

**Not long ago, I began planning a book on the suffering of God's saints.** I've wanted to encourage Christians about the Lord's faithfulness to His people in the midst of their trials. Since then, many readers have written to me, testifying of how God has given them grace in their times of suffering. One woman wrote of an enduring physical trial:

"Twelve years ago, my husband and I retired from our jobs, and God thrust us into the nations as missionary evangelists. During that time, we traveled to more than thirty countries. We often ministered in terrible circumstances, but the Lord always kept us in good health and graced us with supernatural strength.

"Then last March, I was attacked by an unknown disease that is especially virulent. We'd seen this affliction touch multitudes of the people we ministered to, in remote regions. It causes pain and swelling in the hands. The exact cause of the painful swelling in my joints could not be identified by a number of specialists; however, they merely scratched their heads in bewilderment.

"I cried out to God, but the heavens seemed silent. The whole time, I never felt His presence near me. I spent a lonely nine months in a wilderness of pain and uncertainty. By December 1999, the pain had taken its toll on me physically and mentally. I was exhausted and could hardly sleep. And I was losing ground spiritually. Those were some of the darkest days of

# You Don't Have to Die In Your Wilderness

my life. I didn't know if I would see the new century.

"Then one morning, I woke to bright sunshine flooding my bedroom. I realized I'd slept through the night for the first time. My first thought was, 'I don't have any pain.' I was afraid to tell my husband. I kept waiting for the pain to return, but it didn't.

"I realized that while I'd been sleeping, God had been at work. And I sensed He'd told the devil, 'Enough is enough.' Now a year has passed, and I'm still free of all pain. My doctor's records have these words written on them: 'mystery miracle.' I have more strength than I've ever had before. I came out of my wilderness leaning on the arms of my beloved Jesus, and trusting His Word."

It is faith-inspiring to read testimonies like this one, as believers emerge from their wilderness trials rejoicing in God's faithfulness. They speak of awful pain, testings, calamities, tragedies, trials that never seem to end. First their hopes are raised, then they're dashed. They experience sudden bursts of supernatural strength, but then they're overwhelmed by dreadful

fear. And nagging questions flood their minds: "Why has this calamity come upon me? Is God judging me for some past sin? Why aren't my prayers being answered? I've fasted and prayed but heard nothing. Why?"

They may have wavered in their trial, ready to faint. But through it all, they kept their faith. How? They allowed their sufferings to drive them to their knees. As a result, their confidence in the Lord only increased. They came out of their wilderness with a testimony of God's goodness and power to deliver.

I tell you, I've never heard of so much suffering among God's people. My wife, Gwen, and I have been astonished at the letters we've read. We keep saying to each other, "Have you ever read anything like this? This person's suffering is unimaginable."

People describe being stricken with awful, life-threatening diseases. Families are in turmoil, with husbands and wives divorcing, children rebelling and turning to drugs. Others write of being in mental or spiritual wilderness. They face depression, fear, anxieties of all kinds. Some

carry the weight of financial burdens and mounting debts. And now their stress has driven them into a wilderness of despair.

A man who lost a loved one in a tragedy writes, "I shudder every time the phone rings. I wonder, 'Is it more bad news?' All it takes is one call."

A godly woman writes of receiving such a call. She says, "We're a strong, Bible-believing family who attends church regularly. At the time of our trial, our three beautiful boys were ages 7, 3 and 14 months. My awful phone call came on August 25, 1996. My husband had fallen 35 feet from a roof he was replacing.

"He required surgery to repair a broken femur and elbow. The last thing he said to me before the operation was, 'Tell the boys I love them, and I'll see you all in the morning.' But during the surgery, the doctors had trouble. By morning, my husband was comatose.

"My faith told me he was resting, and that in time he would be back with us. But thirteen days later - after many procedures, a transfer to the best hospital, and a state-wide prayer chain - the Lord took my husband home.

"Everything had seemed to be going so well for us. Then suddenly, our world crashed down. Jesus never said Christians wouldn't have to face tribulation, did he? Now, in raising three boys alone, that has been proven to me.

"Yet, through this, my boys have a desire beyond compare for heaven. Not only do they have a Father God waiting in heaven, but they have their earthly dad waiting there, and it has changed their lives. We praise God now that He has taken their saved dad to heaven. It's a goal for all of us someday."

This woman emerged from her wilderness also leaning on Jesus' arms. Yet many Christians never seem to find God's comfort, solace and strength. Let me ask you: How have you faced your

wilderness trials? Perhaps you're enduring one right now.

Maybe your wilderness is a deep depression. You dread getting up each day because a dark cloud continually hangs over you. Your constant cry is, "Lord, help me. I can't take this any more." When you go to church, you do your best to put on a smile. But deep down, you've been through hell. You've fasted, prayed, sought the Lord for days, weeks, months. But God doesn't seem to be answering your prayer.

At times, we all end up in a wilderness. I could write a book on the many desert-like trials I've endured in my lifetime. Yet some Christians refuse to accept that wildernesses inevitably come to us all. They think such talk indicates a lack of faith. I know of one pastor who told his congregation, "My faith has immunized me from harm. I've bound up all pain and calamities in Jesus' name. I simply refuse them all."

I don't wish harm on anyone, but without question this man is headed for a wilderness. His belief simply doesn't line up with scripture. David writes, "*Save me, O God; for the waters are come into my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.*" (PSALM 69:1-3).

The Bible makes it clear: Even the godliest among us endure deep wilderness trials. The question is, how will we come out of them? We can be sure our wilderness experience is going to work changes in us. After all, it's only in the wilderness that our faith is put to the fire. So, is your present trial changing you for better or for worse?

#### **You Testify of Having Faith, But How Did You Obtain It?**

What foundation is your faith built upon? Scripture tells us faith comes by hearing, and that God's Word gives us "*spiritual ears,*"

enabling us to hear (see Romans 10:17). Well, here's what the Bible says about the wilderness experiences in our lives:

- "*Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up... Hear me, O LORD; for thy lovingkindness is good... hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in trouble...*" (PSALM 69:15-17). Clearly, waters of affliction flood the lives of the godly.
- "*For thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried. Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins... we went through fire and through water...*" (PSALM 66:10-12). Who brings us into a net of afflictions? God Himself does.
- "*Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word... It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.*" (PSALM 119:67,71). This verse makes it perfectly clear: It's good for us - it even blesses us - to be afflicted.

Consider the Psalmist's testimony: "*I LOVE the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications... The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow. Then called I upon the name of the LORD; O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.*" (PSALM 116:1-4). Here was a faithful servant who loved God and had great faith. Yet he faced the sorrows of pain, trouble and death.

We find this theme throughout the Bible. God's Word loudly declares that the path to faith is through the floods and fires: "*Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters...*" (PSALM 77:19). "*Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth... I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.*" (ISA 43:19). "*When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt*

*not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.*" (ISA 43:2). *"For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee."* (ISA 41:13).

This last verse holds an important key: In every wilderness we face, our Father is holding our hand. Yet only those who go through the wilderness get this hand of comfort. He outstretches it to those who are caught in raging rivers of trouble.

A reader on our mailing list has written a powerful book on suffering. Her name is Esther Hunter, and the book is titled *Joy in the Mourning*. Esther wrote to us recently of a fierce trial she endured. She and her husband had flown from their home in Arkansas to Manitoba, Canada, to bury Esther's ninety-year-old preacher father. All twelve of that godly man's children had come to honor his life at his passing.

Esther's siblings and their families squeezed into five cars to drive home from the funeral parlor. But along the way, a vicious blizzard fell, causing a whiteout on the road. In the midst of the storm, the lead car got separated from the others.

Esther and her husband were riding in the second car. Up ahead, they say that an awful accident had occurred, with two cars smashed up horribly. Esther is a nurse, so her husband pulled their car over to offer help. As they approached the scene, they realized to their horror that one of the cars was the lead car in their procession. An oncoming car had tried to pass a truck in the blizzard and had smashed into it head on.

Esther looked into the wrecked car and saw her sister, her four-year-old nephew, and two of her brothers lying inside. She pulled out her nephew, who was rushed to a hospital. Esther then pulled out her sister, who soon died in her arms. Her brothers were already dead, having died on impact.

Esther's little nephew survived that horrible wreck. But no one in the

family would ever forget the indescribable scene on that cold, lonely road. All the while, their father lay in a casket at the funeral home. And their mother, who was afflicted with Alzheimer's Disease, never knew anything about the tragedy.

For two years, Esther wandered through a wilderness of grief and confusion. She was continually overwhelmed by tears. She carried questions, guilt and a horrible burden of "what ifs." She spent hours on her knees praying and searching God's Word. She was desperate to find just one ounce of comfort and healing from the awful tragedy.

One day, as Esther walked along a river, she picked up a stone. She scratched on it the words, "I can't carry this load." And she realized, "I can't blame myself anymore." Then she threw the stone into the water. At that moment, God lifted her burden.

Esther emerged from her awful wilderness leaning on Jesus' arms. And she had a powerful testimony: "My Father does all things well. With my loving Father, there are no accidents." She had truly found joy in her mourning.

#### **Some Christians Want to Rip the Book of Job From Their Bibles.**

Some believers can't deal with the fact that Job was a righteous, holy, beloved man of God who suffered awful calamities. I say to those Christians: It is impossible for us to know true faith unless we can look straight at Job's troubles and say, "God allowed all of those things to happen to Job for a purpose."

Yes, God permitted the taking of Job's children. He allowed the loss of Job's health, his possessions, and his reputation. Job was disgraced at the hands of his so-called friends. Even his own wife mocked him. And his body bore horrible sores.

This man lived with unbearable pain and sorrow of heart. Look at him amid the ruins of his life: feeling forsaken, crushed with grief,

the heavens seeming to repel his prayers. Job spent dark, sleepless nights, and terrible, painful days. His pain was so great, he asked the Lord to take his life. Yet, throughout it all, God still loved him. Indeed, Job was never more precious in God's sight than in the midst of his trial.

It was in Job's worst hour that the Lord gave him a life-changing revelation of Himself. He personally led Job out of his wilderness. And Job emerged with an indomitable faith, testifying, *"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him..."* (JOB 13:15).

By contrast, some believers come out of their wilderness bitter and angry. Their trial changes them into doubting, hardened, inconsolable despisers of God. *"Zion said, The LORD hath forsaken, and my Lord hath forgotten me."* (ISA 49:14).

I've seen suffering Christians turn completely against the Lord they once loved. They accused God of forsaking them in their time of need. So, in turn, they forsake all prayer. They lay aside their Bibles. And they no longer go to church. Instead, they carry a terrible anger and resentment against God.

I know a minister whose faith was rocked by a death in his family. This man had thought his faith protected him against all calamities. Then, when tragedy struck, he was devastated. And he turned against the Lord completely. His friends were shocked by his hardness. He told them, "I don't ever want to hear the name of Jesus mentioned again."

Tragically, some believers die in their wilderness. This is what happened with Israel. Except for faithful Joshua and Caleb, an entire generation of Israelites - a people miraculously delivered from Egypt - wasted away in the terrible, howling desert. They died full of doubt, grief, agony, pain. Why? They refused to trust in God's sworn Word to keep them in their time of trouble.

The Lord had promised them, *"Dread not, neither be afraid... the*

*LORD your God which goeth before you, he shall fight for you... The LORD thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son... (He) went in the way before you, to search you out a place... to shew you by what way ye should go..."* (DEUT 1:29-33).

Yet, read what happened to that doubting, hardened generation: *"The space in which we came... was thirty and eight years; until all the generation... were wasted out from among the host... For indeed the hand of the LORD was against them, to destroy them... until they were consumed."* (DEUT 2:14-15). God waited until the very last one died before he even spoke again to Israel: *"So it came to pass, when all the men of war were consumed and dead... that the LORD spake..."* (DEUT 2:16-17).

What caused this generation to die in the wilderness? It was the same two reasons that Christians die in their own wildernesses today:

### **1. They Never Accepted God's Love For Them.**

All through the Israelites' trials, God tried again and again to convey his great love to them. But they wouldn't accept it. They simply didn't believe that their testings sprang from His love. Instead, the people said over and over, "If God loved us, why would he bring us out here to the desert to kill us? Why would He allow us to suffer so?"

Here we see the root of all unbelief: an unwillingness to believe and rest in God's love for His children. Yet, the whole reason God chose Israel to be His people was because of His love: *"Because (God) loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed [you] after them... The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people... but because the LORD loved you..."* (DEUT 4:37,7:7-8). Israel was told, "God didn't choose you because of anything special about you. He chose you simply and solely because He loved you." Consider:

- Why wouldn't God allow Balaam to curse Israel? *"The LORD thy God... turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the LORD thy God loved thee."* (DEUT 23:5).
- Why did God put Israel on the spot at the Red Sea? He wanted to see if they would trust in the love of their heavenly Father. He was wondering, "What kind of a Father do my people picture me to be? Do they really believe I love them enough never to allow them to fall into the enemy's hands? Do they rest in my ironclad promises to see them through any circumstance? Do they know I'll never abandon them, even if things look dark and hopeless?"
- Why did God lead Israel to the bitter waters at Marah? Once again, He wanted to extract from His people some evidence that they believed in His love for them. He wanted to know if they trusted Him to quench their thirst because of His great love.
- We see yet another testing when Israel was on the brink of the Promised Land. Twelve men were sent to spy out the land. But ten of them came back with an "evil report." They claimed Israel would never be able to take the land, because it was filled with giants, fortresses, great walled cities, obstacles too daunting to overcome.

How did the people react to this report? Once again, they cried out in fear and unbelief: *"We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we."* (NUM 13:31). They were saying, in essence, "Our enemies are stronger than God's love for us." They accused the Lord of abandoning them in their time of need, and leaving them to their own devices. And they spent the whole night complaining, crying out, "I wish I were dead. Why has God put us in such a hopeless situation?" The apostle Stephen said of

these people, *"...in their hearts, [they] turned back again into Egypt."* (ACTS 7:39).

Once again, we see that in every crisis, the Lord assured His people, "I've loved you faithfully." Yet, each time, they allowed their obstacles to cloud their knowledge that God loved them.

Think about it: If we believe, accept and trust in the love of our heavenly Father, then what is there to fear? I've learned, for example, that if I truly rest on God's love for me, I don't have to fear being deceived. If I'm truly His - if I believe He carries me in His loving arms - then He'll never let the devil or any voice mislead me.

Nor do I have to fear sudden calamity, or taking a fall, or the prospect of an uncertain future. My loving Father won't allow anything to happen in my life, except those things He has determined beforehand are best for me and my loved ones. No matter what my problems may be, He's going to unravel them and make a way for me. The God of love can perform miracle after miracle on my behalf, if I will only trust Him.

This enables me to face hard times, fiery trials, even death. I know that through them all, my Lord will share my pain, and my tears will be as precious as gold to Him. He won't allow my trials to destroy me. He'll always be faithful to make a way of escape for me.

You may wonder, "But don't we mess up our own lives, with our bad decisions? Don't we bring chaos on ourselves because we get out of God's will? What about all the foolish things we do that entangle us?" I assure you: If you'll simply trust in God's love, repent and cling to Him, He'll clean up all your messes. He turns our ashes into beauty.

### **2. They Were Blinded to God's Delight in Them.**

Our God not only loves His people but delights in each one of us. He takes great pleasure in us. And He's actually blessed in keeping and delivering us.

I see this kind of parental pleasure in my wife, Gwen, whenever one of our grandchildren call. Gwen lights up like a Christmas tree when she has one of our dear little ones on the line. Nothing can get her off the phone. Even if I told her the President was at our door, she'd shoo me away and keep talking.

How could I ever accuse my heavenly Father of delighting in me less than I do in my own offspring? At times my children have failed me, doing things contrary to what I'd taught them. But never once have I stopped loving them or delighting in them. So, if I possess that kind of enduring love as an imperfect father, how much more does our heavenly Father care for us, His children?

That's why I find this scene with Israel's spies so baffling. Time after time, God had proven His love to His people. Yet on every occasion, they refused to accept it. Finally, Joshua and Caleb stood up in the midst of them and cried, *"If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it to us;..."* (NUM 14:8). What a simple yet powerful declaration. They were saying, "Our Lord loves

and delights in us. And He's going to vanquish every giant, because He delights to do it for us. Therefore, we mustn't look at our obstacles. We have to keep our eyes on our Lord's great love for us."

All through the Scriptures we read that God delights in us: *"Such as are upright in their way are his delight."* (PROV 11:20). *"The prayer of the upright is his delight."* (PROV 15:8). *"My strong enemy (was)... too strong for me... but the LORD was my stay. He brought me forth into a large place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me."* (PSALM 18:17-19).

In this last verse, we discover the great truth that Israel missed: "He delivered me, because He delighted in me." No matter how strong our enemy may be - no matter how devastating our fiery trial, or how hopeless things appear - our God will deliver us. Why? Because He delights in us!

God had made His love to Israel abundantly clear. That's why He could ask His people, *"Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God?"* (ISA 40:27). He was saying,

"How can you say I haven't seen your trial? How can you ever believe I don't delight in you? I delighted in my servant Job, all through his horrible experiences. And I am delighting in you right now, in the midst of your hard times."

It is absolutely imperative that we believe - quickly, firmly, today - that God loves us and delights in us. Then we'll be able to accept that every circumstance in our lives will eventually prove to be our Father's loving will for us. We'll emerge from our wilderness leaning on the loving arms of Jesus. And He'll bring joy out of our mourning.

Dear saint, don't look at your mounting bills. And don't try looking into an uncertain future. Your part is to trust in your loving Father's covenant promises, and to lean on His great love for you. You're going to come out victorious, because He's holding you in His loving arms.

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