

A 6-WEEK BIBLE
STUDY EXPERIENCE

A WAY IN THE



WILDERNESS

KRISTEL ACEVEDO



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *A Way in the Wilderness* by Kristel Acevedo.

Copyright ©2025 by Kristel Acevedo.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



InterVarsity Press

Copyrighted content.



CONTENTS

Introduction • 1

How to Use This Book • 3

WEEK 1

The Wilderness • 7

WEEK 2

The Wilderness of Oppression • 31

WEEK 3

The Wilderness of Sin • 55

WEEK 4

The Wilderness of Distraction • 83

WEEK 5

The Wilderness of Despair • 107

WEEK 6

The Wilderness of Temptation • 135



InterVarsity Press

Copyrighted content.

THE WILDERNESS

Group Session

In our introduction, we describe the wilderness as a season of life in which you feel disconnected, lost, hurt, or confused. It is a season of spiritual dryness that can feel particularly harsh. Today I want to focus on the story of John the Baptist and look closer at the verse that challenged my perspective about seasons in the wilderness.

VIDEO

Watch the opening video.



OPENING ACTIVITY

People have used many words to describe wilderness experiences. These include:

- harsh
- lonely
- unintended
- dry
- terrifying
- hopeless
- barren
- desolate
- confusing

Take a moment to identify a wilderness season in your own life. It could be one you are currently experiencing or one you experienced in the past.

1. What difficulties, challenges, or heartaches brought you to the wilderness?

2. What words from the list above best describe your wilderness season?

During the rest of the week, we'll take a closer look at the life of John the Baptist. But for today we'll focus on the verse that changed my perspective on our wilderness seasons.

REFLECT

Luke 1:80 says, “The child grew up and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.”

What does it mean to be strong in spirit? Spiritual strength is not about digging deep or pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Instead, it is reliance on and alignment with the Holy Spirit—it's a resilience that develops when we trust God to do the work in and through us.

3. Think of someone you know who is spiritually strong. What is an example of their spiritual strength?



4. In what area of your life do you tend to rely on your own strength rather than on God's strength?

Learning to rely on God's strength requires that we learn to trust God's character. Consider these words that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah:

This is what the LORD, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the LORD of Armies, says:

I am the first and I am the last.

There is no God but me.

Who, like me, can announce the future?

Let him say so and make a case before me,
since I have established an ancient people.

Let these gods declare the coming things,
and what will take place.

Do not be startled or afraid.

Have I not told you and declared it long ago?

You are my witnesses!

Is there any God but me?

There is no other Rock; I do not know any. (Isaiah 44:6-8)

5. List the titles and characteristics of God included in this passage.



6. What is God uniquely capable of accomplishing?

7. What reasons does this passage give us to “not be startled or afraid”?

8. How could recognizing God’s strength transform our perspective on our own spiritual strength?

9. What might God want to refine in you through the wilderness?



10. How is God preparing you now for the next season of your life?

In the coming days we will see how John the Baptist knew and lived with this conviction—that his strength came not from himself but from God.

PRAY

As you end this time together each week, I encourage you to spend some time in prayer:

Heavenly Father, our Rock and Salvation, the wilderness is not a pleasant experience. You know the pain we feel when wandering through it. We know, however, that you are with us in the wilderness. Not only do you give us your presence, you also give us your strength. Help us to walk in the power of your Spirit whether we are walking in the wilderness or sitting in the sanctuary. In Jesus' name, amen.

If time allows at the end of each group session, I encourage you to share with one another any prayer requests and bring them to our faithful and trustworthy God in prayer.



DAY 1

To move forward, it's important to look back. We touched briefly on John the Baptist's parents in the video, but let's take a deeper dive today.

READ & REFLECT

Read Luke 1:5-24

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, both came from the priestly line of Aaron. They served God faithfully and humbly, and yet they remained childless. In this era childlessness was seen as a curse. Why God had not blessed them with children was beyond their understanding. At their age, however, Zechariah and Elizabeth probably expected no change in their situation and had learned to live with it.

Walking through infertility can be its own wilderness. While infertility may not carry the same stigma it did in biblical times, it's still frustrating and can cause women and men to feel that something is wrong with them. If that is your story, I grieve with you and I pray you would know your worth whether you have a child or not. I pray for supernatural comfort as you navigate this season of your life.

Zechariah is performing his priestly duties when he has a supernatural experience. An angel appears and delivers an incredible message.

Read Luke 1:5-17

- What do we learn about Elizabeth and Zechariah in verses 5 and 6?



- What is foretold to Zechariah by the angel?

- What is the significance of the angel's message for the people of Israel?

This is a pretty big deal! Not only will there be a child in their sunset years, but the child has a significant responsibility.

- How might have Elizabeth's and Zechariah's years of waiting for a child prepared them to raise a child with such a unique calling?



We can probably understand Zechariah's skepticism in his response to the angel: *How can this be? My wife and I are way past our prime.* Essentially, Zechariah is demanding a sign from the angel since he cannot comprehend how this message makes any sense.

Sometimes when we look at our circumstances instead of our God, we forget what is possible. Our circumstances may be limiting, but our God is limitless.

Indeed, Elizabeth does conceive and gives birth to a baby boy! And then when the baby is eight days old and Zechariah confirms that the boy's name should be John, Zechariah shares a prophecy. This passage is often referred to as Zechariah's song (Luke 1:68-79). As you look closely at this song, you'll notice that Zechariah makes declarations about God and about the new child.

- Think about your current circumstances—especially something that feels hard. What would it look like to view that circumstance through the filter of our God instead of the other way around?

Read Luke 1:57-79

- What does Zechariah declare about God? List those declarations below.



- In verses 76-79, he turns his attention to John. What is John's calling?

There had been no prophet among the Jews for centuries. Not only had Zechariah and Elizabeth dealt with unfulfilled longing in their childlessness, but the whole of Israel had been experiencing unfulfilled longing in their hunger for a Messiah. Now the time had finally come, Jesus was on his way, and John would be his hype man.

John would not save people because he didn't have the power to do so, nor was it his assignment. But he would call people to repentance and tell them about the One they had been waiting for, the One who could and would save them.

- As you consider times of waiting in your life, think of the people who stuck with you during those seasons. What truths did they remind you of? What disciplines did they invite you to practice? In what ways did they encourage you?

PRAY

End your time today in gratitude for the people in your life who have stuck with you in the wilderness seasons.



InterVarsity Press

Copyrighted content.

The prophet Israel had been waiting for was hanging out in the wilderness. Maybe locusts are more delicious than I imagine, but that doesn't sound like an easy life. And his message was not an easy message: repent. *Repentance* is another word for turning or changing course. John's message was that Jews were going the wrong way—following the wrong things—and that they needed to turn toward God.

At my church, we often say that baptism is an outward expression of an inner transformation. Coming from a Roman Catholic family, I was baptized as an infant. I can't say I remember anything about that day, but I have seen pictures. My mom and dad were present along with my godparents, my Tía Nubia and Tío Henry. Tía Nubia held me in her arms as the priest poured water over my head.

Later, in high school, I began to consider my faith more seriously. I had been attending a Protestant church with friends and the topic of baptism came up. At first, I resisted any invitation to be baptized because I had already done that. I didn't want to reject my parents' baptism by having a "do-over." Over time, as I read Scripture and had conversations, I became convinced of the validity of believer's baptism by immersion. At the age of eighteen, after much prayer and discussion with my parents, I made the decision to be baptized again. The way I see it, my decision to be baptized affirmed my first baptism—a commitment from my own heart and mind to pursue Jesus, which is the desire my parents had for me all along.

- Getting baptized at age eighteen was my decision to repent and commit to following the way of Jesus. How might God be calling you now to repent and follow the way of Jesus?



DAY 3

Today I want to look at John the Baptist’s story from a different vantage point—that recorded in the Gospel of John. Here we see a dispute arising from John’s followers. They’re upset because Jesus has begun his ministry and is also baptizing people. Rude! Doesn’t he know that’s John’s deal?

READ & REFLECT

Read John 3:25-30

- How does John describe his role in relationship to Jesus?

John 3:30 includes a statement from John the Baptist that is frequently quoted in churches and youth groups. In fact, when I was a teen my own youth group had T-shirts with this phrase printed on the back: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

- Thinking about the relationship between John and Jesus, why would John “decrease” and what might that have looked like for him?



- If making room for Jesus to “increase” is the goal, what might it look like for you to “decrease”?

Decreasing can be difficult for those of us who get our sense of worth by increasing. But remember that before John the Baptist began his ministry, before he was even born, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. This filling helped him keep his eyes on his assignment. Although we are not told many details of John’s upbringing, I can imagine that as he grew his parents reminded him of the words the angel spoke. I can imagine that as he walked the wilderness, this infilling of the Spirit helped him to remember his assignment and fulfill it.

Read Matthew 3:4-10

- How does verse 4 describe John?



- What did he tell the powerful Pharisees and Sadducees to do?

Following his assignment in the wilderness was not for the faint of heart, yet John, filled with the Spirit, remained steadfast in his ministry. When we partner with God in ministry, we too must choose to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. How do we tap into that Holy Spirit power? By slowing down. Taking a beat. Listening. Immersing ourselves in Scripture. The still small voice? That's it.

When partnership with God brings us to the wilderness, we again must choose to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. When others are confused about our assignment or try to change it, we choose to remain steadfast in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are all called to ministry in some way, whether we work for a church, a bank, a law firm, or full-time parenting. We are each called to be ministers in our spheres of influence. When we take that calling seriously, we will experience adversity—we will have wilderness moments. And we can tap into the Holy Spirit power the same way John did. This is the essence of spiritual strength—reliance on and alignment with the Holy Spirit—and there is no better place to develop this strength than the desert.



PRAY

Occasionally in this study I will ask you to read and reflect on a psalm. The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 works of Hebrew poetry. The actual book of Psalms is further divided into five books filled with prayers and praises that were used in corporate worship. Furthermore, there are different categories of psalms. There are psalms of praise, psalms of thanksgiving, psalms of remembrance, and even psalms of lament.

These psalms, or prayers, were intended to guide worshipers. Have you ever felt like you don't have the words to express your feelings to God? The psalms can guide you in articulating your distress and then point you toward celebrating God's goodness and power.

As we end our time today, take a moment to breathe and focus on these words from the psalmist. Imagine John the Baptist praying these words as he ate locusts in the wilderness. Imagine him praying these words in the morning before a full day of baptizing people. Now pray it one final time for yourself.

God, create a clean heart for me
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not banish me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore the joy of your salvation to me,
and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach the rebellious your ways,
and sinners will return to you. (Psalm 51:10-13)



BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/a-way-in-the-wilderness



InterVarsity Press

Copyrighted content.