

Deserts of Development: How God Shapes His Leaders in the Wilderness

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Abstract

A wilderness experience in the life of a believer is often a tool used by God to shape him for some leadership position or specific calling. While the desert one is thrust into may be physical in nature or purely psychological, wilderness experiences share common characteristics and yet yield an array of differentiating results for those who travel through them. In order to examine how God shapes leaders in the wilderness, three case studies reveal how the individuals in each case grew in the leadership skills necessary for them to carry out their calling.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Christian life, stages of confusion, heartache, disillusionment, and loneliness prove to be either detrimental times of discouragement or periods of enlightenment inciting spiritual growth. These miniature epochs of life are often precariously ordained wilderness experiences, periods in which an individual might feel empty and that his every attempt to find God seems to end in silence or a period of rigorous testing. Examples of such experiences permeate both the Old and New Testaments. Moses, Joseph, Elijah, Paul, and even Jesus Christ all travelled through times in which God allowed them to experience the difficulties, temptations, and lessons learned in the wilderness.

Although some might recognize these more readily in a physical sense, these times of austerity, isolation, confusion, and deprivation also exist within the heart, soul, and mind of the believer. Wrestling with unanswered questions, lacking in areas of personal growth, and hitting a spiritual plateau on any or all issues one faces are just a few examples that exist of spiritual wilderness experiences that take place internally.

Lessons learned in the wilderness are valuable to the growth and success of leaders God chooses to use in powerful ways. It is often in the wilderness where God reveals Himself to be enough for that individual and the only permanent, stable, life-giving source of inspiration, direction, wisdom, and revelation. The deserts God may place in the lives of individuals are also used to strip young leaders of pride and any sense of self-sufficiency.¹ While the possible lessons learned in the wilderness are

¹. Nicole R. Hill, "Wilderness Therapy as a Treatment Modality for At-Risk Youth: A Primer for Mental Health Counselors," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* vol. 29 (Idaho State University, 2007), 338-349. Interestingly, counselors have used a technique called "wilderness therapy" in order to help young

profuse, there is no doubt that they are useful and almost necessary tools God uses to shape leaders.

An examination of three wilderness experience case studies will be delineated to show how each individual grew as a leader. In order to examine this issue more completely, an Old Testament, New Testament and extra-biblical example provide information that stretches the gamut of both time and circumstance. These case studies include Joshua taken from the books of Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua; Jesus Christ taken from Luke 4:1-13, Mark 1:12, and Matthew 4:1-11; and the early life of Martin Luther prior to the Reformation of 1517.

JOSHUA: THE WILDERNESS OF TRAINING

Joshua Chooses a Winning Team

It was in Joshua's prolonged wilderness experience that he was trained as a leader to take Moses's place after his death. Several tests trained this dynamic leader for his task as leader of the Israelite people. Although much can be said of his life and work, two particular circumstances highlight specific areas of effective leadership training. A brief look at the events surrounding his ordination as the new leader of Israel will also provide a picture of successful leadership succession.

The Israelites, having escaped Egyptian captivity, were thrust into a 40-year wilderness sojourn. This occurred because of the fickle faith they held in their God. With the idea of the Promised Land looming in their minds, Moses led the people God had entrusted to him courageously. He eventually learned to delegate certain responsibilities

adolescents. Because adolescent clients tend to be the most difficult patients to engage on a psychological level, wilderness therapy is used to help them to self-disclose. The idea is to provide an alternate treatment method that increases the susceptibility of the youth to spontaneously respond to psychological analysis performed by the doctors.

and tasks to others. One individual, Joshua, was used on several occasions and trained to eventually replace Moses as the leader of His people. It was only through Joshua's training in the wilderness that he was adequately prepared for all that God had for him to accomplish. The many fruits of his training are found in the book that bears his name for its title.

Joshua is first introduced in the narrative of Exodus. Already, he was being used by Moses to make decisions as an extension of the supervising leadership. While in a tense situation, Moses called upon Joshua to fight off the Amalekites (Exodus 17:9-16, NASB). Prior to this account, there exists no reference of this up and coming leader. John Durham suggests that this may allude to the idea that readers should already assume his ability and aptitude for the task at hand.² Regardless of this, it is quite evident from this short passage that Moses trusted him enough to call upon him in trouble. One could correctly determine that Joshua had already made his reputation known and showed himself trustworthy enough to be summoned for this task in the first place.

Moses was not given any specific instructions by God on how to handle the situation with the Amalekites who came to fight Israel at Rephidim (Exodus 17:8, NASB).³ However, Moses had enough confidence in Joshua to "choose men" and "go out" in order to "fight against Amalek" (Exodus 17:9, NASB). Joshua, as Moses's assistant and successor, exhibited great potential as a future leader in this moment. After being given his task, Joshua revealed that he had the ability to make decisions quickly.

² John C. Durham, *Exodus: World Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 235-37.

³ James K. Bruckner, *Exodus: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2008), 159-61.

Likewise, having been given the instructions to “choose men” for a specific undertaking, Joshua rose to the occasion and in his obedience displayed great alacrity in getting this task accomplished.

In both a literal and an illustrative way, Moses did not leave Joshua to himself. This opportunity to stand against Amalek, while delegated to Joshua, was overseen and even supervised by Moses himself once the battle began. While Joshua was intimately involved in the fight, Moses watched carefully and prayed as he oversaw the battle that was presently taking place. Almost as a master to his apprentice or an employer to his employee, Moses was seen atop the mountain watching over his junior assistant doing all that he could to ensure that the task was completed (Exodus 24:13, NASB).⁴

The extent of the victory that took place revealed how God’s power worked through His obedient servants. According to Exodus 17:13, Joshua “overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of his sword.” The Revised Standard Version more graphically replaces “overwhelmed” with “mowed down” and lends credence to the totality of the Israelite victory over their enemy.⁵ This entire experience gave Joshua the freedom to serve under supervision and helped train him for what skirmishes he would encounter once in the land promised to his people.

⁴ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1973), 136. The word used here in the Hebrew, *sharath*, can be translated to mean “minister” or “servant.” It is used similarly in Joshua 1:1 when it introduces Joshua as Moses’ “minister.” While the KJV uses “minister”, the NASB uses “servant,” the ESV and the NKJV use “assistant,” and the NIV translates it as “aide.” While the translations are different, the use of this same word throughout the Old Testament suggests that it can be rendered in various ways. Perhaps the most accurate interpretation in this context would be an assistant-minister who is in submission to a higher authority.

⁵ Bruckner, *New International*, 160. The ESV also uses “overwhelmed.” Both the NIV and TNIV render it as “overcame” and the NLT translates it as “crush.” All of these describe an overwhelming victory over the Amalekites which is exactly what the original author desired to communicate.

Joshua Rises to the Challenge

The next major training opportunity for Joshua took place in an entirely different situation. Having been summoned by the Lord, Moses was given the task of sending spies into the land of Canaan, the land that would eventually belong to the Israelite people. Moses was to “send them from the wilderness” into this foreign land to gather information concerning the inhabitants and the environment (Numbers 13:17-20, NASB). Upon this charge, Moses enlisted one spy from every tribe for the task of analyzing Canaan. Joshua, previously called Hoshea, was one of these spies. However, after experiencing the land for themselves, 10 of the 12 spies returned with discouraging news. While the report included an overview of the land’s fertility and abundance, every spy except Caleb and Joshua concluded, “We are not able to go up against the people for they are too strong for us” (Numbers 13:32, NASB).

Upon hearing this information, the people of Israel cried out vociferously against God for leading them to such a dire situation, even to the point of considering a return to slavery in Egypt (Numbers 14:2, NASB). This response revealed that the community was more concerned about the majority report of the spies and reacted in fear and frenzy. In doing this, they completely ignored Caleb’s minority report and the challenge to proceed and conquer the land in the power and presence of God.⁶ The extent of their fear can be observed in their misguided desires to return to the very place and circumstance God delivered them.

⁶P. Dennis Cole, *Numbers: The New American Commentary, an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scriptures* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 220-28.

This frenzy included the attitudes and feelings expressed by Moses and Aaron who, upon hearing the news, fell on their faces in the presence of everyone else. Budd concludes that this prostrate position is typical of intercession or self-abasement.⁷ Discouraged by what has been heard, even Moses and Aaron were seen by the entire assembly begging God for His provision from the evils spoken of ahead of them. Although it was an act of reverence, it was also an act of faithlessness in God.

Seeing this abysmal display of cowardice, Joshua responded in great frustration. He and Caleb tore their clothing, communicating the total outrage and complete disappointment they felt toward their people based on their response (Numbers 14:6, NASB).⁸ In this crucial moment, Joshua spoke up and directed the people's attention where it rightfully belonged. Ignoring whatever the majority of the spies communicated, Joshua reminded them of the incredible benefits that the land they examined had to offer by calling it "an exceedingly good land" (Numbers 14:7, NASB). Cole points out that the Hebrew construction here even goes as far as to say "good is the land exceedingly exceedingly."⁹

To Joshua, the benefits outweighed the difficulties associated with it, difficulties he knew would not be a problem for God. The basis of this optimism was further clarified by the proclamation that follows. Emphatically, Joshua declared that ". . . He [God] will bring us into this land and give it to us" (Numbers 14:8, NASB). In this statement, Joshua took ownership of the opportunity to convict and challenge his people. He was able not

⁷ Philip J. Budd, *Numbers: Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 155-59.

⁸ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 245-49.

⁹ Cole, *The New American*, 227.

only to divert attention from the obvious complications of their situation, but he was also able to fixate the people's attention on the ultimate solution to their problem.

Joshua here exhibits a subtle quality that is vital for effective leadership, framing issues. In dire situations when everyone appears to lose his head, a leader is the one who keeps his head firmly attached and clearly communicates the reality of what is taking place while providing the solution to the problem that is faced. This was exactly what Joshua did for the Israelites.

Joshua is Commissioned to Lead

Following his many years of service to Israel, the time had come for the prophet Moses to depart and hand over his role of leadership to the selected individual. In Deuteronomy 34:9, Joshua is commissioned to replace this dynamic leader. This short verse describes not only the formal succession of power, but attaches Deuteronomy and Joshua together. It successfully provides a transition between Moses' leadership and Joshua's.

Joshua had more than proven himself able to take Moses' position. In a way, the wilderness for him was a proving ground for what God had for him to accomplish during his own leadership. It was evident to the Israelites at this time that Joshua was able and prepared to replace Moses as the leader of their community.¹⁰

Three elements encapsulate Joshua's commissioning. As the text suggests, Joshua was "filled with the spirit of wisdom" (Deuteronomy 34:9, NASB). J. A. Thompson suggests that this "wisdom" was the charismatic gift required by all of Israel's

¹⁰ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy: The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture NIV Text* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 1994), 455.

formidable leaders and was supposed to be able to lead the entire Hebrew nation.¹¹

Accompanying the wisdom gained from his formidable training under Moses, the spirit of wisdom supplied the remainder of knowledge necessary to lead well.

Secondly, Moses “laid his hands” on Joshua. This, as some argue, set him apart for leadership in a ceremonial and formal way.¹² Others suggest that this act was a rite symbolizing the transmission of covenantal authority and responsibility from one individual to another.¹³ In either sense, Joshua was set aside before the people as the new leader. After receiving the blessing of Moses and the spirit of wisdom, he was well equipped for the task.

Finally, Joshua’s entrance into his new role was well received. The Bible is clear when it reveals that the Israelites “listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded . . .” (Deuteronomy 34:9, NASB). It is often difficult for a new leader to be well received, especially when he follows a dynamic and powerful influence such as Moses. However, evidence from this verse suggests that Joshua did not suffer much of that at all. He had grown as a leader over time, proved himself in the wilderness, and had the former leader’s blessing. These characteristics made it easier for him to settle into his new role out in front of the people he was leading.

On some occasions, God can use the wilderness experience to prepare leaders for a new task. Leaders like Joshua, who go through the wilderness of training, are sometimes thrust into a new role that God would have for them to fulfill. It is the desert

¹¹ J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 320.

¹² *Ibid.*, 320.

¹³ Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 454.

itself and the lessons learned in it that prepare the leader for what is ahead. Evidence of Joshua's success can be read in the book bearing his courageous name.

Summary

There are at least three things that suggest that Joshua's wilderness trained him for the role God desired for him to fulfill. Joshua in the desert was able to choose a winning team in order to fulfill a difficult task. Likewise, it was Joshua who was able to regain the proper focus upon returning from the land of Canaan. Finally, Joshua, following these training experiences, was commissioned by God through Moses to take over as the leader of Israel.

These three series of events highlight the training process Joshua underwent in becoming the incredible leader he was. Being able to choose a team wisely in order to secure a victory is a vital quality any effective leader must exhibit. Along with this, having the ability to keep one's head in dire situations is absolutely necessary when any leader faces difficulty. Joshua was also given the wisdom and blessing of the established leadership and won the approval of those he would serve. Leaders who take over for someone else travel through a training period of their own just like Joshua did. By faithfully completing the tests, their reputation is elevated and likewise, they are more well-received by those they lead. It is through these experiences in the wilderness that Joshua was prepared to lead Israel to the promised land.

JESUS: THE WILDERNESS OF TESTING

Jesus is Led into the Desert

Jesus Christ's incident in the desert is an excellent example of what it means to travel through a wilderness experience prior to a ministry of leadership. While many may

assert that He, the Son of God, required no extra preparation for the task He was assigned to take, Christ offers a model that shows how believers grow and are prepared during a time of isolation and testing. It is imperative for those seeking to be used in God's work, especially those He has called to leadership, to examine the life of Christ and apply it to their lives. For this reason, His ordeal is elucidated.

Much can be learned from Christ's trial in the desert; however, there are a few specific lessons that are significant to the discussion. In order to arrive at the conclusions, Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13 will be explicated in an effort to reveal what the Bible says about Jesus's experience.

Although many enter difficult periods of isolation and displeasure following a life changing situation or series of small negative events, Jesus's entrance into the desert God had for Him to endure was different in many ways. The baptism of Jesus, which culminated in God's vocal approval of His ministry, was followed directly by Jesus's temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1, Mark 1:12, Luke 4:1, NASB).¹⁴ While many enter into a spiritual and psychological wilderness through many small events that lead them there over an extended period of time, Jesus Christ traveled directly from the first high point of His ministry to one of the most difficult trials of His ministry within mere moments.

¹⁴ Immediately (επιθις) is the adverb used here. This word is translated "immediately" in the NASB and "at once" in the NIV.

Craig Blomberg asserts that it was no coincidence that the temptation immediately followed His baptism.¹⁵ He claims that many in their faith have similar experiences following conversion or after reaching some higher level of maturity in their existing walk.¹⁶ Another biblical example of this can be seen in 1 Kings 19:1-18 in the story of Elijah. It is dangerous to assume that periods of trial only come after a long process or after the culmination of many small insignificant events. It is more accurate to acknowledge that the sovereignty of God can at any moment thrust an individual into a period of testing or trial. In these divinely ordained trials, God grows and shapes His leaders.

Likewise, it was through the influence of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was thrust into this series of tests (Matt. 4:1, Luke 4:1, NASB). Morris states that the activity of the Holy Spirit reveals that it was God's plan that this took place at this point, the very outset and beginning of His ministry.¹⁷ The phrase "was led" (ἠγέρτο) is the same root word found in Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18 which apply to the influence of the Holy Spirit on the heart of a believer. It was, as Darrell Bock describes, the "spiritual impulse that guide[d] Jesus" into the wilderness.¹⁸ In Jesus's case, He Himself was not seeking the desert trial, but rather was driven there through the Holy Spirit's influence.¹⁹ In the same

¹⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 83-87.

¹⁶Ibid., 85.

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 112-114.

¹⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 368-378.

¹⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Luke*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 57.

way, believers do not seek the wilderness; however, many have either been through one after being led there or will at some point in their lives.

In a more emphatic way, Mark communicates that Jesus was “thrown out” into the wilderness (Mark 1:12, NASB).²⁰ This reveals that Jesus did not by some instinct or personal preference go into the wilderness; rather, He was actively thrust into the wilderness and necessarily consented as a positive response to that leading. In the same way, very few individuals choose to enter into a time of trial and temptation in their lives. However, those who aspire to lead and live in the Spirit will respond positively to the Spirit’s leading, even when He drives them into the desert and expels them from the comforts and pleasures they enjoy.

Jesus, from the outset of His ministry provided the perfect example of what it means to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, even if it meant going from a place of great community and recognition to solitude and temptation. Those who prove to be faithful leaders respond in this manner when it is their turn to do so. This submission to the Lord’s will is a necessary characteristic of a usable vessel of the Almighty.

The Physical and Spiritual Wilderness of Jesus

It is also important to note that Jesus’s wilderness was physical as well as spiritual. The most likely geographical location designated here by both Luke and Matthew would be the wilderness of Judah. However, the use of the word *desert* is frequently applied throughout the Bible to refer to a special place where individuals

²⁰ “Throw out” (ἐκβάλλω) can also be rendered “send out,” “drive out” or “expel.” This word places more emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s action upon Jesus who the action applied to. While Jesus did not resist going to the wilderness, He most certainly was thrust into the wilderness or driven by the implication and the influence of the Holy Spirit upon Himself.

contact God (Hosea 2:14-15, NASB) or where demons and wild beasts abide (Isaiah 13:21, 34:14, Mark 1:13, NASB).²¹ R. T. France is convinced that the specific location of the desert, while difficult to pinpoint, directly assumes solitude and naturally assumes a lack of physical resources.²² Although deserts by their very nature are dry and desolate, they are also areas of silence and seclusion. Interestingly, according to Jewish tradition, an entrance into a wilderness meant that God was preparing the individual for a new beginning.²³ Whether or not the specific location of Jesus's temptation is known, the important principle for both the original readers and today's expositors to understand is that Jesus was alone in a desolate land area away from all physical resources or human contact.

Although God does not send individuals He is preparing for ministry or leadership to literal deserts in today's world, He may withhold resources and fellowship from many if not most individuals during seasons of testing. This provides fertile ground for growth, increased dependence on God, acute awareness of the Almighty, and, as the Jews suggest, an environment to begin afresh. However, does God instigate and cause every aspect of a wilderness experience?

The Nature of Jesus's Testing

James chapter one reveals that God Himself does not tempt anyone; rather, it is the flesh that perpetuates sin and death in the life of the individual. Yet, as can be seen

²¹ Robert Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 145-149.

²² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 129-136.

²³ *Ibid.*, 129.

from Jesus's experience, temptation played a major role in how He was tested. Mounce suggests that although God may arrange the time for the testing, "it is the tempter who carries out the temptation."²⁴ While God may orchestrate the context in which temptation may occur or be allowed to take place, He plays no role in tempting someone to sin. In His sovereignty, God uses intermediate agents to perform His will.²⁵ For Jesus, His will included a series of tests and the intermediate agents used included a desert and a fallen archangel.

However, can what Jesus went through in the wilderness be classified as a series of temptations? France said that it is misleading to refer to Jesus's experience as "the temptation of Jesus" and argues that a better rendering would read "the testing of Jesus."²⁶ The word *peirazo* in Matthew always refers to testing and not temptation. This suggests that any temptation, trial, hardship, or negative circumstance one goes through should not be acknowledged for what it is on the surface. In the story of Jesus in the wilderness, God chose to allow temptation as His medium for Christ's testing. In other situations, God is free to use death, illness, or financial ruin. Therefore, these epochs should not be labeled "times of death" or "periods of illness" but more accurately, "times of testing."

The context of Jesus's temptation can be further analyzed when His physical condition is observed. One notices how in both Matthew's and Luke's accounts, the

²⁴ Robert Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 28-31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁶ R. T. France, *Matthew*, The Tyndale Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), 96-101.

Word reveals that Christ had fasted for forty days prior to any encounter with Satan (Matt. 4: 2, Luke 4:2, NASB). This small detail reveals at least one purpose for which Jesus was tested and made to enter into the wilderness in the first place, to provide an example. Oftentimes leaders prior to reaching their fullest potential are placed in a situation of great turmoil to provide a godly example to others of how to handle it.

Darrel L. Bock describes how Jesus's ordeal is a direct antithesis to the story of Adam in the garden. While Adam had not fasted at all, Jesus lacked food for forty days; and while Adam freely roamed in paradise, Jesus was left deserted in a wilderness.²⁷ While Adam was provided with every reason not to succumb, Jesus was left susceptible to giving in.²⁸ Both Matthew and Luke in their accounts reveal that Jesus was most vulnerable at the time of His testing. This suggests that God does not necessarily carry the believer through the wilderness He may have for him during a time of great spiritual growth or period of heightened strength. Rather, God is free, as He was with Jesus, to make individuals vulnerable and weak in order to provide every reason for them to give up. In doing so he reminds them of His power and proves Himself to be enough to get through even the most trying situation.

Jesus's Example of Humility

The forty day period may provide insight into another principle that is applicable to the shaping of leaders. Mounce points out that God's stated purpose for having Israel wander in a desert for forty years was an effort to humble them and to test them in order

²⁷ Bock, *Luke*, 371.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 372.

to know whether they would keep His commands (Deuteronomy 8:2, NASB).²⁹ Although Jesus was the son of God, Morris states that right at the forefront of His ministry, Jesus needed to face the question as to what kind of Messiah He would be.³⁰ As He was humbled by coming to earth, this period of testing in the wilderness humbled Jesus in that He was made to show outwardly the obedience He operated under inwardly at the forefront of His ministry.

Many leaders, especially young leaders who are quick to climb the ladder of success, become haughty and arrogant, proving useless to the Father. The warning explicitly given in 1 Timothy 3:6 not only suggests that the problem is real, but that it can easily manifest itself in those leaders who have not yet gone through some sort of period of humiliation. A prime example of this is found in Jesus' experience. Although He was perfect in every way, Jesus humbly understood and proved through these tests that while He had powers others did not, He had to decide how He was going to use them.³¹ If He chose to use them for personal gain, pleasure, or simply to show off, He would have proved Himself a proud sinner. Rather, Christ purposefully limited Himself and relied on nothing of His own talents, gifts, or powers to pass the test God had for Him to take.

While a wilderness is a perfect environment for seclusion and silence, these two qualities provide adequate conditions that teach humility. Jesus, alone and hungry, void of resources, could have chosen to sustain Himself supernaturally; but instead, He decided to depend on and trust in someone else in order to make it through successfully.

²⁹ Mounce, *Matthew*, 28.

³⁰ Morris, *Luke*, 112-14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

Bock claims that following His test in the wilderness, Jesus emerged as a faithful Son despite all that acted against Him.³² Jesus chose to believe that God would provide for His needs and refused to care for Himself miraculously. Likewise, He communicated through His actions that God held the highest place and priority in His life rather than selfishly usurping the throne. He also chose to believe His Father's words of promise rather than put God to the test. All of these exemplify how Jesus positively submitted to the wilderness experience before Him. These principles, humility and dependence, are ones that leaders cultivate as God prepares them for their areas of influence.

Christ also exemplified what it meant to be willing to do whatever God asks.³³ Jesus willingly followed God's call into the wilderness and readily humbled Himself in each and every temptation. For Christ, this foreshadowed what type of willingness He would express on His way to the cross. In the same way, when Christian leaders face deserts in their lives, the correct response is always to be led humbly through and willingly suffer the tests that God has without seeking a shortcut or loophole.

Summary

Jesus's example and the details surrounding it teach that real life, especially in any form of leadership, is defined as doing the will of God and walking in His paths, even when it calls for suffering and self-denial.³⁴ God often subjects one of His own to great suffering and tribulation in an effort to teach dependence on Him and His plan. In addition, He is at work in the lives of young leaders tearing down the idolatrous visage

³² Bock, *Luke*, 383.

³³ Stein, *Luke*, 150.

³⁴ Bock, *Baker*, 384.

they may have of themselves in an effort to cultivate an attitude of self-denial. The lessons of trust and dependence on God must be learned by every believer who aspires to leadership, even if it takes a wilderness experience to discover it.

MARTIN LUTHER: THE WILDERNESS OF TRIUMPH

Martin Luther's Pre-Wilderness Experience

The previous examples have dealt with individuals traveling through physical as well as spiritual deserts. Their spiritual state paralleled the environment God had placed them in. As if to illustrate what was taking place inside their minds and spirit, both Joshua and Jesus traversed through a physical and literal area of destitution and isolation. However, in the case of Martin Luther, his wilderness existed almost exclusively in his mind and spirit. His story resonates with many who journey through wilderness experiences today. Luther's psychological as well as spiritual ordeal can be used to identify and learn how he grew and was prepared to lead the worldwide Reformation.

In order for there to be a true analysis of how Luther ended up in the desert of his early adulthood, Luther's upbringing must first be placed into focus. Having been born in Eisleben, Germany, Luther suffered a childhood severely lacking in compassion and mercy from his parents.³⁵ Likewise, Luther suffered under the cruel reign of those in positions of authority while attending school. It has been discovered that both of Luther's parents exercised questionable measures of punishment toward young Martin even as an adolescent boy.³⁶ The trend that began at home eventually followed him to his school

³⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (Massachusetts: Prince Press, 2007), 15-20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

where it has been recorded that he was whipped for not having understood the lesson.³⁷ Many suffering such consequences for seemingly trivial offenses as these might change their perceptions regarding both the temporal and eternal judgment and wrath of God. During his youth, periods of depression, anxiety, and sorrow characterized this future reformer.

The relationship Luther maintained with his parents played a pivotal role in his later view of God's relationship to man. The disciplinary measures he received, as shoddily as they were administered, would no doubt figure into Luther's theology on how God administers His wrath upon mankind. In this regard, Luther's worldview began taking shape at a very early age. Luther's working theology as a young student assumed that there were severe consequences for offenses and one's standing before God was grim with little hope of improving.

From an early age, Luther's domestic life and academic career chartered him on a course that would eventually lead straight into a psychological, intellectual, and spiritual wilderness in which he would have to find some way of escaping. This escape would involve answers to questions that dealt with the grace that seemed in such short supply and the liberty he could never believe possible. As in any other case, Luther's experiences as a child cannot be responsible for all of his idiosyncrasies, attitudes, or views nor can they be responsible for his later epiphany. However, these characteristics performed a major role in shaping Luther as a human being and may have instigated his search for answers to the plethora of questions that later plagued his mind.

³⁷Ibid.

Martin Luther's Journey to Revelation

As can be expected, many of Martin Luther's bleak views concerning his heavenly Father can be traced back to his relationship with his earthly father. "The origin of Martin's doubt that the father, when he punishes you, is really guided by love and justice rather than by arbitrariness and malice," may rest in how discipline was administered in his childhood.³⁸ It is recorded that Luther's father beat him without hesitation driving Luther to profound fear and anxiety as a youth. The fear young Martin had of his father would have silenced any back-talk or defense of whatever was in question. It is no accident that after experiencing freedom and given the chance in later years, Martin Luther was one of the most obstinate back-talkers in history.³⁹ This fear of authority and punishment led him into a deep spiritual and intellectual wasteland throughout his early adulthood. However, the question as to what kept him silent for so long can be answered when one observes how this anxious youth developed throughout his wilderness journey.

Perhaps the first dramatic step taken by Luther into his psychological and spiritual wilderness occurred one summer during a thunderstorm. Travelling to Erfurt from Mansfield, Luther was nearly struck by a lightning bolt which sent him toppling over onto the ground. Out of desperation and fear he cried out, "St. Anne, help me! I will

³⁸ Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1958), 58-60.

³⁹Ibid., 58.

become a monk!”⁴⁰ Three things concerning this vociferous cry reveal important information concerning Luther’s theological nomenclature.

Nearly electrocuted, Luther’s desperate promise reveals that he felt as though God was about to punish him for his shortcomings. This desperate plea shows that Luther was almost bartering with God as he probably believed this bolt of lightning was a direct beam of wrath God had hurled straight from the throne room of heaven. Secondly the small word *help* reveals that Luther’s view of himself and his own standing before God was askew. *Help* suggests that Luther or the saint he cried out to played a part in his own salvation (or in this case being saved from the storm). Many Catholics still hold to these ideas today. Although the view would change, this small word says much concerning Luther’s theology. Thirdly, Luther’s appeal to St. Anne rather than to God reveals that Luther’s then Catholic dependence on different traditional beliefs was up to the standard to the times. It is not wise to overlook or refuse to ask why he instead did not cry out to God. Shortly following this traumatic experience, Luther joined a monastery and while spiritual enlightenment may have been desired, it would take time in the desert Luther to acquire such a result.

Luther’s father, upon hearing his son’s new life direction, was livid. Having conceived his own dreams of Luther’s life, Luther’s father saw himself cheated out of the wishes, plans, and sacrifices he felt he had made for his son.⁴¹ Just as Moses left the security and comfort of Egypt, and just as Jesus went off to the wilderness alone, Luther

⁴⁰ Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther The Man and His Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 54-57.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

left the safe-haven of what was offered him by his family, a comfortable living as a lawyer, and travelled singularly into his mysterious and unexplored wilderness.

Although scholars question Luther's true intentions in entering the monastery, his convictions immediately shifted from fulfilling the promise he had made to St. Anne, to answering the question that had always haunted him, "How may I find a merciful God?"

"Luther entered the monastery in an effort to achieve salvation through perfection."⁴² This impossible feat eventually drew Luther into deep feelings of defeat, discouragement and loneliness. Executing his vows with the upmost tenacity, Luther lived and learned according to the Augustinian order which required absolute love of God, one's neighbor, and perfect humility.⁴³ However, the question of escaping God's wrath for his sinful life left him discontent in all things. Knowing himself to be sinful, Luther was bothered by the notion that salvation was unattainable. Luther himself states, "I was a monk for 15 years and yet I was never able to trust my baptism."⁴⁴ Confession allowed Luther no peace either. While Luther desperately craved answers to these pressing questions, peace, grace, confidence, and contentment were not to be had. Not even the Bible itself was able to answer the problems he faced, at least not in the way he was interpreting it.

⁴² Ibid., 55.

⁴³ M. Michelet, *The Life of Martin Luther* (London: David Bogue, Fleet Street, 1859). In a conversation Luther had with Dr. Staupitz, a fellow monk, Dr. Staupitz provided some deep insight into Luther's condition. While Luther pined over his sin and unworthiness, Staupitz states, "...such trials are good and necessary for you, but would not be so for anyone else." This suggests that wilderness experiences are custom-designed events God uses to shape individuals. Perhaps the reason for this wilderness was to prevent Luther from becoming "haughty and supercilious" as he himself suggests in the same conversation.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 57.

As Luther perused the pages of the canon, *law* was the word he kept observing rather than *gospel*. When thoughts of God's righteousness were presented, Luther winced at the thought of the unachievable task of making himself righteous before God in order to inherit God's kingdom. Having been educated in the schools of the day and learning every theological nuance taught according to the current way of thinking, Luther travelled deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness that was his spiritual and intellectual wilderness. The experiences he carried from his early years and understanding of judgment and wrath, coupled with his discontented feelings towards the various sacraments, teachings, and renderings of Scripture left Luther stuck in confusion and spiritual disillusionment.

As can be expected, conditions dismally worsened before they improved. It is recorded that at one time, being so overcome with grief and sorrow, Luther shut himself up in his cell for several days allowing no one to enter.⁴⁵ After days had passed, several of his friends broke open the door to find Luther's seemingly lifeless body.⁴⁶ In his own words, Luther describes his feelings toward the Bible as he read it prior to his incredible discovery. The passages of particular annoyance were found in Romans, Galatians and in Hebrews. He says about Romans 1, "'The justice of God is revealed in it, [the gospel]' I hated that word, 'justice of God.'"⁴⁷ Loathing a word such as *justice* can be clearly attributed to not only his present distress, but also the judgment described earlier of his

⁴⁵ J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁷ Martin Luther, *Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works*, Translated by: Andrew Thornton, *Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 421-428.

harsh and strict childhood. The shared characteristics of Luther's father and his idea of God are copious. The unusually high standard set before him from his earthly father and the impossible standard set about by his heavenly Father of perfection were perhaps similar if not identical in Luther's mind. The beatings and consequences he experienced on earth necessarily foreshadowed the extreme torture and pain he felt he would experience or even deserve in hell.

Falling deeper and deeper into disillusionment, this monk "grumbled vehemently and got angry at God."⁴⁸ Luther also stated that at one point he "did not love, no rather. . . hated the just God who punishes sinners."⁴⁹ It was his extreme aversion to these hindrances that led to his obsession over them. Clearly "he [Luther] was wholly ignorant of those truths that are so plain to us, a knowledge of which would have been of so great a service to him."⁵⁰

Martin Luther Triumphs

Finally, after having obsessed over the questions and pursuing the answers he so desperately longed for, Luther reached his epiphany. Faith, Luther determined, is the catalyst for living righteously and for which one is saved rather than any litany of works he can hope to accomplish on his own. It is trust in Christ that is sufficient for the soul.⁵¹ This epiphany followed after he was able to scale the enormous road block he encountered in Romans 1:17. The means of achieving righteousness before God was the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 425.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 427.

⁵⁰ Charles Warren, *Scenes in Luther's life* (Boston, MA: New England Sabbath School Union, 1848), 57.

⁵¹ D'Aubigne, *The Life*, 66.

final obstacle that Luther had to overcome before reaching beyond the desert he had travelled through for so long.

Luther finally discovered that salvation was freely given by faith and there was nothing he or anybody else could do to deserve it. God was loving and merciful rather than a bully striking sinners down from heaven. It was this epiphany that brought peace to Luther, as it does for anyone who comes to know Christ personally. Luther's discovery was the greatest discovery anyone could make then or even today. God is a loving God who provided the means for salvation, a salvation believers receive freely by faith.

Because of his rigorous study in the Scriptures, Luther was now prepared to support his conclusion that believers are saved by grace through faith alone from attack. It had taken a long and difficult journey it took to bring him to such awareness. Likewise, Luther's fresh realization was able to stand firm amidst even the most stringent ridicule.⁵² Luther himself confirms that "faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting it."⁵³ It was his life that Luther would constantly risk for the sake of his cause in the Reformation. There is little doubt Luther's experience throughout his spiritual wilderness increased his conviction to

⁵² Emily C. Cook, *Residential Wilderness Programs: The Role of Social Support in Influencing Self Evaluations of Male Adolescents* Vol.43 No. 172 (San Diego, CA: Libra Publishers, 2008), 751-774. Psychological studies have shown that wilderness experiences have positively affected those who endure them. In a qualitative study performed by Emily C. Cook, she discovered that male adolescents who travel through a wilderness experience develop a higher sense of self. Although Martin Luther was not an adolescent at the time of his experience, the result of his ordeal is no different. Having wrestled with all he had to deal with, Luther gained self-esteem and self worth when before he lacked both.

⁵³ Martin Luther, *Luther's German Bible: An introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Translated by: Robert E. Smith, *Dr. Martin Luther's Vermischte Deutsche Schriften* (Erlangen: Heyder and Zimmer, 1854), 124-25.

this extreme point of confidence of being willing to die for the gospel, a confidence that he so courageously exhibited during the Protestant Reformation.

Evidence of growth in Luther is seen most explicitly in his works and sermons. In Luther's work, *On Faith and Coming to Christ*, he describes that the right way to go about finding eternal life is far from the way he once pursued. In fact, it is also the direct antithesis of what he was brought up in as a Catholic. "This right way, however, is the Lord Jesus Christ. Whoever desires to seek another way, as the great multitudes venture to do by means of their own works, has already missed the right way; for Paul says to the Galatians: 'If righteousness is through the Law, that is, through the works of the Law, then Christ died for naught.'⁵⁴ The law which had so strictly bound Luther was no longer the heavy weight it had been before. Now it was a tool used to reveal the desperate need for God's grace and imputed righteousness. This, Luther described, comes through true repentance and not from the practices that permeated his religious culture.

In his second thesis Luther speaks on the word repentance when he states, "This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests."⁵⁵ Having experienced the anxiety and confusion such a system of penance brought, Luther was adequately equipped to speak on the matter following the wilderness experience in his life. If it were not for the period in his life when he craved the answers he often was left without, Luther would never have

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *On Faith, And Coming to Know Christ*, Translated by: Shane Rosenthal, *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 80-86.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, Translated by: Adolph Spaeth, L.D. Reed, Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), 29-38.

derived such revelation and therefore would not have been the charismatic figure he was during the Reformation.

A prime example of this charisma is seen in his letter to Pope Leo X discussing his court at Rome. In reference to the Catholic Church, Luther brilliantly concluded that “She incomparably surpasses the impiety of the Turks, so that in very truth she, who was formerly the gate of heaven, is now a sort of open mouth of hell.”⁵⁶ Having gained a proper view of forgiveness before God and of true repentance, Luther was able to speak critically of the present condition of the Church in Rome. Often when one wrestles with and then discovers principles of incredible significance, his fervor and determination to spread his fresh wisdom is unstoppable no matter what the price or consequence may be.

In danger of losing his life, Luther travelled to meetings with various dignitaries, rulers, and church leaders who would have loved nothing more than to shut him up or make him disappear. Evidence of the audacity he exemplified includes the event in which he burned the papal bull, challenging the pope’s authority. These qualities parallel the qualities of Moses who stood before the ruler Pharaoh and proclaimed the message God had given him. In both cases, it was the sharpening and strengthening work of the wilderness experience that shaped these reformers into bold and confident men. They were bold both in their God and in the message and convictions that He had bestowed upon them.

The experiences Martin Luther was led into greatly affected his call for reformation of the church. The questions that plagued him and drove him to spiritual

⁵⁶ Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Translated by: Henry W. and C. A. Buchheim, *First Principles of the Reformation* (London: John Murray, 1883), 98-100.

starvation were made known to him through the processes, experiences and growth he experienced in his time of uncertainty. Only after experiencing his time in the wilderness was Luther made ready and useful for the purpose he would so confidently perform during the Reformation.

Summary

While the principles learned from Martin Luther's experience are less concrete, it is important to realize the incredible opportunities God may have for all people in times of great discouragement and disillusionment. Everyone in life experiences tendencies and weaknesses that are physical, intellectual, or even spiritual. However, God's sovereign tempering in the wilderness is able to mold usable vessels and powerful leaders out of the most unlikely individuals. This was Martin Luther's experience.

CONCLUSION

Although the examples of Joshua, Jesus, and Martin Luther have been discussed in brief, they do not provide an exhaustive list or complete analysis of all that the wilderness experience has to offer potential Christian leaders. The truth is, while wilderness conditions are similar in nature, the variety of lessons that can be learned are immense.

The wilderness can act as a proving ground as it was for Joshua. Likewise it can manifest itself in a period of difficult tests that stretch one's dependence and reliance on God, as it was for Jesus. Maybe the wilderness will be a series of unanswered questions regarding fundamental issues as it was for Martin Luther. Whether it is characterized by these or not, deserts in the life of potential leaders are incredible tools God uses to stretch,

strengthen, and stimulate people in order to be used in ways they could not otherwise without them.

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