

Joining Jesus in the Wilderness

Author: Patrick J. Griffiths ©
 Date: March 5, 2006
 Title: Why the Wilderness? – The Wilderness is a place of Solitude
 Text: Luke 4:1-15 (Key verses: 1, 2, 13-15)
 Theme: “For forty days, being tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:2)

Introduction:

This week we will consider the idea of solitude. So, why should I consider the wilderness? The purpose of the wilderness is to separate ourselves from life’s routines and focus more quantitatively and qualitatively on who Christ is, what He has done, and who we are in Him.

We are inundated by circumstances that pull us away from Christ. Consider with me the following information.

Why am I teaching this study?

What do I see as the dangerous conformities (inside and outside the church) that lead us away from new life?

- 1 out of 3 marriages fail.
- 70% are living paycheck to paycheck (Source: Wall Street Journal)
- Average American spends \$1.22 for every dollar they earn. (Myvesta.org, Inc)
- 95% argue about money related topics on a regular basis
- We are consumed with worry over our marriages, relationships, health issues, death, money, international and national conflict, and employment.
- We are controlled by what others might think of us if they knew the truth.

What easy or common patterns seduce our attention and distract our appetites?

We are always trying to look better than we are. For whatever reason we have allowed the TV and modern advertisement to sell us a lie as to what constitutes normal and live with huge amounts of clutter and debt. “Keeping up with the Joneses” is an American saying, but it has never been an American ideal. We have always been more interested in getting ahead of the Joneses than in trying to match them.

All of these concerns rob us of our joy. How do we make our lives easier? How can we restore the joy that is ours in Christ? I believe a means to that end is by joining Jesus in the wilderness.

Yet we are still troubled by the idea of slowing down. Is a place of solitude necessary? Consider with me the DC Comic book hero Superman.

ILLUSTRATION:

The Fortress of Solitude is the occasional headquarters of Superman in DC Comics. It lies deep in the core of a mountainside in the desolate Arctic wastes.

“Whenever Superman wants to get away from it all,” notes *Action Comics* Number 261, “he retires to his secret sanctuary, the Fortress of Solitude, the most glamorous hideaway in the entire universe!”

In Superman's words,

This is the one place where I can relax and work undisturbed! No one suspects its existence, and no one can penetrate the solid rock out of which it is hewn!

Why do we think we are exempt from needing a “Fortress of Solitude?”

With all of this in mind, let us consider the wilderness as it is depicted in Luke 4:1-15.

There are two primary movements inside of our Lord’s wilderness. **First**, there is the nature of the wilderness. And **second**, there is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. There is a sense in which the one must precede the other. The nature of the wilderness provides the platform for the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

This study seeks to focus on the idea of solitude.

ILLUSTRATION:

While a teacher I have been noted to say to my students when taking a test, “You have plenty of time, just hurry up!”

You and I have all the time we need, but have created levels of involvement that rob us of our ability to quiet our hearts before God. The internal noise is deafening.

Sitting still to listen and look for God is contrary to our spiritual upbringing. We have bought into the devil’s lie that our value is found in what we do, not in what we are. We do not see worship as a valid expression of the Christian life and believe it is better to burn out for Jesus rather than rust out for the devil. When in reality both extremes are invalid expressions of the Christian life.

I. The nature of the wilderness

There are certain qualities about the wilderness that lend themselves to spiritual reflection. I would like to begin by noting the first of several qualities.

A. The wilderness is a place of solitude (v. 1 [wilderness])

The first thing I would like us to consider about the wilderness is solitude. Seeking solitude is . . .

“[The] practice . . . of seeking times of silence in our lives. It's hard to hear the Spirit with all the noise around us. So, many Christians have learned to take some small part of each day and set it aside for silence. This means shutting off the beeper, turning off the TV and radio, taking the phone off the hook, and closing the door. Or, it means walking off to the beach or garden or mountain, as Jesus Himself did, and not doing anything but leaving yourself open to the Lord.” <http://www.spirithome.com/spirquie.html#quiet>

It is a time where we seek to quiet the noise that is around us and in us so that we might hear more clearly the Holy Spirit through the Word of God and see more clearly Jesus Christ in and through general and special revelation.

Although we see the negativity of the wilderness, what it represents is something that is highly positive. I am only considering the idea as it is present in Luke's Gospel, but Jesus often separated Himself from others in order that He might give Himself (for a season) to intentional communion with His Father.

Read the following references.

Luke 4:42 When day came, Jesus left and **went to a secluded place**; and the crowds were searching for Him, and came to Him and tried to keep Him from going away from them. (Mark 1:35 tells us that He went to pray)

Luke 5:16 But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.

Luke 6:12 It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.

Luke 9:10 When the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done. Taking them with Him, He withdrew by Himself to a city called Bethsaida.

Luke 9:28 Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

Luke 9:37 On the next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met Him.

Luke 21:37 Now during the day He was teaching in the temple, but at evening He would go out and spend the night on the mount that is called Olivet.

Luke 22:39 And He came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples also followed Him.

The wilderness in these passages is a place of solitude. Jesus is often seen separating Himself from His daily surroundings in order to have a more determined time of personal intimacy with His heavenly Father.

In considering solitude there is both a negative and a positive aspect.

1. Solitude negatively considered

Sometimes the greatest temptations come when you are all alone and in the absence of accountability and discovery. It is during this time that we might make our greatest compromises and give up the greatest fights.

Solitude can be a negative action if not used properly. However, the positives to solitude far outweigh the potential negative.

2. Solitude positively considered

There are extremes to solitude, but there is also a healthy expression of solitude that can promote spiritual development.

Because we have been conditioned to perform we struggle with the idea that resting is a spiritual discipline. Yet resting, or being, is far more significant to the Christian life than doing and working.

There can be at least three immediate consequences to solitude.

a. Solitude provides the opportunity to listen

ILLUSTRATION:

Remember as a child when you would lie down in a grassy field and simply have the wind blow over your body and move the grass in rhythmic movements of God's doing? Remember the witness of God in creation? Creation testifies to the greatness of God.

When we step back and separate ourselves from the clanging clutter of our misguided lives we can hear God. And do you want to know what He is saying? The voice says, "I am here and I will never leave you or forsake you." The whisper continues, "I am enough in this life and in the life to come and it is time to rest in me."

OT ILLUSTRATION:

1 Samuel 3:1-10, the boy Samuel in the temple, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." The question for me is not "is God speaking," but rather "Am I listening?"

ILLUSTRATION:

The story is told of a man who decided to become a monk, so he signed up with a monastery that took its vows of silence seriously. The head monk told him he could not speak a single word for 5 years. However, after 5 years, he would be permitted to speak two (and only two) words.

After 5 years, the head monk called him in and said, "You are now permitted to speak your two words, so choose them carefully and speak what's on your mind. But remember: only two words. The monk said, "Food bad!"

The head monk reminded him he could not speak another word until his next 5 years was reached. In his 10th year, the head monk summoned him and told him it was time for his two words, so he should choose them carefully. The monk said, "Bed hard!"

The head monk again reminded him of his vows to remain absolutely silent for the next 5 years. At the end of those 5 years, he was again sent for and given the opportunity to speak his two words. The monk said, "I QUIT!"

The head monk looked up and said, "Well I'm not surprised. All you've done since you've been here is complain!"

Solitude can create the opportunity for silence and in our silence we create the platform to listen.

ILLUSTRATION:

The market place is replete with books on how to listen. Why, because listening in a sea of voices it perhaps one of the most difficult activities our 21st century minds can engage in.

- The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships (Paperback) by Michael Nichols
- Listening: The Forgotten Skill : A Self-Teaching Guide (Wiley Self-Teaching Guides) by Madelyn Burley-Allen
- Effective Listening Skills by Art James
- The Good Listener by James E. Sullivan
- The 7 Powers of Questions : Secrets to Successful Communication in Life and at Work by Dorothy Leeds
- Wisdom of Listening by Mark Brady

Throughout the Bible the audience is often called upon to hear God. The idea behind hearing is to listen intelligently, to obey what is heard.

Listening in the Old Testament

The occurrence of the word is too numerous to examine every reference in the Old Testament, but by looking at just the Psalms and the book of Proverb we can get a sense of the word as it refers to the idea of listening.

Ps 34:11 Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

Ps 45:10 Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house;

Ps 49:1 Hear this, all ye people; give ear, all ye inhabitants of the world:

Ps 50:7 Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify against thee: I am God, even thy God.

Ps 66:16 Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.

Ps 81:8 Hear, O my people, and I will testify unto thee: O Israel, if thou wilt hearken unto me;

Ps 143:8 Cause me to hear thy lovingkindness in the morning; for in thee do I trust: cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee.

Pr 1:5 A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels:

Pr 1:8 My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother:

Pr 1:33 But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.

Pr 4:1 Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding.

Pr 4:10 Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many.

Pr 5:7 Hear me now therefore, O ye children, and depart not from the words of my mouth.

Pr 7:24 Hearken unto me now therefore, O ye children, and attend to the words of my mouth.

Pr 8:6 Hear; for I will speak of excellent things; and the opening of my lips shall be right things.

Pr 8:32 Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways.

Pr 8:33 Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not.

Pr 8:34 Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors.

Pr 12:15 The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.

Pr 13:1 A wise son heareth his father's instruction: but a scorner heareth not rebuke.

Pr 19:20 Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.

Pr 22:17 Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge.

Pr 23:19 Hear thou, my son, and be wise, and guide thine heart in the way.

Pr 23:22 Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old.

Listening in the New Testament

The New Testament counterpart is equally prolific. I would like to note the idea as found in Mark 4:3 and 19. Jesus calls His audience to “listen” to what He is about to say. Verse 19, in addressing the problem of a soil type, states it in the following words:

19 but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

Notice the items listed,

- the worries of the world, and
- the deceitfulness of riches, and
- the desires for other things

It is these things that “enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”

Because of these things entering in, we are not listening and thus the Word of God is unfruitful in our lives. By entering into the wilderness with Jesus we are seeking to intentionally “listen” to Him in order that “the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things” would be silenced and that we would more carefully be hearing what the Holy Spirit is saying through “the written Word of God, creation, and our conscience.” I put those three in their proper and primary order.

How important is it to be listening?

ILLUSTRATION:

Sam, a dispatcher for a national moving company in Philadelphia, gave Mike, a new driver, an assignment to go to Portsmouth to make a household goods delivery.

When Mike arrived in Portsmouth, he called Sam for further instructions. As Sam gave Mike the necessary information, Mike got a strange feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Mike asked Sam for the complete address, which was Maple Street in Portsmouth, Virginia. Well, Mike was in Portsmouth, but it was Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Mike was ten hours away from where he was supposed to be. He had traveled north in the wrong direction.

In his haste, Mike didn't listen to all the information that Sam gave him, and Sam neglected to get accurate acknowledgment from Mike stating that he understood the instructions. <http://www.itstime.com/apr2000.htm>

May God help us to use our solitude in order to listen to and for His voice in and through His revelation?

The second immediate consequence to solitude is . . .

b. Solitude provides the opportunity to slow down

There are several passages of Scripture that speak of this intentional quieting for the purpose of communing with God.

- In Exodus 14:13 God calls His people to stop trying to figure out their own deliverance and start resting in His.

Ex 14:13 And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you today: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more for ever.

- God will do what He wants with what is His. Because this is true, we must rest (Ps. 46:10).

Ps. 46:10 Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

- Because God is in control, we need not worry about the prosperity of the wicked (Ps. 37:7).

Ps 37:7 Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

- Our resting in Him is an affirmation that we can't, but Jesus can (Ps. 62:5).

Ps 62:5 My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him.

Solitude allows us to slow down. **The tragedy of our present pace is that we believe we are making great progress but are unaware that we are in a freefall and we do not even know it.** We need to slow down.

The third immediate consequence to solitude is . . .

c. Solitude provides the opportunity to think

Ps. 4:4 Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah.

In the book of Psalms we find the word “Selah” used in 71 verses. Selah is often left un-translated, but it carries the idea of pause or to reflect.

Thomas A. Edison, “The best thinking has been done in solitude.”

Henry Scougal notes how a means of begetting a holy and divine temper of spirit is through “a deep and serious consideration of the truths of our religion, and that both as to the certainty and importance of them.” (The Life of God in the Soul of Man, 118). He goes on to say, “Our thoughts must dwell upon them, till we be both convinced of them, and deeply affected with them.” (119)

"The detachment from the confusion all around us is in order to have a richer attachment to God. Christian meditation leads us to the inner wholeness necessary to give ourselves to God freely." Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline, 2nd ed. (Harper, 1988), p.21

Consider with me Luke 10:38-42.

This is one of the most pointed passages in the Word of God as it relates to working versus worshipping. Pagan theology works for God believing that through such efforts God is pleased and thus dispenses favor proportionate to the amount of effort exerted. There can be no rest for there is no finish.

It is a tragedy that has visited and continues to visit the world of Christendom. We have so skewed God and biblical worship that many of us side with Martha and view Mary as having a free loading non-productive welfare state faith.

Yet the passage is intentional. Mary sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His word (v. 39). She had a listening grace. Martha’s distraction is set against Mary’s ease of presence. Martha wrestled and Mary rested. The word distracted in verse 40 speaks of dragging a burden, of being twisted by anxiety. Our Lord notes this in verse 41 when he comments on Martha being worried and bothered. Martha’s struggle manifested itself in her face and body language. Her statements to our Lord communicate the idea that she pounced on Him (v. 40). She charged Him with wrong doing. Her agitation blinded her to the inappropriateness of her actions. There is a danger in serving our Lord from a motive that lacks purity. *If we serve for merit, we have gained nothing. If we serve from love, we lose nothing.*

Our Lord’s response to Martha overflows with compassion. Can you not hear it, “Martha, Martha.” There is deep tenderness in His voice. He speaks her

name, “Martha, Martha.” She perhaps thought that through her actions God would love her more or be more approving of this willing and humble servant. Yet, God’s love for and approval of either one was not rooted in their actions, but His grace. He did not accept them because of their actions, but because of His. He did not approve of them because of their actions, but because of His.

Our Lord establishes precedence in this small and short paragraph. “Only one thing is necessary.” Only one thing, not these ten things, but this one thing. How many times do we find ourselves overextended spiritually, financially, physically, and emotionally? How many times do we find ourselves trying to live 26 hour days? How many times do we clutter the simplicity of Christianity with rituals and laws?

Yet, how many times have we laid hold of “this one thing?” When was the last time we simply sat at the feet of Jesus? Sat and listened to Him? What Martha did was not bad, but it was only good and her good took the place of the best. And because the good had replaced the best, the good became the eternal enemy of the best.

There is hidden within the text and interesting thought.

In verse 39 the Greek text suggests that Martha also was prone to sit at the feet of Jesus. Martha was a Mary but became distracted by the good and robbed herself of the best. Many of us have started well but because of “the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter[ing] in, [the Word is choked], and it becomes unfruitful” (Mark 4:19).

Many of us started out like Mary and through time have ended up like Martha. Perhaps today God will grant to us the ability to enter with Jesus into the wilderness and find our place of solitude.

APPLICATION:

I am inviting us to join Jesus in the wilderness. I would invite you during this week to seek opportunities for solitude in order that . . .

1. You might find time to listen to and for God through His revelation.
2. You might find time to slow down and see God in and through His revelation.
3. You might find time to think on who God is, what He has done, and who you now are in His Son.
4. I would also encourage each of us to set aside a period of time each day, if for only 15 minutes, where we seek to quiet all of the voices in order to hear and see Him. This might be simply going outside and sitting alone with nothing around you that is creating noise.
5. I will suggest that we set aside specific time to read the Word of God, to pray, perhaps to fast from food and/or other items that would be of

- a secondary nature like hours spent in front of the TV or computer that are not work related. But even here, work must fit into its proper place. Being a workaholic is not a virtue. Anytime we have the appendage “-aholic” attached to a word, we are running from something. Perhaps this time can be used to restore and strengthen relationships that are either fractured or have been weakened.
6. We must somehow create intentional pockets of time where we remove ourselves from the distractions around us both externally and internally.
 7. May it please God the Holy Spirit to provide for us a clearer vision of God and His work in us and through us to those around us.