

## Followers of the Way

### The wilderness – Curse or blessing?

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#### 1 Kings 19:1-18

What's do you first think of when someone starts to talk about the wilderness? In ancient Jewish thought the wilderness was seen as a place of chaos and lawlessness, the abode, as likely as not, of evil spirits. It was somewhere people were banished to for sin, and where the devil held sway. So the wilderness, as the name suggests, was desolate – devoid of civilization, and it was dangerous. The few people who did live there were nomads, and for others, who found themselves there perhaps unwillingly, it was a place of trial and testing. But at the same time, it's beyond question that the wilderness was central to the Torah.

In Jewish tradition, for instance, the book of Numbers in Hebrew is called 'Wilderness', because it's in the wilderness that the Israelites began their journey of revelation, where God spoke to them and revealed Himself as the One and Only God, turning them from the undisciplined rabble that came out of Egypt into a nation – into the chosen people. God, the Creator of all, who is vast beyond the totality of all imagining, revealed Himself to them in the wilderness as the One and only Sovereign God, beyond nature and representation.

It's perhaps difficult today to get a sense of the scale of what that actually meant, but back then, the very suggestion would have been revolutionary. A quantum leap in spiritual understanding, because, to pagans, gods (and there were a lot of them) were 'knowable'. They were powerful and sometimes capricious, but more important, they were close – manifest in and through nature, and they could be *seen*. More than that, their essential being could be represented by images, which could be influenced and their help obtained, by appropriate sacrifice and worship. But the God who revealed Himself in the wilderness to the Israelites was vastly more huge than this. This God could not be seen, or known, except in so far as He chose to reveal Himself. And in the wilderness that was what He did – God revealed Himself not just as Almighty, but ultimately 'unknowable', because He existed outside the material – the manifest – so that His being was **beyond** and **bigger** than our senses. This God was transcendent, in no way bound by nature. However, most incomprehensible of all, He cared – in a way that pagan gods never did.

This perception and understanding had been blocked since the Fall by the devil, who had used civilisation and the illusion of control to gorge our senses, blinding us through the material to anything and everything else. So God's revelation of Himself, here in the wilderness, was something that could begin only by stripping away everything on which the people had previously relied. Most especially, of course, their reliance on other gods.

But the wilderness *was* dangerous. In the gospels we read of the mad man who runs to meet Jesus after He crosses over the Sea of Galilee, disembarking in the region of the Gerasenes. This man, possessed by a 'legion' of evil spirits, is so violent that he can no longer live in what we'd call the civilised world, and the demons have driven him to live amongst the tombs – their territory, where the physical reality of wilderness is all too clearly emblematic of the wilderness of death.

And, of course, the wilderness was something Jesus Himself had to endure at the start of His own ministry – the place where He was tempted by the devil ... and where He came to understand the nature of His call. What God required.

So, in the emptiness and desolation of the wilderness, harsh though it may seem, we find truth, where everything else is stripped away, and we are left naked before God. Yes, it can be a place of suffering, devastation, and fear, but it's also a place of incomparable blessing, and all of us in this life will at some point have to journey there.

In our reading this morning, we heard how Elijah, overwhelmed at Jezebel's murder of the prophets, fled into the desert. But instead of God just patting him on the head and saying, 'There, there. It's okay. Go back and I'll sort it,' from there an angel led him farther into the wilderness – to Horeb, the mountain of God. And there, God first spoke and then revealed Himself, telling Elijah to stand on the side of the mountain because He was about to pass by.

I wonder what went through Elijah's mind then? Was he scared? Because bear in mind it was believed that no one could see God and survive. What did he think he was going to see? Well, we know from the text that first of all there was a violent wind, and then an earthquake, followed by fire, but God, we're told, wasn't *in* any of these things. Rather, they were just demonstrations of His unimaginable, awesome power. I guess Elijah was probably terrified, but God was showing him what He could do. He was saying, in effect, 'You don't need to be worried, Elijah. This is Me, this is My power, and nothing and no one can stand against me!' And it's only when these demonstrations have passed that God does at last finally reveal Himself – not as a towering figure blazing with light, which you might expect, but in a still small voice, a gentle whisper, that shows more clearly than anything else God's love and protection, and then He tells Elijah what to do.

There must have been such enormous reassurance for Elijah in this meeting with God. It must literally have given him the strength to go on. But the point is, it came after one of the most shattering experiences of his life, when he was at his lowest ebb, and it was only at this point that he could have had this kind of encounter – in the wilderness.

We all have to go through wilderness times, when it can feel as if everything has fallen apart ... including maybe our faith in God. But it's important then, like Elijah, that we blindly keep faith and obey, because it's here in this darkness that we actually find the greatest blessing, when everything that is not of God is stripped away, and we see Him face to face, and learn what we are to do. Faced with Jezebel's fury, Elijah had had a long and difficult journey into the wilderness, but at no point was God absent. Indeed, God had gone before him every step of the journey and wasn't just leading him, but was providing for all Elijah's needs. And it was only after Elijah had been strengthened by

that encounter, which proved beyond all doubt that God *was* at work and in control, that Elijah could carry out the tasks that lay ahead of him, and that would, eventually, see Jezebel's total overthrow.

So, in our own lives, we need to know and understand that our wilderness times are also times of blessing, when all that is not of God is stripped away, enabling us to see and know God more clearly, envisioning and empowering us for the tasks that lay ahead.

As the world seems daily to plunge further into chaos, we need to recognise too that globally we're entering into a wilderness the world has never seen before. It's a wilderness that perhaps heralds what the Bible calls 'the Day of the Lord', when the Saviour returns in glory. We can't say, of course, because the timing for that is known only to God, but in the wilderness that's without doubt ahead, it's more important than ever that we choose which side we are on and keep faith. There can be no compromise. There will be suffering and difficulty ahead, and maybe persecution. But for those who keep faith, there will be unimaginable blessing, both now in this world – but most important of all, in the world to come.