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John 1:19-29, ESV.

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

The Wilderness.

To Americans, the world within which Jesus, the Apostles, and John the Baptist lived is very small. Interestingly, despite its relative compactness, because so much time has passed, we have difficulty finding locations for many of the places referenced in Scripture. Consider John the Baptist. All four Gospels describe John the Baptist. Matthew, Chapter 3 says that John is in the "wilderness", which in biblical Greek is the word "erēmos", "of Judea". Matthew says that people come to John from "Jerusalem and all of Judea and the whole region of the Jordan". Mark,

Chapter 1 simply says that he is in the “wilderness” or “erēmos”. Luke, Chapter 3 says that John can be found in the “wilderness”. The most precise statement comes from the Gospel of John. Religious leaders of the day ask John the Baptist this: *“Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”* ²⁶ John answered them, *“I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”* ²⁸ *These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.* As near as we can tell, Bethany across the Jordan was just north of the Dead Sea, and a tiny bit east of the Jordan River. Jerusalem is to the west and slightly south. The Sea of Galilee is far north along the Jordan River. John the Baptist didn’t just baptize people in the wilderness: he lived there. He survived on wild honey and locusts. The Gospel of Matthew tells us this, and that he wore a garment of camel’s hair. John the Baptist wasn’t the only biblical figure who spent time in the wilderness. Moses led the Chosen People in the wilderness for 40 years. They had to rely on manna left by God - and an entire generation grew up there.

Let’s step back and look at a theme that appears over and over in Scripture: spending time – and not easy time – in the wilderness. While “erēmos” is typically the word that we find for wilderness in the Greek New Testament, there are other words in the Bible that translate to wilderness. Together, various forms of the word

wilderness appear almost 300 times in the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, in the Pentateuch, we see the word “midbar”. Another word that is translated as wilderness in our Bible, but can also mean desert or steppe, is “arabah”. The Chosen People were called Hebrews when they were slaves in Egypt, then Israelites in Canaan, which became Israel, and then they became known as the Jews. This is according to the biblical story, and while it is true that the real genetic history of modern Jews is more complicated, there is no question that throughout the history of the people of the Bible, the wilderness has been an important part of their story – and an important metaphor. While Jesus lived in Nazareth, and we associate Paul with his hometown of Tarsus, and while Moses was born in one of the earliest sophisticated cultures, that of Egypt, and Joseph rose to prominence in Egypt, all of these biblical figures, and many more, spent important, formative time in the dry, rocky, wilderness where food was very scarce.

Consider Jesus. Before he even began his ministry, he spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness, hungry and thirsty, being tempted by Satan. When it was over, he needed rescuing by angels. Here is something that Paul says in Galatians (and I have edited this): ¹¹ *For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel.* ¹² *For I did not receive it from any man, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.* ¹³ *For you have heard of my*

former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia. ¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem. The subtlety is that while Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness and Jesus spent 40 days and nights, Paul spent three years in the wilderness of Arabia after encountering the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Only then did he head back to Jerusalem to begin his ministry.

Consider Joseph. We read about him in Genesis. He was one of the sons of Jacob, and out of envy, his brothers try to kill him. Here is what we read in Genesis Chapter 37 - and again I have made slight changes: *Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸ They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." ²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²² And Reuben, one of Jacob's sons, said to them, "Throw him into this pit here in the wilderness.* There's that word again. How

did Joseph's brothers try to kill him? By abandoning him in a pit in the *wilderness* where no one would find him. There's more to this, though, than the mere fact that they tried to kill him in the wilderness. Let's look at just one more reference to the wilderness in the Bible.

This one is more poetic than literal. Job. Remember that Job is a wealthy man with a huge family, a big estate, and extensive livestock. He is blameless and upright. He serves as a priest for his family. Just in case any of his ten kids has sinned, he sacrifices a burnt offering for each of them every single morning. But then God allows Satan to test Job, and his life is destroyed. Job gets robbed and loses his animals and servants. Fire falls from the sky, torching his property. An enemy army attacks and kills more of his people and animals. A mighty wind comes along and blows his house away, killing all of his children. Job suffers mightily, but his response is that he came into the world naked, and that he will leave naked, and that the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. He blesses the Lord to the end. Job then gets infected with a flesh-eating disease. His wife wants him to curse God, but he says no. Job decides that he must talk to God personally. God reminds Job that he, God, has all power over creation, and that he, God, is wise and knows what he is doing. Job agrees. God blesses Job. Here is a passage from Job, Chapter 1. It begins with the words of a human messenger

who has arrived to give Job some bad news: ¹⁹ *Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you.* ²⁰ *Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground to worship.* ²¹ *He said, "I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The LORD gave me what I had, and the LORD has taken it away. Praise the name of the LORD!"* ²² *In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God.*

Moses was tested for 40 years in the wilderness and Jesus was tested for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Paul went physically into the wilderness before he could emerge as the Great Evangelist to the Gentiles. But what about Job and Joseph? It's interesting that we're told that Joseph was left in a pit in the wilderness to die and that Job's home was destroyed, and all his children were killed by a wind coming from the wilderness. Those facts aren't necessary to the stories. Job's wind could simply have swept in from somewhere, and Joseph could have simply been tossed into a pit in the middle of nowhere. The notion of a wilderness is stated explicitly for a reason. The wilderness is a known metaphor with which the Chosen People, the readers of Scripture, would be familiar. The wilderness suggests something unwanted, threatening - and it may therefore serve as a place of trial. In the case of Job and Joseph, we're told that they went

through periods of trial, but to nail the concept down, to make sure the readers of Scripture didn't miss the point, the wilderness is mentioned in their times of trial. It's a deliberate literary reference, a powerful metaphor. You don't need to personally spend 40 years or days in the wilderness, or even remember that the number 40 is indeed a biblical numerological device for a period of extended trial. All you need is the wilderness to be associated with what you're going through – and you know that your faith is being tested and that you will emerge stronger.

That's why people, in particular Christians, often refer to "wilderness experiences". It doesn't mean you went camping and got lost in the woods or got sick from whatever you cooked up. For many people living today, with Covid, an extreme political and social divide, a war in Europe, dramatic inflation, investment markets turning south, their world is one big wilderness experience. On top of that, people are facing the normal challenges of sickness and concerns over loved ones. Many of us are indeed having wilderness experiences. We feel bombarded with small and big, close to home and remote, wilderness experiences.

But the Bible tells us something more. A wilderness experience isn't just a period of intense testing. It may not even be bad. It can be a very good thing to have a wilderness experience happen to us. It's when we're suddenly cast into the wilderness that we make connections with God. The People of God, throughout

the Old and New Testaments, lived with the threat of the wilderness. They were always right on the edge. God promised them land and God gave them land. To make sure that the People of God kept their side of the bargain, that they maintained their covenant with God, God went ahead and gave them a very challenging place to live. You will always be surrounded by the wilderness, he seemed to be telling them. Hundreds of times in the Bible, we hear that word “wilderness”: “erēmos”, “midbar, “arabah”. Sometimes I think that as Americans, while we’ve been blessed with a much easier world to live in, and it seems like such a beautiful gift, maybe we’d be better off if we were more constantly reminded of the proximity of the wilderness. Maybe we wouldn’t have to wait for the markets to tank or for riots in the street or a loved one to develop a dangerous illness.

When we are in the wilderness, we turn to God. We strengthen our faith. We learn to persevere. We get the opportunity to see God answer our call. We learn to keep our minds on God throughout the day and to weave God into our daily lives. If the wilderness were a literal thing, like a waterless, rocky desert with almost no life in it, and if it was always right out there, within view, maybe it would be easier. It might be that God recorded the wilderness stories of the Chosen People in Scripture so that we could experience what they lived with every day – and that is the threat of the wilderness that surrounded them. When we read

wilderness stories in the Bible, we turn to God – and that prepares us for the day when we find ourselves in the wilderness. We can grow in our faith without even having to experience our own personal wilderness experiences.

That is one of the most beautiful things about Scripture. It allows us to learn in a way that in one respect is vicarious, but in another is deeply personal. This is the key reason why studying the Bible is such a powerful and important experience. I have been in the wilderness of southern California. It's called the Mojave Desert. Once, I went camping there with three guys I know. There were some scraggly yuca trees, but the place was almost shade-less. We pitched our little tents in the sun, slathered ourselves in sunscreen and managed to survive for three days in the summer. I have never drunk so much water. But while sitting in the sparse shade of a rock outcropping, I thought of the People of God, living every day of their lives in a place like that, conquering it and making it their home. Not just their home – but the home that God had personally given them. I feel the same way when I read about biblical characters confronting their own wilderness experiences and reaching out for the hand of God to guide them. Please pray very briefly with me.

God, thank you for the wilderness of the Bible. Thank you for the wilderness experiences in our lives. We grow closer to you, we strengthen our faith, and we become far more confident as humans made in your image. Amen.