

Broomfield



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 5 Issue 23

June 18, 2006

The Cities in which we Dwell, Part 2

Psalms 19:1-2, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.”

Romans 1:20, “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.”

Housed in creation is a message, or what we call a sermon. These passages are very clear. If we would but look at this world through the eye of faith, we would behold such great and glorious things when it comes to God.

And yet herein lays a problem. Romans 1:23 tells us that in our sin we have turned out backs on God. And consequently, God has shut the sinners' ears.

Yet this ought not to be the case for the child of God. When we behold creation, we ought to receive a message from God. For example, Calvin said that when one beholds the trees of the field fluttering in the wind we must see them applauding the glory of God because Isaiah states the “trees of the fields clap their hands” (Isaiah 55:12). When we behold the stars in the heavens or the sand on a beach, we ought to be reminded of the covenant promise to Abraham by which you and I have been saved.

Genesis 22:17, “That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies.”

- When we see a bird, we ought to be reminded of the provision of God, Matthew 6:26.
- A rainbow, we ought to be reminded of the faithfulness of God, Genesis 9:12-17.
- A fish, we ought to be reminded of our call to be fishers of men, Matthew 4:19.
- A withering flower, we ought to be reminded of the eternal word of God, James 1:11.

Truly all of creation declares the glory of God.

And herein is the basis for our current series. We have been looking at the different places which God used in the revelation of His redemption recognizing that in many of these places, He taught His children valuable lessons. And yet, we also are looking at these places as more than just cities that existed in the

days of Christ. They also represent places in which you and I dwell even today.

If your life was personified by an Israeli city of the first century, in what city or place would you live?

The Wilderness

Previously we examined the city of Nazareth. It was a city which had eyes but did not see and ears but refused to hear. Now, I want to consider not so much a specific city with you, but a place which throughout redemptive history has housed cities of men, the wilderness!

Revelation 12:13-14, “And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.”

This passage speaks of “the woman.” the church, fleeing to the wilderness. Clearly the wilderness is a place in which we can be found in this life. But what is the wilderness?

When we think of the “wilderness” in Scripture, we really are thinking of a variety of places. For example, we read of the Wilderness of Sin which was the first wilderness God's people came to upon leaving Egypt.¹ There is the Wilderness which was in the region of Mount Sinai where God's people encamped following the Exodus.² There is the Wilderness of Zin between Mount Sinai and the Promised Land in which Israel wandered for forty years.³ There is also the Wilderness of Beersheba, the Negev, which was south of the Promised Land⁴ and the Wilderness northeast of the Dead Sea⁵ where John baptized⁶ and Christ was tempted.⁷ And there is also the Wilderness which lay on both sides of the Jordan river known as the Arabah.⁸ All of these places are the “wilderness” in Scripture. On the surface this would mean that at first glance any reference to the wilderness in the Bible will require some qualification.

- Just exactly which wilderness are we referencing?
- Is it the wilderness around Sinai?
- Or are we talking about the wilderness north of the Dead Sea?

The truth of the matter is that in most cases it doesn't really matter. For the terms for “wilderness” in the Bible have but one connotation: A Waste Land. Whether the wilderness is Midbar, Arabah, Jeschimon, Negev in the Hebrew or Eramos/eramia in the Greek it doesn't matter.

A wilderness or desert tells us that it is a desolate or deserted area devoid of civilization. It is thus a disorderly and dangerous place, the home of wild beasts and savage wandering tribes, and so is a place of bewilderment and disorientation. It indicates “that which is beyond”- i.e., beyond the limits of settlement.

¹ Compare Exodus 16:1

² Compare Exodus 3:1; 4:27

³ Compare Numbers 14:26-35

⁴ Compare Genesis 21:14

⁵ Compare Joshua 16:1

⁶ Compare Matthew 3:1

⁷ Compare Mark 1:12, Luke 4:2

⁸ Compare Isaiah 35:1-2

In other words, the experience of one wilderness is the experience of all wildernesses. For example, one such “wilderness” is the Negev.

Genesis 13:1, “And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south⁹.”

The word translated *south* here means “dry or parched.” It references the southern part of Judah which was/is a hot, dry place with less than eight inches of rainfall annually.

Or one can think of the Wilderness of Zin where God's people spent forty years of their lives. Listen to how God's word describes this wilderness:

Deuteronomy 8:15, “Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint.”

Jeremiah 2:6, “Neither said they, Where is the LORD that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt?”

Such is the idea of “wilderness” to the people of God throughout Scripture.

Redemptive Significance

And this brings us to the Biblical and redemptive significance of the wilderness.

The wilderness, though not a city, is a place in which many a child of God has found himself. Consider many of the saints of the Old Testament. Abraham spent many long nights in the wilderness.¹⁰ So did his son.¹¹ The wilderness is where Hagar went when she was trying to flee from the Covenant Household of God.¹² It was where Joseph was abandoned by his brothers and then sold into slavery.¹³ The nation of Israel at the time of Moses first met their God in the wilderness.¹⁴ The most famous of all wilderness experiences was that of Israel when after they refused to trust God, the Lord sent them back into the wilderness for forty years.¹⁵ David spent many years in the wilderness.¹⁶ Elijah fled to the wilderness.¹⁷

And yet it just wasn't in the Old Testament where one finds the wilderness. New Testament children of God spent time there too. For example, think of these:

- John the Baptist- his entire ministry was conducted in the wilderness.¹⁸

⁹ נֶגֶב negeb -- meaning to be parched

¹⁰ Compare Genesis 20:1

¹¹ Compare Genesis 26:1

¹² Compare Genesis 16:7

¹³ Compare Genesis 37:22

¹⁴ Compare Exodus 19:1

¹⁵ Compare Numbers 14; Joshua 5:6

¹⁶ Compare 1 Samuel 23:14, 15, 24, 25; 24:1; 15:1, 4; 26:3; Psalm 63:1

¹⁷ Compare 1 Kings 19:4

¹⁸ Compare Matthew 13:1

- Paul spent many nights in the wilderness.¹⁹
- Christ was driven by God into the wilderness.²⁰

Now on account of its characteristics and the role it played in the lives of God's people throughout redemptive history, the “wilderness” was used figuratively of a state of trial and difficulty in the life of a child of God. God warned of what He would do to His people if they didn't repent, “I will also make her like a wilderness, make her like desert land, and slay her with thirst” (Hosea 2:3).

Well guess what? Israel didn't repent, and so we read, “Thy holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation” (Isaiah 64:10).

Now as bad as this may seem at first glance, this actually is a good thing. Let me give you some background.

Though an horrible place in which to dwell, nevertheless don't ever forget

- Moses met God in the wilderness, Exodus 3:1-6.
- It was in the wilderness that the people of God became mindful of God's presence in their lives (Deut. 2:7) AND where they too first met God, Exodus 19.

It was when God's people were in the wilderness that God did unimaginable things for His children.

- He provided water from a rock, Psalm 78:19-20; Exodus 17.
- He fed them on the food of heaven, Exodus 16:13-36.

As such, and let us never forget it, God is able to transform the wilderness into

- A pool of water, Psalm 107:35; Isaiah 41:18.
- A spring, Joel 2:22.
- A place where the children of Christ, having tasted of the river of God, praise the Lord, Isaiah 43:19-21; Psalm 84.
- A Garden of Eden, Isaiah 51:3.

Accordingly, the wilderness is described as a place in which God's people yearn for Him, Psalm 63:1.

Christ's & the Wilderness

From all of this we see that God placing His children in the wilderness is not such a bad thing! In fact, the wilderness played a crucial role in the life of Christ.

Our Lord was shown to be “worthy” in the wilderness. We are told that Christ was “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). We also read that the Spirit “drove Him to go into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12). From the beginning of time the Lord ordained to use the wilderness in the life of Christ. Christ's presence in the wilderness wasn't an accident; God wanted Him there.

Even after He passed the test, because the wilderness can be a spring, Christ frequently returned there in

¹⁹ Compare 2 Corinthians 11:26

²⁰ Compare Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12

order to pray.²¹ Truly, God utilizes the wilderness in the lives of His people to grow them in grace. Accordingly the wilderness has been the home of countless men and women in the kingdom of God!

- Have you ever been in the wilderness?
- Is this the land in which we dwell?

The Message of the Wilderness

Family of God, as this is the city in which all of us at times will dwell; it behooves us to know its message.

- What significance ought the wilderness to hold in our lives?
- What is its message?
- For what specific reason does God “drive us” to go there?

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses proclaimed God’s message to the people of God prior to their taking of the Promised Land. The wilderness was now behind them. The time of consummation was before them. And lest God's people forget the “Whys?” and “Wherefores?” of the wilderness, Moses reminded them in this text.

Deuteronomy 8:2, “And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.”

This verse is the sum of his message.

Why were God's people in the wilderness? Because God was angry with them and was rubbing His people's nose in their sin? Because God was venting a little steam after the incident with the spies?

NO! God brought His people into the wilderness for four reasons: .To humble them! To temper them and so to make their faith firm! To teach them the importance of walking in light of His word! And to reveal what was in their hearts (not for the sake of God [He already knew], but for the sake of His people)!

That, in a capsule, is “The Message” of the wilderness. And yet, Moses here goes on to explain.

Deuteronomy 8:3, “And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.”

This is beautiful! Though Israel was in the wilderness for the purpose of breaking down their pride, nevertheless God fed them with the food of heaven. He did this so that His people would come to see that they did not need Egypt nor the food of Egypt in order to live. He did this to show them that they didn't need the security and modern conveniences of civilization! He showed them that they did not need this worldly treasure or that!

²¹ Compare Luke 5:16

God was and is sufficient for their needs! They needed only to learn to sup upon Him in His word!

Now to prove that God didn't have it out for His people but truly was tempering them, Moses continued...

Deuteronomy 8:4-5, "Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years. Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee."

This is one of the unheralded miracles of the Wilderness Wanderings. We recall these miracles:

- The water from the rock.
- The manna from heaven.
- The meat in the form of quail.
- The pillar of fire by night and the cloud of smoke by day.
- The Shekinah glory of God as it manifested itself in the quaking mountain.
- The earthquake which gobbled up the rebel.
- The protection.
- The speaking to Moses face to face.
- The cleft in the rock.
- And many, many more glorious things.

But what very few of us probably knew before this day was that during the entire forty years of living in the harsh and cruel environment of the wilderness NOT once did an Israelite sandal break or an article of clothing tear. Whatever state in which the clothing of the Israelites were when they set foot in the desert, this was the state at the end of forty years!

Now, why did God do this?

To PROVE that God isn't about tearing down His people in the wilderness, but preserving them! He did it to show that God isn't venting His anger on His people in the wilderness, but disciplining them as a loving father!

And what was the end result?

Deuteronomy 8:6, "Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him."

This is the end of all wilderness wanderings. It is the upholding of the word of God. It is the walking with Him in His ways. And it is the deepening reverence of the Lord.

I hope from this you have "the flavor" of the wilderness firmly fixed in your mouth! It is not about cruel treatment, but loving reproof. It is not about humbling us to the point of despair, but to the point of undistracted devotion. It is not about deprivation, but dependence upon Christ. It is being placed in a state in your life where all you have left is the Lord!

The Treatment of Two Fighting Soldiers

Years ago John Todd, a Marine drill sergeant, shared this with me. When two of his soldiers weren't getting along, he'd send them on a grueling job together... by themselves. He knew that they either would

kill each other in the process or they'd be forced to work together.

Every time the soldiers would return. They didn't kill themselves and they would return reconciled with a strengthened relationship.

That is what the wilderness is for the child of God. Both he and God go into the wilderness together. And when they come out, they are reconciled and have a strengthened relationship!

That is what the Wilderness is all about! And that is the second place in which you and I can find ourselves living at times in our walks!

Our Response

How do you respond to a message like this?

One can rebel against the teaching and so “kick against the goads” like so many who have found themselves in the wilderness. Israel in part did this. In Exodus 16 we read of their murmuring against Moses and Aaron like a wounded animal striking out in agitation. In Psalm 78 and 95 we read of God's people hardening their hearts against the Lord.

And do you know what they got in return?

They received just more bitterness and heartache. They didn't receive it because God had it out for them. Rather they received this because God's aim in the wilderness is that through a shared experience of suffering He and His child might enjoy a strengthened relationship!

Stiffening our necks is not the answer when we are in the wilderness. Rather just like when a woman has a contraction during child birth, we must learn to relax and work with the pain of the wilderness that it might have its effect. And that must be our response to all wilderness experiences.

God spoke of Israel's devotion, “I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, The love of your betrothals, Your following after Me in the wilderness, Through a land not sown” (Jeremiah 2:2) You will find that the most productive response to the wilderness is trusting in the character of God and so following Him in love without question or murmuring.

When one does this, rather than repining and griping, you will behold the beauty of the desert. Soon you will find yourself thankful for it. Indeed, passing through the valley of weeping, you will discover that it has become a spring.²² Living in the wasteland of trial and persecution, you will behold a table set before you in the presence of your enemies.²³

Yet how does this happen? Do you simply just purpose in your heart to have a “be-happy attitude”? Do you will yourself not to complain but to rejoice?

No! That is impossible because our flesh is too strong.

So how do you do it?

²² Compare Psalm 84

²³ Compare Psalm 23

Long for the Lord

I submit to you the example of David in Psalm 63 when he found himself in the wilderness. Notice there were three distinct elements to his wilderness experience. First, he longed for the Lord.

Psalm 63:1, A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah. "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."

In the wilderness the temptation will be to live for the cessation of the drought, relief, one's own vindication, and the former days when your walk was so rich. Yet the man who thrives in the wilderness is the one whose passion is nothing less than the Lord Himself. And so he doesn't allow the heat of the day to dissuade him in his love for Christ. NO! In the fever heat of summer, he continues to seek God earnestly, and thirst and yearn for Him. He knows that God is that which alone can quench his thirst in a dry and weary land where there is no water!

The Tabernacle

Now when your passion to grow in your love for the Lord is fed, do you know what will happen?

Psalm 63:2-4, "To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary. Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee. Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name."

This is great! Because David's passion was Christ, the wilderness thus became a tabernacle in which he worshipped the Lord. There where his enemy sought his life and David knew that he was in grave danger, nevertheless he sang the praises of God!

And do you know what happened? The Valley of Baca became a spring.²⁴

Psalm 63:5, "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips."

I thought David wrote this in this wilderness and thus in want and in danger? How is it that he could speak of marrow and fatness?

When the love of Christ is that which you are all about such that you sing in the fire, even in want you will be filled and satisfied! David here is in a forsaken land, and yet HIS SOU, not his flesh, was satisfied!

So what ought we to do in the Wilderness?

Know God Richly

First long for Christ! And yet that was not all, he sought to know God more deeply.²⁵

²⁴ Compare Psalm 84

²⁵ Compare Psalm 63:6-8

Psalm 63:6-8, “When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches. Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice. My soul followeth hard after thee: thy right hand upholdeth me.”

While in the desert, David did not spend his time slandering God in his heart. He did not plan what he would say if only God appeared. And he did not search for where God had let him down. Instead! He meditated upon the character of his God. He set his heart to know the Lord more intimately.

And do you know what happened? Three things:

- He sang for joy, verse 7b.
- He clung to God, verse 8a.
- He came to know more fully the sustaining grace of His Savior, verse 8b.

And so how did David pass his time in the wilderness?

- He longed for God Himself.
- He sought to know Him more intimately.

Temporary Nature of the Wilderness

And this brought him to a final response. He understood the temporary nature of the wilderness.

Psalm 36:9-11, “But those that seek my soul, to destroy it, shall go into the lower parts of the earth. They shall fall by the sword: they shall be a portion for foxes. But the king shall rejoice in God; every one that sweareth by him shall glory: but the mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped.”

In the wilderness the temptation is to view the things of this life as “the end all to be all.” Nothing matters but the present. There is nothing more important than what is taking place now. That I am humbled and the wicked are exalted speaks ill of God. That I have done so much for the Lord and have been rewarded with a drought reveals an injustice in God

Clearly because Christ was David's passion and because he set his heart to grow in his understanding of God, notice what David experienced:

- He here saw that this age is but a temporary world.
- The adversary is soon to be overthrown.
- The wicked will perish shortly — along with sin, misery, sadness, sorrow, and sickness.

Soon, he only would know rejoicing and glory. The wicked would be stopped. The Wilderness would be transformed into a Garden of Eden.

Family of God, if ever/whenever you find yourself in the wilderness, this is how we must respond! Let us not fight, question, and wonder. Rather, let us long for and love God. Let us understand the character of the Lord such that we allow ourselves to be humbled. Let us learn to walk with Christ. Let us know that know that sorrow may fill us tonight, but joy comes in the morning!

Indeed!

The body of Christ currently dwells in the wilderness.²⁶ Let this not frighten us. For God has promised to transform the wilderness into glory.²⁷

Subscription Information

A subscription to the *Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is on a free basis. To subscribe or unsubscribe send a post card to *Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word*®, Post Office Box 691, Windsor, Colorado 80550. Or you may send your request by email to [Nels Nelson](mailto:Nels.Nelson@broomfieldopc.org). *The Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is published regularly.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Broomfield Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Broomfield Presbyterian Church is located at Kohl Elementary School, 10th Street and Kohl, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Broomfield Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon and the these notes can be found at [The Wilderness](http://www.the-wilderness.com). The web address for all sermons at Broomfield can be found out as follows: <http://broomfieldopc.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 18, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.

²⁶ Compare Revelation 12:6

²⁷ Compare Isaiah 35:1