“THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE”
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Introduction

Anyone who travels the “spiritual path” of sanctification (being conformed to the image of Christ) will ultimately discover something known as the “wilderness experience.” What exactly is it? And why does it happen to those who are faithful to God and who try to live their lives in harmony with His will? The Bible frequently addresses this issue. Scripture often depicts the experience of God’s presence or blessing with the imagery of water—streams, oases, and rivers (Ps 1:3; 92:12-14; Jer 17:8). Conversely it describes times of distress, doubt, and alienation from God with the imagery of a desert or wilderness. The wilderness is where water is scarce… where a traveler walks alone in the heat and the cold without shade or protection… and where wild animals live. In a spiritual wilderness God feels far away, distant, absent, and unresponsive… faith feels doubtful or uncertain… we feel alone, vulnerable, lost, and unprotected… there is the fear of hopelessness and the unknown… and it’s the place where Satan resides.

The British novelist Sheila Skillman reminds us that as soon as someone reaches a spiritual high Satan takes an interest in him. Apologist and author C. S. Lewis describes the timeless dominion of hell in his book The Screwtape Letters— it is there where Satan’s senior assistant Screwtape strategizes on how to recapture those who are in danger of slipping from his grip, and who are at risk of forever belonging to Satan’s Enemy (Christ). Screwtape grumbles—“He has given Himself every natural advantage, and He’ll take anyone, on any terms! He must be thwarted at every move!” So Screwtape instructs his junior demons to try every means possible to win “the subject” back again for damnation. As a result of the Devil’s work in the wilderness, many Christians not only question their faith, but God as well — they commonly think that God has forgotten or abandoned them… that all of their past efforts have been nothing but a waste… that they are simply too unspiritual and unlovable… that if God exists at all, He is a cruel, fickle monster… and that maybe this thing called Christianity is nothing but a myth.

No believer can fully avoid the wilderness experience — it is the path we must all travel. It can take the form of depression… a crisis of faith… or one or more traumatic life events, of which the list is endless. It is not a joyful time. It is a time when we feel alone, deserted, and dying of spiritual thirst in the midst of a debilitating spiritual draught. There is not much solace in a wilderness experience, but it should bring some comfort to us to realize that every believer is subjected to such encounters. All true saints go through a wilderness experienced in their life; some more than others. Why, you ask? Our first thought usually is that it was caused by some sin… but sin is not the reason God sends us into the wilderness. King David was no stranger to wilderness experiences (Ps 28:1-2; Ps 38:9-10), and though he sinned like you and me, yet he was “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:13-14; 16:7,13; Ps 51:10,17; 139:23; Acts 13:22). David wrote a number of psalms that speak to the hearts of fellow believers when they are experiencing spiritual dryness. Spiritual dryness, or the wilderness experience, is God’s way of getting us to exercise our faith even when there is little feedback or affirmation or emotional joy. In the wilderness we are not being punished — we are being tested, and our faith is being strengthened.
The Wilderness Experience

When we go through the wilderness experience some choose to renounce the outside world, and others retreat into some spiritual, emotional or psychological cave, and cut themselves off from all normal social interaction and engagement in daily life. Whatever our response, this is the point on our spiritual quest when we are confronted with the tricksters and demons of hell, and we question everything we ever learned — How can a loving God allow this to happen to me? Have I been fooling myself all these years? Does God really exist? Why doesn’t He show Himself, and take some kind of action, and mount a rescue mission. It’s during the wilderness experience that God seems to disappear — He can neither be seen, heard or experienced… and our faith seems hollow and meaningless. The great medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, asked herself these same questions. How can sin and evil exist in a world supposedly governed by a loving and sovereign God? Ultimately Julian found her answers only in powerful intimacy with Jesus Christ. The experience of the great travelers on the spiritual path, is that the wilderness is a place through which we must travel in order to reach a place of greater intimacy with God.

It is during the wilderness experiences of life that it is helpful to remember, if God is indeed God, He doesn’t have to do anything I think He should do. David Frost once questioned Billy Graham in an interview. “If your God is all you say He is, then He will have to save everyone, won’t He?” Billy Graham replied, “If He is God, He doesn’t have to do anything.” The Judaeo-Christian God, as some skeptics and atheists are keen to point out, has a fire and brimstone side to His character… He punishes children for the sins of their fathers, even to the third and fourth generation (Ex 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:18). Though we are told He is love, and not even a sparrow can fall without Him knowing about it, the evidence of our world shows us that He all too often lets the good suffer and the evil seemingly go unpunished (Ps 73). We can feel angry with God, as did many characters in the Bible — the psalmist roars his anger against God in several psalms… the writer of Ecclesiastes bitterly bemoans the injustice and futility of life… and then there is suffering of Jesus Himself in the wilderness, and on the cross when He cries out in anguish, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

When we are undergoing a wilderness experience, the devil will come alongside us — his primary purpose is to tempt us to doubt God and to serve him (and ourselves). As he did with Jesus in His wilderness experience, Satan will show us all kinds of things that will appear to be good, attractive and wonderful. Satan’s supreme goal is to get us to disobey God, to destroy our fellowship with God, and to steal our destiny & blessings. During the wilderness experience we will be tempted to give up and doubt the integrity of God’s Word — it’s a time when we become confused, frustrated, irritable, and angry… we move from thoughts of faith to thoughts of doubt; from thoughts of being faithful to thoughts of being self-centered. In the wilderness we are tempted to do our own thing, and try to make things happen in our own strength. We are strongly tempted to doubt and question. If we are to come out of the wilderness triumphantly, we must follow the example of how Jesus gained the victory over the devil in the wilderness.

How did Jesus defeat the enemy? First, He fully submitted to God and His will for His life… and second, He fully trusted the Word of God. The only weapon Jesus used was the Word (Mt 4: 1-11). That should tell us that only way the enemy can be defeated is by the Word of God — as J. Vernon McGee says, “the Devil seemed to think it gave good answers, because he left Him!” (Mt 4:11). We cannot afford to respond with fear, doubt, worry, and unbelief… because when we
do it only gives Satan a foothold in our lives. As we speak the Word over our situations and circumstances, and affirm the truth over and over again, it will ultimately settle peacefully in our souls, thus renewing our confidence that everything is truly working for our good and for God’s glory (Rom 8:28-29; Phil 4:4-7; Heb 12:10-11). The resultant peace that comes from God’s Word is actually a weapon or tool for us to use against the enemy’s attacks. As Yvonne Carson says, “When we experience God’s peace our enemy is completely dumbfounded; it silences him; he simply can’t understand how we can praise and worship God in the midst of trial and difficulty” (Job 1:8-22; 2:9-10; Jam 1:2-4). God’s peace doesn’t make any sense to him because it transcends creature logic (Phil 4:7). Moreover, our confidence in God’s Word lets the devil know we refuse to exchange the truth of God for his lies. When we maintain our peace in the wilderness, we honor God, and this overwhelms the enemy and he flees from us — “Submit to God; resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jam 4:7). 

The only way to resist the devil is with God’s Word — you fight lies with truth (Jn 8:31-32, 44, 47). We must put the Word in our hearts in abundance (Eph 4:11-12; 1 Pet 2:2), for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks (Lk 6:45). We must renew our minds and our hearts with God’s Word that we might be able to stand firm in the presence of the Evil One (Ps 119:11; Rom 12:2; Eph 6:10-17). God’s Word is a living, incorruptible seed that always produces the fruit of righteousness (Heb 4:12; 12:10-11; 1 Pet 1:23-25; Is 55:11). 

Your wilderness experience is that place where God hides you from public view and prepares you for “His purposes.” You may feel that the darkness of the wilderness will never cease, but the time will come when the Lord will bring you out of hiding to the place He desires for you. The South African writer Janine Johnson says that all believers actually think God is angry with them when they’re in the wilderness, because their pain is so great, but that is not so! Believing that God is not angry with you is the foundation upon which you must build your life! Satan will do everything he can to get you to believe that God is extremely disappointed with you, and that He does not love you! The “love of God” is the cornerstone of our faith! It is ground zero! It is in the wilderness that God introduces Himself to us in a deeper and more profound way... and where He shows us that we are thirsty and dry — what better place to show us that but in a desert? As our thirst increases, we cry out to God and start searching desperately to find Him... and that’s exactly what God wants us to do! The Lord says, “You will find Me when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jer 29:13). Reflect upon the words of the psalmists in Psalm 42, when he was thirsting for God in the wilderness: “My soul pants for Thee, O God... my soul thirsts for God, for the living God... why are you in despair, O my soul?... Why have You forgotten me, O God?” The psalmist David then goes on to encourage us with these words: “Thou has taken account of my wanderings, and put my tears in His bottle” (Ps 56:8). So even though we have no idea where we are or where we are going — God knows — and He is right there with us in the desert capturing our tears and protecting us from the Evil One. Probably the two most significant miracles that occur in our hearts in the wilderness are these:

1. **The first miracle we experience is the realization that “God loves us unconditionally.”** and that He is going to deliver us out of our bondage and fear. God uses our wilderness experiences to refine us into the person He predestined us to be (Rom 8:29; Eph 1:5, 11; Phil 3:21), and significant spiritual growth only takes place in our hearts when we come to know that God love us unconditionally (1 Jn 3:1-3; 3:16; 4:7-10,18-20; 5:1-4), and that life is not about the little world we have tried to create, but about God’s world. That’s why the wilderness is a place where God builds our faith and builds our character... but that happens only when we realize that God really loves us. By the way, how can we really know that God loves us? When we
sin, He puts His arms around us and forgives us! Think about that! It’s why Charles Wesley penned those incredible words, “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God should die for me?” Every believer eventually discovers the reality of God’s love in the desert.

2. **The second miracle we experience is “God’s gracious provision of manna;”** the more “manna of the Word” we eat the hungrier we become, and the more we want to know and understand. It is in the desert that we ask God to guide us to the answers of the questions that are in our hearts… and as we search and find answers, something begins to happen in our spirit… *and God begins to feed us on the meat of His Word*… and the more time we spend studying His Word the more we want to know Him… and the more we grow to know Him, the more our soul is nourished, and the more our inner man is strengthened… and as His Word sinks deep into the driest places of our souls, we experience the grace to traverse the wilderness in which we find ourselves.

For many believers the event that led to “profound spiritual growth” in their lives, was when they felt abandoned by God in the wilderness. It is in a spiritual wilderness where God seems to vanish, and our faith begins to feel so meaningless and insignificant. It is a scary, debilitating feeling when your life and your faith seem to have all been in vain. Being out there in the wilderness (feeling alone, vulnerable, scared, betrayed by God, despairing), life seems so chaotic and disconnected. Janine Johnson says the best description of this spiritual wilderness for her is summed up in the word “exile” — exile from God.

### The Wilderness Experience of Jesus

**Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe Jesus’ wilderness experience** (Mt 4:1ff; Mk 1:12ff; Lk 4:1ff). They tell us that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The verb “drove” in Greek has a nuance of compulsion and violence, thus the Spirit violently hounded Jesus to go to the wilderness — this wasn’t going to be a trip to a beautiful mountain retreat; the devil of hell was going to hound him for forty days in a desolate wilderness! A wilderness in the Hebrew Scriptures is a barren, arid and dry place, a void, and a place where no life grows or thrives — it is a place cut off from life; a place inhabited by monsters and demonic forces; a scary place; a place of chaos; a place of wandering and restlessness. This was the place where the newly baptized Jesus was violently forced to dwell, and where he would encounter Satan himself. *It was there in the desert that Jesus suffered from hunger, thirst, and loneliness… it was there that He was tempted to desperation, and to give up on God altogether.* No doubt, many of you have gone through several wildernesses — perhaps a life-threatening or serious illness, the death of a loved one, separation from a partner, the suffering of a child, the death of a dream, failure, addiction, bankruptcy, loss of reputation, rejection of a friend, and on and on. As has been commonly stated by theologians, “Our baptism (i.e., our conversion) offers no respite from the struggles of life… like Jesus, all of us are eventually thrust into the wilderness of life.”

**Though the wilderness is a place of darkness and despair,** it should be understood that it is also a place where God is. When the Israelites left Egypt where they were enslaved and entered the wilderness — God accompanied them for all forty years! He drove them out to Sinai, but He did not leave them by themselves… nevertheless, the wilderness was not a picnic, nor was it at all what they thought it was going to be… rather than being a pleasant oasis, it was a barren
wilderness with no food or water. Sound familiar? They had to wait on God to rain down manna before they could eat, and they had to wait on God to provide them with water… and because God didn’t function on their schedule, their sense of security was greatly threatened. *From their vantage point, God didn’t seem to be their meal ticket after all… He wasn’t the God they thought would make their life easy; as such, they were disappointed in Him, and felt abandoned by Him. So they were also tempted to abandon Him! Their faith in God was being severely tested.* Emerging from the glorious event of the Exodus, and the parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites thought that since they were God’s chosen people… that God would act in a way that they wanted and could predict — *they assumed God was predictably predictable*, and that He would even exceed their expectations! But that was not the case — so the wilderness was a complete shock to them! Essentially it caused the Israelites to cry out: “How can God do this to us? He is not at all what we expected! We don’t want this God! We want a god that we can predict! a god that we can control! a god we can understand! a god who treats us good!” Conversely, when we feel as if God is not functioning the way we want Him to… when things are not going well… we are also inclined to think that God is mad at us or has forgotten us. As the Asian Episcopal pastor **Noel Bordador** puts it, “*We all want a predictable God; that if we’re good, He won’t allow bad things to happen to us!* We’re not into having a God who lets bad things happen to reasonably good people… so the wilderness experience makes us ponder whether we can trust and love God when bad things happen to us.”

### The Wilderness Experience of Israel

**In that precarious placed called the wilderness, the children of Israel learned to trust God**, and to believe profoundly in His goodness and mercy despite the wilderness. Thus, they had to *learn to trust that God is still good*… that God is *for* them and not *against* them even amidst the unpredictability of life. Though God seemed unpredictable to them, they ultimately learned that He was predictably good. *So the wilderness is a place of exile from a predictable kind of a God; we are forced to give up on that kind of a God.* The wilderness forces us to let go of our control, and in the dark night of faith, we let God lead us in the journey to the Promised Land even if we get their circuitously by the way of the desert. *The experience of the wilderness opens us up to a deeper and more profound faith in God and in His goodness even as we wander through the lonely desert.* God says, “I will allure you, and bring you to the lonely wilderness, and there in your heart, I will speak tenderly… in the barren soil of your loneliness, I will speak my love… I will betroth you to Me forever as My spouse… I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and then you will know Me as your Husband, and as your Lord” (*Hos 2:14-20*). It is in the wilderness of life that God betroths Himself to us in such deep intimacy… an intimacy that doesn’t spring from factual knowledge of God, but an intimacy that comes from trusting Him in the midst of a desolate wilderness. *The wilderness is not the end of the story*, because the Scripture says that God always brings His people out of the wilderness… just as the Israelites and Jesus Himself emerged from their wandering in the desert. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the wilderness is the place where salvation dawns… the place that gives way to a land rich in water and life… the place that ceases to be a place of exile and alienation. The promise is the *Promised Land* (note the word “promised”), and we arrive in God’s time, and on God’s terms.

**Another lesson do we learn in the wilderness**, is that we learn to give up our illusion of a God that will make life easy for us… a God that will do what we want Him to do… a God of our own
liking and making. As Bordador says, “It is the cross that helps us arrive at that position... if God can allow His Son to be stretched out on a piece of wood and left to hang there until He dies, then we cannot escape the reality and destiny of the cross. Ultimately, it is the cross that sustains us in the wilderness… that continues to give us faith and hope… because when we gaze upon it, we see not only death and abandonment, but that the Lord Jesus who endured the cross was not allowed to remain there… that He who felt abandoned by His Father was vindicated. And so like Jesus, we will not be abandoned, that we may also see the Land of the living.”

The Wilderness Experience of the Believer

The spiritual wilderness feels differently for different people — for some, it is a place of intense and devastating loss; for others it is associated with feelings of emptiness, weariness and listlessness. The experience can last for days or for years. For some the experience leads to a permanent loss of faith; they simply give up the fight (since Scripture teaches that all genuine believers “overcome,” it can therefore be assumed that those who permanently abandon the faith were simply never genuinely saved in the first place; this is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints). For many believers the wilderness forces a change of faith, and a re-framing and re-defining of what Christianity really means to them… some emerge out of the desert with their faith in tact, but with a renewed sense of energy… others stay in the church, but remain in some kind of low-grade wilderness for the rest of their lives, believing that a deep nourishing faith is either a false expectation or simply beyond their reach.

Brenda Rockell, the pastor of Cityside Baptist Church in Auckland, New Zealand, says: “The desert generally results in the changing or questioning of our faith… for many, the dismantling of previous beliefs and assumptions about God and Christianity is a process that leads to turmoil and pain, and to a sense that there is nothing left… [thus] their Christian vision is substantially dimmed…. [So] the desert can be filled with anger at God and a [continual] questioning of His love.” And then there are those who ultimately (and joyfully) exit the wilderness and experience a deep abiding intimacy with the Lord Jesus — this is God’s ultimate goal for each of us.

One very helpful thing to do when you find yourself in the desert is to “accept the fact” that you are in the desert. Obviously, if you’re in a desert, that’s where you are… and the acknowledged of that fact can be a huge relief, and can give you a sense of peace even in the midst of it. Rockell says acceptance is a strong action that says, “I'm in water that I didn't want or choose, but since I'm here I will roll with the waves, and keep my head above water, and hopefully that day will come when I land on shore.” Accepting that I’m in a desert also means accepting that this is a place I might be for a good period of time, so looking for some quick exit is not an option. We need to move fully through our deserts, facing whatever it is we need to face… it can be helpful to identify what kind of desert we are in, and if possible, why we are there — that can help give us some handles to the kind of process that’s needed to move forward. Another thing to know is that God is in the desert with us… He has not abandoned us… He is not just on the other side of the desert waiting for us to get through it… He is right there in the midst of it all. Rockell says that though that might be difficult to accept or believe, we need to at least hold it as a strong possibility as we move through the desert.
The Wilderness Experience of Elijah

One of the most moving biblical stories about the wilderness experience is that of the prophet “Elijah” (1 Kings 19) — he had just been engaged in some might acts of faith which put his life at risk, so he responded by heading out into the wilderness. Immediately after making his first complaint to the Lord, Elijah goes to sleep — he’s exhausted from his battle with the false prophets and the fears that now plague him. When we wield a lot emotional energy it drains us of physical energy also, so when we reach this point we desperately need to take time to rest. *Before God converses with Elijah, He first attends to his physical needs — food, water and rest.* Obviously, it is possible to over-spiritualize our needs and our experience (think about that)… so sometimes our first priority should be to take care of our physical well-being, that we might be strengthened to face the inner journey that lies ahead. *A little exercise, good sleep and good food can go along way in the desert;* though these things won’t necessarily resolve the sense of alienation from God, or the disconnection from faith, they can create the conditions for a more helpful engagement with those spiritual issues.

**Elijah traveled into the wilderness for “40 days” to commune with God.** The mention of “40 days” should also bring to mind the period of time the Lord Jesus spent in the wilderness… as well as the “40 years” Israel wandered in the desert before entering the Promised Land. Most Bible scholars believe the number *forty* is highly symbolic, and refers to a significant, purposeful, spiritual time in a person’s or nation’s life (see the supplemental study on the next page). There is a *process of pilgrimage* associated with the desert; there’s a journey we have to travel, and sometimes it is only at the depths, and after much wandering, that the *encounter or shift* occurs that moves us out of the desert. A really valuable part of that pilgrimage can be to get away from normal life for a little bit, to get out of town, or go to a retreat center — even if it is only for a few days. Getting out of the normal rut of life can create a very helpful perspective, in much the same way that one benefits from being refreshed physically.

**Elijah tells his story to God…** he tells Him of his pain, his anger, his fear, and his self-pity… he tells God his story, twice! Sometimes we need to keep telling God our story over and over until a shift happens — by the way, God is robust enough to hear our anger and our disappointment as often and as forcefully as we need to express it. It can also be helpful to find a close friend with whom we can share our story (preferably someone who has experienced the desert as well) — someone who will listen non-judgmentally, without trying to “fix things,” but who can pray for us and encourage us, and check on us from time to time as to how things are going.

**Elijah discovers that God is not in the fire or the earthquake or the rushing wind, but in the “silence.”** God is not just in the major events of life that are often considered significant, but also in the small and quiet moments — that is when grace most frequently comes to us. That means, *in the desert it is important to create moments when we are still before God* (Ps 46:10), even if we have no expectation of God’s presence, and cannot or do not even want to pray. The stillness can allow things just to settle for a bit, and enable us to pay attention to what’s happening in our lives. Go for long walks, breathe deeply, smell the roses, and behold the beauty of God’s creation… and quietly let Him minister to your soul in His own way.
The Significance of the Number “Forty” in the Bible

The number “forty” in Scripture is frequently used in contexts of testing, chastening, and probation; thus many scholars understand it to be the number of “probation” or “trial.” This doesn’t mean that forty is entirely symbolic (it still has a literal meaning in Scripture)... but it does seem that God has chosen this number to help emphasize times of trouble and hardship. Here are some examples of the Bible’s use of the number forty that stress the themes of testing and judgment —

~ When God destroyed the earth with water, He caused it to rain for 40 days and 40 nights (Gen 7:12).
~ Moses spent forty years in Midian being prepared to lead Israel from Egypt to Canaan (Acts 7:30).
~ Moses was on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights when he received the Law (Ex 24:18).
~ After Israel’s golden calf sin, Moses interceded on Israel’s behalf for 40 days and nights (Deut 9:18, 25).
~ The Law specified a maximum of 40 lashes that a man could receive for a crime (Deut 25:3).
~ It took the Israelite spies 40 days to spy out the Land of Canaan (Num 13:25).
~ The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land (Deut 8:2-5).
~ The nation of Israel served the Philistines for 40 years before Samuel’s deliverance (Jud 13:1).
~ Goliath taunted Saul’s army for 40 days before David arrived to slay him (1 Sam 17:16).
~ After Elijah fled from Jezebel, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb (1 Kg 19:8).
~ Jonah’s message to the Ninevites was that God was giving them just 40 days to repent (Jon 3:4).
~ Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness before His encounter with Satan (Mt 4:1-11).
~ Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance lasted for 40 days; and then came His ascension (Acts 1:3, 9).
~ The period from the crucifixion of Christ to the destruction of Jerusalem totaled 40 years.

Is the Bible’s use of “forty” just happenstance or coincidental? I think not. Though some people place too much significance on numerology, and try to find a special meaning behind every number in the Bible, the number forty has long been recognized as being symbolically significant on account of the frequency of its occurrence, and the uniformity of its association with a period of probation, trial, and chastisement. I believe the “40 day” period that Jesus spent in the wilderness was not only important to the journey of Christ, but is also important to us as His followers — this was not only a time of tiredness, temptation and difficulty... but a time of connection, empowerment, and recognition. Jesus re-entered the world after wrestling with uncertainty, pain and doubt, and after overcoming His demons, fears and temptations. He was then ready for His ministry... more ready than if he’d gone straight from His baptism into His encounters with ordinary people. The author of Hebrews reminds us — “We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet did not sin” (Heb 4:15; 2:17-18).
How to Overcome the Wilderness Experience

The 16th century Spanish mystic “St. John of the Cross,” writes in his notable work *The Dark Night of the Soul* — “Souls begin to enter into this dark night when God draws them out from being beginners.” The process of faith formation, of transition through to maturity in Christ, is a process that inevitably contains darkness, doubt and desert wanderings. Though the experience is both confusing and disconcerting, the other side of the desert brings a far deeper and richer faith. The believers faith can be fostered if he will engage in spiritual reading and theological study — this will help him reconstruct his beliefs and learn new forms of spiritual practice, like meditation, contemplative prayer, the employment of music in personal worship, journaling, engaging with God through physical activity, and discovering a new kind of practical service or ministry that impacts the world around him. All of these behaviors can be extremely helpful.

The ultimate purpose of the wilderness is not only to develop a deep transforming faith, but to develop a profoundly energetic and rewarding intimate connection with God. The new wardrobe can embrace all kinds of wonderful colors and textures, including some of the previous garments, after a bit of alteration. Though the desert is indeed a dark and lonely place, if we will persevere and move through it like Jacob did when he wrestled with God (Gen 32:24-30; Hos 12:3-4), we will eventually emerge from it with treasures of insight, wisdom, strength and joy — hard won and precious not only to us, but also to God. It is lonely, cold and hard in the desert, yet it was there that Moses was prepared by God, and it is there that we too can learn to “love not the world” but “rely only on God.” By the way, there are “no religious crutches” for us to lean on in the desert: “no religious activities” in which to hide our true condition. The truth is, we do not need religion; we need to “know Christ intimately” — and intimacy only happens when we are completely alone with Him in the wilderness, where there is nobody else to turn to except Him.

Soul searching and “self examination” are the things that takes place in the wilderness. Christian author Peter Whyte reminds us that there are only “three roots” to all kinds of evil, that when we examine all sin we discover they all have their origins in PRIDE, MONEY, and SEX (Cf. 1 Jn 2:16 — lust of the flesh = passions; lust of the eyes = possessions; pride of life = position). Men love status and ruling over others, and when they have it, pride will cause them to hang on to it (very often at the expense of others). Men often lie to impress their listeners with their own importance, or boast of their achievements — pride is at the root of the lie… pride resists being in a subordinate position… pride demands its rights… pride resists being humble… pride causes us to blame others for our problems. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim 6:10); men will lie, cheat, defraud, embezzle, steal and assault others to gain wealth. Sins that have their root in sexual desire include adultery, fornication, pornography, homosexuality, lust and rape. These three areas of our lives must come under the government of God if we are to share in His holiness. Scripture tells us that the bride “purifies herself” and “makes herself ready” — it is our task to clothe ourselves in fine linen, bright and clean, and this linen is our righteous behavior (1 Jn 3:3; Rev 19:7-8; Jn 17:19; 2 Cor 7:1; 2 Pet 3:14).

During the wilderness experience it is time to “focus on the goodness of God.” Reflect upon the truths of Scripture… audibly affirm them over and over again, until they settle peacefully in your mind and heart… as you accept & identify with the truths of God’s Word in the wilderness, you will develop a faith that greatly pleases God (far more than the faith that is accompanied by strong emotions and feelings). True, genuine faith actually has nothing to do with our “feelings”
— the dynamic of the flesh is “feeling,” whereas the dynamic of the Spirit is “faith” — though our feelings at times may be of God and genuine, they are not a trustworthy instrument by which to live. The key for us as believers is to be conformed to God’s will regardless of how we feel. During the wilderness experience we may “feel” as though God has deserted us… we may “feel” as though our prayers have not been heard… and “feel” like our worship is completely uninspired and meaningless. The psalmist David had enough wilderness experiences to write a book of psalms, but he ends every one of them with “pure worship.” Ultimately, he never forgets who his God is, and he never forgets from where his strength comes (Ps 40:1-3; 46:1-3).

The only way to get out of your wilderness experience is to “ignore the symptoms” (get your eyes off of the “waves”) and believe the Lord and pray and worship Him for who He is — the key is to focus on the truths of Scripture. Wilderness experiences are all about “persevering” with God. Don’t give up! Trust God! Hang in there! He is faithful! Ultimately, God wants us to go through the desert and come out on the other side of it victorious. We must know that God is in complete control of our circumstances, and that He has His reasons for everything. Jesus told Simon Peter that he would be going through a wilderness experience… that Satan would sift him like wheat… but then He said, “But I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail, and when you are ‘turned again,’ that you strengthen your brothers’ (Lk 22:32). Jesus knows what we’re going through… and He has prayed for us as well that our faith will not fail. Though we all stumble along the way, the faith of the true child of God does not fail — it is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that keeps us moving “forward” on our spiritual journey. When we “pass the test,” God will bring our wilderness experience to an end, because we will have learned what God wanted us to learn; as such we then have a greater understanding of who God is, how He works, what His Word says and how we must rely upon it — as opposed to our feelings and emotions. Admittedly, that’s a lot of learning packed into one experience.

God’s ultimate desire for us as His children is that we learn to “walk by faith alone,” without continual feedback or affirmation. Let me tell you my story — as a young Christian God operated in my life in a “more revelatory” manner than He does today… the more I have grown in the Lord the “less revelatory” He has been in communicating His will to me. When I was younger in the faith, God would reveal His will to me in such a way that it was relatively easy to discern His leading… He more readily accommodated my demands when I was younger… He seemed to communicate His will to me through a “miraculous aligning of the stars” so-to-speak… circumstances would often develop that clearly pointed out His will for my life… moreover, He would confirm His will through other people, and give me a deep abiding peace and an inner confidence regarding His will. So, in a sense, God was partially directing my life with “visible signs” regarding His will… which means I was “walking by sight” to a degree — therefore to insist that God somehow communicate His will to us in a “revelatory fashion,” essentially is more akin to walking by sight than walking by faith. Demanding to “see the evidence” is a childlike faith, a “weak faith”… whereas trusting in the spiritual principles that God has been teaching us for a lifetime is a “mature faith,” and that is the place God ultimately wants each of us to arrive at. The more I have grown in the faith, the less revelatory the Lord has been in directing my life — it is if He has been saying to me: “I’ve been teaching and training you now for years, and I have put a lot of things in your spiritual tool box… I now want you to use those tools without the aid of extra-biblical revelation… I now want you to walk exclusively by faith, trusting in everything I have taught you over the years, and believe in My Word alone.” That, my friend, is God’s primary purpose for the wilderness experience.
As Peter Hess reminds us in his work “Radical Discipleship,” wilderness experiences are God’s way of disciplining and pruning those He loves (and we all desperately need it), building faith, breaking down our reliance on our feelings and our emotions, and crucifying the self or flesh. The wilderness experiences we go through are worthwhile experiences, and we are to embrace and accept them for what they are, and persevere through to the end. Ultimately, we need to react to wilderness experiences as mature Christians… and resolve to not wilt under the hot desert sun of spiritual aridity, but rather trust God knowing that the dryness is temporary and that He has a reason for it. Allow Him to do His work in you. By the way, everything God does is good — and God does wilderness experiences. Abraham went through them, as did Moses, Elijah, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Peter, John, Paul, Timothy… and now it’s our turn.

The Sifting of Peter

The night before Jesus went to the cross, Jesus told Simon Peter, “Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; however, when you turn back to Me, I want you to strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:31-32). In the ancient world… wheat was sifted to separate grain from stubble… the good from the bad. When Satan asked to sift Peter, however, his purpose was not to get rid of that which was bad in him, but to destroy his faith so that nothing good was left. God in His omniscience allowed Satan to sift Peter to accomplish His own higher purposes. Charles Stanley reminds us in his book, Handbook for Christian Living, that when Jesus said, “Satan has demanded person to sift you like wheat,” He used the plural form of “you” — so Jesus’ message was not just exclusively for Peter, but was one that was all-inclusive. Obviously, God in His omniscience allows Satan to have a limited degree of influence in all our lives… and though that can be unsettling for us, we must remember God always supervises the process and has the final word. So it is very important for believers to recognize that the devil must get permission from Christ to sift them — Satan doesn’t have a free hand with God’s children. The “accuser of the brethren” (Rev 12:10) has to get God’s approval before any grinding or sifting can take place.

Stanley says that the issue of “sifting” can lead us to a deeper understanding of the way God conforms us into the persons He created us to be. Jesus was not fooled by Satan’s plan to sift the disciples — He knew Satan’s mission was to defeat and destroy (Jn 10:10), yet He had His own mission and chose to allow Satan’s influence in their lives to accomplish His purposes (Gen 50:20). While God may allow us to be severely tested, God has faithfully promised to never leave or forsake us (Heb 13:5). In Paul’s letter to Titus, he gives us the reason for this God-ordained process in our lives — “He gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Tit 2:14). So God allows us to be sifted in order to bring honor and glory to Himself. As John MacArthur states in His Commentary on Matthew (Mt 4:1-2), “Christians cannot be tempted (sifted) in a way that God cannot use for their good and His glory.” He uses weak, imperfect people… the strong (the self-assured and self-confident) have little need for God; they think they can make it on their own. So those of us who have faced our weaknesses head-on and watched as God took control of our inadequacies (2 Cor 12:7-10), using them for His glory, understand that siftable souls are precious in God’s eyes — they are refined gold (Ps 66:10; Prv 17:3; Is 48:10; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:3; 1 Pet 1:7). In the process of sifting us, God pushes us beyond our capabilities so that we have to trust Him; furthermore, He lets us fail at times so that we do not lose sight of our frailty and His perfection.
Just as Jesus prayed that Peter’s faith would not “utterly fail,” He let Peter know that he would suffer a set-back of sorts when He said, “when you have returned to Me” (Lk 22:32). Jesus was in essence saying, “Peter, you and your friends are going to be sifted… I mean really sifted, as you have never been sifted before… you will be shaken to the core, until you think you’re going to die… but it’s not going to be fatal… it will even cause you to wonder and doubt, but you’ll come around… and when you do, don’t forget what you’ve learned… and then you need to strengthen and encourage the others.” Sure enough in the hours that followed Jesus’ conversation with Peter, he fell — big time — he even denied that he ever knew Jesus! And then the Lord Jesus picked him up again… affirmed His unconditional love for him… embraced him… forgave him… and then reminded him of his calling to “tend and shepherd His flock” (Jn 21:15-17).

The Sifting of Believers

Sifted saints understand the value of the process that takes them from the heights of their self-sufficiency to the awareness of God’s firm hand in conforming them to His image. Though Peter was sifted by Satan, God had a different agenda for allowing the process: he was sifted to serve! (note Luke 22:32). … and God is still sifting His people today for this very purpose — we are to be “others-oriented” in life (servants if your will – Mt12:18; 20:26; Gal 5:13)… not “self-oriented” in life. Our responsibility is to stay focused on God’s truth and not be swayed or distracted by temporary circumstances. If we will stay faithful to the process, we will see God turn our times of sifting into glorious monuments to His grace and mercy. Incredible as it may seem, God will even use our faith failures to bless others! By the way, once you get through a sifting process, you have an obligation to strengthen and encourage others who are in the process of being shaken and feel as if they are on the prong of a winnowing fork (2 Cor 1:3-11; 1 Pet 1:6-7, 13; 4:1, 12, 17-19; 5:6-11) — the main reason I have done this study is to encourage and help others.

Sifting is a struggle of the heart, the mind and the soul — it is an “inner struggle.” It is through our inmost thoughts and desires that the tempter comes to us… his attack is launched in the minds. The very power of the devil lies in the fact that he breaches our defenses and attacks us from within, and he finds his allies and his weapons in our own inmost thoughts and desires. As William Barclay says in his Commentary on Matthew, “Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.” He reminds us that there is no release in the believer’s warfare — it shall continue to the end. Christians often become worried with incessant temptations; they think they should reach a stage when the power of the tempter is for ever broken, but that is not what Scripture teaches. Believers probably reach this conclusion when they consider Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness… but it should be noted, Jesus’ temptations did not cease in the wilderness. The tempter spoke again to Jesus at Caesarea Philippi when Peter tried to dissuade Him from taking the way of the cross… His response to Peter was “Get behind Me, Satan!” (Mt 16:23) — Satan was the evil reality behind the temptation. In addition, never in all history was there a more excruciating struggle with temptation then the one Jesus waged in the Garden of Gethsemane when the tempter sought to deflect Him from the Cross (Lk 22:42-44) — Luke tells us His sweat “became like drops of blood!” (Lk 22:44). From beginning to end Jesus had to fight several horrific battles with the Evil One, and that is precisely why He can empathize with us and our battles (Heb 4:15-16).

We’ve all been in “the sitter” from time to time, and it is comforting to know that God super-intends all the sifting. He says to Satan about our sifting, “This far and no farther” (Job 1:8-12; 2:
Three principles of sifting:

1. God limits the sifting… He is mindful of our frame… and He knows the method that works best in each of our lives… He knows the intensity of the shaking in the sifting process… and He has set the length of the sifting. We are not at the mercy of Satan! Our lives are being sifted according to the wisdom and foreknowledge of God. Our sifting might include physical suffering, financial suffering, humbling circumstances, overwhelming temptation, loss of employment, psychological depression, spiritual discouragement — whatever the method, our sifting is for a purpose, and that is to make us better servants. Another important point to remember is this — we go through wilderness experiences alone. As Barclay reminds us, “No [other human being] accompanies us in this struggle… there are certain things that a man must work out alone… there are times when no one else’s advice is any good to him… there are certain times when a man has got to stop [doing] and start thinking… it may be that we make many a mistake because we do not give ourselves a chance to be alone with God.” One of the biggest problems for believers is that they do not put forth an intentional effort to be alone with God.

2. God always takes care of His people in the wilderness. Christian writer Frank Viola reminds us that when the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness, God provided them with water from a rock and bread from heaven. The bread was called “manna” — it was a picture of Jesus Christ, our spiritual food (Jn 6:31-35; 6:49-51; 1 Cor 10:1-4). It didn’t take long, however, for Israel to grow weary of the manna; in the same way, you and I will eventually grow tired of the Lord’s provision in the wilderness… and like Israel, we will be tempted to murmur against Him. There is only one kind of food given in the wilderness, and it is not sufficient for the long haul. The manna is designed to get you and me through the wilderness experience, but we cannot live off of it beyond that point. By contrast, in Canaan, the fullness and the superabundance of the land are fully available to us… the produce of the rich and good land becomes ours to enjoy; and that produce is inexhaustible.

3. If you remain in the wilderness, you will eventually die. Simply leaving the counterfeit habitats of Egypt is not enough; if you don’t exit the wilderness, you will die in the desert. Viola reminds us that God always brings His people out of bondage so that He might bring them in to the land of plenty. You can chisel that in stone. “He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers” (Deut 6:23).

4. The wilderness has but one goal: to sift us, reduce us, and strip us down to Christ alone. Those of us who have left Egypt need to be emptied of all our “religious baggage,” and the wilderness experience is designed to do just that. Viola calls it “a place of religious detox.” Consider John the Baptist: The Lord raised him up to call the people out of Judaism, the organized religion of the day; and those who followed John in the wilderness were stripped of everything that the old Judaism had to offer. They were dropping the religiosity of that system and starting over at ground zero. Most of the twelve disciples Jesus selected were followers of John the Baptist; they had a wilderness experience that brought them to ground zero. Compared to the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes, they were “clean slates” for the Lord Jesus to write upon. They were “empty wineskins” for the Lord to pour His new wine into. John the Baptist stripped them of the old, and Jesus filled them with the new. As Viola notes: We cannot receive the new until we first let go of the old; old wineskins don’t patch.
well, and God doesn’t pour new wine into old wineskins (Mt 9:16-17). In addition to the Twelve, Paul also had a wilderness experience that brought him all the way to ground zero — shortly after his conversion, God led him to an Arabian desert for three years (Gal 1:17-18). Why? He was being detoxed... he was allowing years of human religiosity to drain from his veins... everything that Paul knew as a zealous Pharisee bled out of him in the desert — he was beyond being transformed... he had to have a “spiritual lobotomy!” The “change” that needs to take place in our lives is immense! None of us only need a little “mid-course correction! Think about it for a minute — God is in the business of “making us like Jesus Christ!” And we are no way near being like Him! The miracle of salvation is that God is ultimately going to make us like Christ! To paraphrase Wesley, “How can this be! I’m a catastrophic mess! Yet in spite of my corruption, God still loves me! This is absolutely incredible!” Unless you see your utter sinfulness, you will never appreciate the fact that God really does love you — “it is only by God’s amazing love that we are transformed into the image of His Son!” As David would say, “This is too wonderful for me to understand, I cannot attain to it!” And that, my friend, is what God does in the wilderness. In the wilderness God came to Paul in a way that he had never before known; he came to Him in “the face of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:11-12; 2 Cor 4:6). Although Paul was given his gospel by divine revelation in the wilderness, it took five years of living in the right habitat, in an ekklésia in Antioch, Syria, for him to learn the fullness of Christ. In order for Paul to be a dispenser of the new wine, he had to be drained of the old.

4. **The Wilderness is a symbol of “new beginnings.”** After their forty-year stay in the wilderness, Joshua let the people of God across the Jordan into the Promised Land. In Hosea’s day, God led Israel through the wilderness to woo the nation back to Himself (Hos 2:14). After the Jews had been in exile in Babylon, the prophets spoke of preparing a pathway in the wilderness so that God’s people could return home. John the Baptist marked a new beginning for Israel by introducing God’s people to their long-awaited Messiah in the wilderness. And so it was with the apostle Paul, he began his apostolic ministry only after he spent considerable time in the Arabian wilderness. If you are living in the wilderness today, rejoice in that fact, because God is doing a transforming work in your life — He is making you more like Jesus, that you might be a choice servant of His by being His hands and feet and eyes and ears and mouth in this world (Eph 2:10).
Bibliographic Sources

In addition to the various sources stated in the foregoing study, some of the themes and material was taken from the following authors —

J. Vernon McGee — *Thru the Bible Commentary on Matthew*
Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983

William Barclay — *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*
Westminster Press, 1958, pp. 54-60

Charles F. Stanley — *Handbook for Christian Living*

John MacArthur — *New Testament Commentary on Matthew*
Moody Press, 1985

Frank Viola — *Are You in the Wilderness?*
Website: [http://frankviola.org](http://frankviola.org)

Peter Hess — *Radical Discipleship*
Website: [http://www.peterhessbooks.com](http://www.peterhessbooks.com)

Noel E. Bordador — *The Wilderness*
Website: [http://epistle.us/articles/wilderness.html](http://epistle.us/articles/wilderness.html)

Brenda Rockell — *The Spiritual Wilderness*
Website: [http://cityside.org.mx/node/91](http://cityside.org.mx/node/91)

Sheila C. Skillman — *Understanding the Wilderness Experience*
Website: [http://EzineArticles.com](http://EzineArticles.com)

Bible Study.Org — *The Significance of “40 Days” in the Bible*
Website: [http://www.biblestudy.org](http://www.biblestudy.org)

Yvonne Carson — *The Wilderness Experience*
Website: [http://spiritualseedfoodforthesoul.blogspot.com](http://spiritualseedfoodforthesoul.blogspot.com)

Peter Whyte — *The Wilderness Experience*
Website: [http://www.truthforfree.com](http://www.truthforfree.com)

Janine Johnson — *My Spiritual Wilderness Experience*
Website: [http://beautifulyahweh.blogspot.com](http://beautifulyahweh.blogspot.com)