesus returns from Baptism '*full of the Spirit*' - something that has, for many, its modern counterpart. He is then driven into the **Wilderness**, after which Luke writes:

**Then Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit** [This is the usual translation. The New RSV which I normally use has '*filled with the power of the Spirit*'. Their insertion of *filled with* here is not in the Greek.]

It seems that what the **Wilderness** did for Jesus, according to Luke, was to develop his '*fullness*' of the Spirit into the *power* of the Spirit. This is not just word-play; it makes sense.

In rejecting Satan's suggestions to misuse power, God the Father could entrust Jesus with it, and allow the residence of the Holy Spirit within him now to overflow dynamically in ministry to others. The **Wilderness** had tested him and had cemented in him his resolve only to obey God. He could be trusted now both with power and powerlessness; his public ministry and the Cross. These were now assured and in safe hands.

If we have a longing to 'minister' as Christians – (and I don't just mean the professional 'ministry') then we should expect God to test us and strengthen us as he did Jesus. Luke's Greek word for '*power*' is '*dynamei*' from which we get our word 'dynamite'! No one is entrusted with dynamite unless they are well trained, highly disciplined and utterly reliable. The same is true in the spiritual life. Time is never wasted when God is training us. It is the work of a loving Father not to let us work with dynamite untrained! Thank God for that!

In my short final section – PART IV – I shall simply deal with the question 'How do I know that what I am going through was prompted by the Holy Spirit?' It is a frequent question and one that has a surprising answer!

## PART IV – WAS I DRIVEN HERE BY THE SPIRIT?

**'Is what is happening to me the Spirit driving me into the Wilderness - or is it just *life* ? Am I going through all this because of what other people have done, or my own wrong choices?'**

The conscientious and bewildered Christian is likely to ask this.

My answer may surprise you:

**'It doesn't make much difference one way or the other!'**

Let me now explain.

A Christian's **desert-experience** is a journey of *spiritual* significance. It is of spiritual significance and use because the Christian allows it to be so.

If your home and the homes of your non-religious neighbours were burnt down, the trauma would be the same for each of you. But for you – the Christian – it could provide God with an opportunity to teach you many things, and guide, strengthen and mature you. God could not do the same with the others because they had not opened the door of their lives to him - they have no religion, so God has no place in their understanding of life, and their minds cannot view their trauma religiously, positively or creatively.

We have the choice to make our **desert experiences** spiritual break-through times or not. We can react against them, blame God, hate him and turn our back on him for treating us so unfairly – or simply ignore him. The trauma will never then become the positive or true spiritual experience of that we mean by the **wilderness experience**.

Because it is largely the Christian him- or her-self who invites God to be present in life, it means that it is the individual Christian who is mainly responsible for making a difficult period one of spiritual growth. God will always *want* to use life's difficulties to help us grow nearer him and in holiness – some Christians resist this, others go along with it. The true **wilderness experience** is when you trust God and, by his grace, go along with it.

When this is understood, the question of who or what triggered the experience, and why, is of no vital significance.

- **How it was started does not dictate what we do with it.**

It is what we decide to do with it that determines whether it is a real Christian experience of growth in the **wilderness** of which God is in charge, or whether it is simply a trying and difficult time of which we are trying to be in charge.



It is quite possible for the Holy Spirit to drive a Christian into the **Wilderness** following a special experience of the Holy Spirit (as often happens) and for what follows to be just a bleak religious breakdown which is totally negative and not a true spiritual experience of **wilderness-growth** at all. Its Christian start does not guarantee its Christian results.

In the same way a bad start need not have negative results.

The **wilderness experience** may be started by distortion and evil in our lives, our own sins, the sins of others, the distortions of society, of the environment, and so on – or a mix of them all. The great news is that the **wilderness** need not become simply an evil progression because evil and distortion were there at the start.

When God is invited to oversee and overrule it, it can become a truly Christian experience which, in time, works through and moves through understanding, penitence, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and renewal to resurrection 'in newness of life'. God is good at transforming things!

You may certainly learn some useful things from working out how your **wilderness experience** started. I have suffered from M.E. (Chronic Fatigue Symptom) for nearly 15 years, which halted my travelling speaking-ministry, and which means I cannot now minister publicly. I have learned a lot by pondering the multiple facts that probably caused it – medical, spiritual, personal, relationships, choices, demands of others, and so on. None of that matters much now. What *does* matter is whether I am trusting God and allowing him to teach and lead me? (I feel I am: I am now teaching countless *more* people world-wide through my writing, then I ever managed when I was rushing around speaking!)

By all means reflect and learn from how your **wilderness experience** started, but what matters is how open you are to God now, how much you trust him, how much you are prepared to learn.

Part of the learning may well be a greater awareness of evil, and learning to have a more disciplined life. The **wilderness experience** is – as Jesus demonstrated – not lying back and passively accepting everything that life throws at us. It includes an active fight against evil. Our trust in God still leaves us with plenty to do – he cannot do our growing up for us, and part of that maturing is learning to fight against evil so that what we encounter is only what God is allowing, and not what we have brought upon ourselves by our own lack of training, our disobedience or our carelessness. [See the article **Spiritual Warfare and the Ordinary Christian** on this website.]

Twenty four years ago I was among the first within the Renewal movement to write an article on the 'Wilderness' in the magazine *Renewal*. The theme has never been far from either my experience or my reflecting. It is from that long period that I can testify to God's faithfulness and to the wonderful ways - and ingenuity! – that in the lives of those who love him, he can make '***all things work together for good.***'

[See Romans 8:28]

I wonder if St. Paul had the wilderness in mind when he wrote that ?



He may also have been thinking of the verse I have quoted earlier:

*Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God . . . who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.* [Deuteronomy 8:11,14-16]

## APPENDIX A

Here are some reasons why I think there is little teaching about the **Wilderness Experience**, and why Christians are not prepared for it.

### 1. Geographical.

The wilderness/desert is more familiar to those of eastern Christian traditions who are familiar with actual deserts, than to those of us in the over-urbanised west.

### 2. Historical.

The splits between Christians of east and west and between so-called 'Protestants' and Roman Catholics have prevented many Protestants from inheriting the spiritual insights of other Christians even when the subject is deeply Biblical – e.g. Anointing the Sick, Mary, Wilderness, etc.

### 3. Psychological.

Preachers and teachers share the human tendency to avoid difficulties, and sometimes, perhaps, to court popularity. It is exciting to draw people into experiencing the Holy Spirit for the first time. It is quite another thing to teach them what they are letting themselves in for, and to pastor them through it!

### 4. Spiritual.

There can be spiritual blindness both among teachers and among those taught. One cannot get far teaching a blind person about sight, nor a colour-blind person about colour. Much the same is true of the spiritual realm.

St. Paul expressed this very clearly:

*The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* [1 Corinthians 2:14]