

# FORMED *to* LEAD

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HUMILITY

CHARACTER

INTEGRITY

— and —

DISCERNMENT

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## ENCOUNTER

### The Word Arrives in the Wilderness

*Lord, I pray that this chapter might illuminate ways you reveal yourself in the wilderness, raising leaders' hopes for your movement in difficult places. Holy Spirit, open leaders' hearts especially in places of desolate experiences, that they might perceive your voice. And Father, please invite some leaders into the cultivated wilderness of consecration to listen closely for your word.*

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At thirteen years old I had built my teen identity around athletic performance. My confidence was rooted in athletic success and the recognition that came with it. Then I experienced debilitating knee injuries lasting nearly three years and requiring multiple rounds of surgery. My confidence was shaken. I was heartbroken and, though I did not understand it at the time, I experienced a crisis of identity and vocation. In the depth of my depression, I did not know what to do or who to be. My world became a wilderness.

How often do we look for God in our dreams of success, vindication, or dominance? Do we look for him in power and control? In security or comfort? In confidence and answers? In policies and positions? Leaders are especially drawn to look in these directions. We like moving forward, looking for redemption and progress. And yet . . .

perhaps God is more likely to reveal himself in the wilderness of our experience than the promised land of our wishes. Perhaps we will find him more in questions than answers, more in challenge than comfort, more in longing than victory, more in arduous travel than in arrival at our destination. The truth is, God meets us more in our humility and weakness than in our pride and strength.

Paradoxically, formation is abundant and rich in the wilderness but often dry and scarce in the oasis. But in order to receive the formation God offers us in the wilderness, we need to first believe he will arrive there, and then learn to pay attention in specific ways.

### WILDERNESS IN SCRIPTURE

Luke 3 begins with the word of God arriving to John the Baptist in the wilderness. We know from Luke 1 that John was a special, remarkable child with a miraculous birth story. And from Luke 1:80 we know he lived in the wilderness for the first thirty years of his life. In Luke 3:2 we find that the word of the Lord came to him in a particular year. It seems that John had to wait for all of those thirty years before the word came and his preaching began. John's waiting reflects the extended longing of the people of Israel after the final prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi. Four hundred years later, the word comes again to a prophet, and the crowd vibrates with expectancy.

The God of the Bible has a habit of showing up in the wilderness. Of course, he begins by walking with the man and woman in a garden, in the cool of the early evening under the trees. And occasionally he shows up in a city or a temple. But ever since men and women were banished from Eden, the Lord has visited his people in the wilderness.

Abraham entertains the threefold visitor in Genesis 18 while he sojourns in a tent along the road in a place called Mamre. "The God who sees" reassures Hagar in Genesis 21 as she shelters from the sun in the desert. Jacob wrestles with the angel of the Lord in Genesis 32 in a place where his only pillow is a rock. Moses meets the Lord, but not in the palace of Pharaoh where he grew up. After forty years of

shepherding in the barren land of Midian, Moses turns aside to look, and the Lord appears in a burning desert bush in Exodus 3. The exodus story forms a strong metanarrative for the people of God, who are delivered from slavery by God's mighty hand and then sojourn in the wilderness for forty years, awaiting the fulfillment of his promise of "a land flowing with milk and honey."

Both Old and New Testaments reflect on that wilderness journey as an ongoing metaphor for the sojourning people of God, liberated but also awaiting full deliverance. We came from a garden, and we are destined for the new Jerusalem, but in the meantime we walk with God in the desert as the liminal space between the home we have left and the one God is preparing for us.

Most notably, God's true revelation in history happens in the context of a wilderness that is political, social, and also natural. God anoints Jesus the Messiah out in the country, at the Jordan River, amid social, political, and religious controversy. In Luke's narrative, the wilderness is almost a character. John, the miracle baby with dramatic destiny, grows up in the wilderness and receives the word of the Lord there. Multitudes come out to be baptized by him in the Jordan, as if they are crossing along with Joshua from the exile of wilderness into the Promised Land. The heavens are torn open as Isaiah 64 anticipates, and the Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism. The Messiah is thus revealed not in Jerusalem but at the Jordan, in the wilderness. After Jesus' baptism the Spirit drives him again out to the desert to be tested as the people of God are tested between Egypt and Canaan.

The wilderness in Scripture is the place of testing, the place of longing and waiting, the place of suffering and survival. It is a place of isolation, a "lonely place," as Luke calls it later (5:16). The wilderness is the setting for the journey, but it is not the destination. Often it is a "trackless waste" (Psalm 107:40; Job 12:24) where we can find no path of direction or escape. We need divine help in order to be sustained in the wilderness and to be led out of it.

Yet the God of the Bible consistently reveals himself in the wilderness.



### THE WILDERNESS OF EXPERIENCE

During my season of depression as an early teen, my older brother Dan experienced a deep Christian renewal. As a university student, he encountered a bright and vibrant call to give his life away in forming others as disciples of Jesus. He brought that new life to his injured punk brother—and I was dazzled by the beauty and significance and reality of the way of Jesus.

The interruption of my life and the pain of my injuries were transformed by new vision. God met me in the midst of my desolation—not in spite of it or around it. In Jesus' call I found a path of leadership I could embrace with my whole heart. In Jesus I also found the first hints that there might be meaning and power in my pain.

Several years later I was reflecting on my life in preparation for a speech at my high school graduation. I remember the sense of shock when I realized I was grateful for those injuries, because God called me and completely reoriented my life in the wilderness of my teenage depression.

This formative movement from wilderness to renewal is not a one-time experience. Rather, God often speaks to us most powerfully when we feel the weakest. In my early forties I was granted a six-month sabbatical from my InterVarsity work as a regional director. For the previous seven years I had led InterVarsity's campus work in Northern California, Hawaii, and northern Nevada. I loved the staff and the work with my whole heart, and for those years I worked harder than I had ever worked. The region was in a healthy and growing state, and I knew I needed rest and perspective. I did not yet know the extent of healing I needed. I thought I just felt tired from the work.

Only when I slowed down did I discover that I was in a wilderness period. We moved our family to Oaxaca City in southern Mexico so that I could soak in Latin American spirituality while studying integral mission models and learning from a local mentor. In many ways it was a joyful sabbatical, and I'd jump at the chance to do it again. Our family experience was both challenging (with kids in fifth and seventh grade experiencing school in a new language) and also delightful.



As soon as we arrived, however, I began having disturbing dreams every night. These nightly dreams lasted for at least four of the six months. The pattern itself overwhelmed me.

In my dreams I found myself in situations and relationships from the past seven years, always in deep tension. Often in the dream I would respond to the relationship poorly—and when I awoke, I felt deep regret. I'm not usually a crier, but I often wept in my dreams, and sometimes wept as I processed them. Thankfully, because I was on sabbatical, I had time to process my dreams every day with prayer and journaling, and I also had time to make up lost sleep.

Eventually I realized a pattern in the dreams, and I began to sense the Spirit's leadership. Each of the dreams was revealing ways the pressures of leadership had deformed my soul. Sometimes the pressures caused me to react outwardly in a way I regretted. Other times the situation made me put on a mask and outwardly perform while in my heart I reacted poorly. I began to ask God to mend my heart and lead me forward. I offered to let go of my regional director role if that would allow me to have greater integrity. I asked God what he wanted from me, and through prayer, Scripture, and my spiritual director, God asked me back, "What do *you* really want?" That question was the Spirit coming to me in the wilderness of my experience. Throughout the next few months of prayer, I experienced a renewed sense of calling that included moving into a new role.

Most simply, I came to the conviction that whatever I did in the following years, my deepest desire was to love God more and receive more of his love. It sounds simple, but this conviction brought deep healing and a new sense of freedom to me. I thank the Lord for the ways he met me in the internal wilderness of my dreams and delivered me from toxic wounds and patterns I had not previously seen.

These experiences were not my preferred path. Given the choice, I would have met God in other circumstances, not in the injury, depression, and dreams that exposed my twisted soul. I would have chosen more of a journey of strength and victory.



And yet on reflection, the painful experiences better align with my Christian theology. God is a generous Creator who empowered human beings with a cultural mandate to steward the earth and its inhabitants, reflecting his character by creating and influencing. We humans rebelled and broke fellowship with God, also damaging our relationship with each other and all creation. Now in the in-between wilderness, sojourning toward the redemptive re-creation of all things, our stewardship and creative action is intermingled with repentance and healing. By grace through the incarnation and the cross, we are rescued from slavery and invited to join the redemptive process around us while we are being redeemed. So God reveals himself in our weakness and pain, and through that revelation draws us to reveal him to the world.

### **ATTENTIVENESS IN THE CULTIVATED WILDERNESS OF CONSECRATION**

Isaiah offers an invitation:

See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness

and streams in the wasteland. (Isaiah 43:19)

Often my answer to Isaiah's question, "Do you not perceive it?" is "No, I don't." In order to perceive the Spirit of God in the wilderness of our experience, we must pay attention in a certain way. I like to call it consecration: setting ourselves apart for God, ready to hear his surprising word, ready to witness his work. Consecration is a way we can practice recognizing and receiving the presence of God in difficult places. Disciplines like fasting, prayer, solitude, and silence are examples of consecration, where we intentionally hone our abilities to pay attention to the movement of God's Spirit while we quiet the other appetites that might distract us.

Our scene in Luke 3 on the banks of the Jordan River recalls another consecration, recorded in Joshua 3, where the people who have



wandered in the wilderness for forty years are asked to set themselves apart. It happens at the same location—on the banks of the Jordan. After consecrating themselves, they are commanded to pay close attention to what God has done. The crossing of the Jordan is enacted as a clear echo of God’s deliverance of his people at the Red Sea and also a reference to God’s deliverance of his people in the first Passover. Church liturgies for baptism remember the scene in Joshua, the crossing of the Red Sea, the baptism of Jesus, and our own baptism. We find ourselves in the very same narrative.

At the Jordan of our own baptism (and every time we remember our baptism or celebrate one), we are called to set aside time and space, remember how God has moved in the past, look for his current movement, and trust in his deliverance.

God invites us to pay particular attention in situations of weakness or pain.

The long history of Christian contemplative traditions, especially that of the desert mothers and fathers, invites us to intentionally practice solitude, silence, and prayer as exercises of listening for the Word and looking for the Spirit in an internal wilderness or desert. Henri Nouwen summarizes this vision of contemplative consecration well in *The Way of the Heart*. He envisions that all our words can flow from an abundance of silence, all our relationships can flow from an abundance of solitude, and all our actions can flow from an abundance of prayer. As a leader, wouldn’t you like your words, relationships, and actions to emerge from this kind of depth? Do you know anyone who seems to draw from a deep well of wisdom and maturity?

Unfortunately, I find that leaders are especially bad at the practice of contemplative consecration. We presume that we must make things happen, so we busy ourselves with action. Then when wilderness experiences come, we often feel threatened, embarrassed, or ashamed because we expect ourselves to perform well all the time. Our sense of responsibility accelerates under stress and we begin to overassociate the state of our soul with the state of our work.



Our activistic and self-protective instincts, in fact, present grave dangers to our souls in wilderness times. Idolatries and compulsions become easy drugs to ease our pain. Idolatry emerged for the Israelites in the wilderness, when they felt pressure and fear. Like narcotics, these idolatries and compulsions lead to addictions, and they snowball into toxic situations where leaders become distant, abusive, ashamed, or divided in character.

We as Christian leaders need to learn to stop, be still, and listen—especially in times of desolation. Carlo Carretto says, “God’s call is mysterious; it comes in the darkness of faith. It is so fine, so subtle, that it is only with the deepest silence within us that we can hear it.” I am grateful that in my own life I was given opportunities to stop and reflect. When I finally reflected on my teen experience while preparing a speech, God revealed the treasure of redemption that was hidden in my pain. In a sabbatical, God made space where I could listen to my disturbing dreams and find his deeper invitation for the next phase of my life.

I try to build regular rhythms of stopping and listening into my life. I find that when I build the rhythms into my schedule, I sometimes need to adjust them. But if I don’t build them in, I never experience them. I also find that what brain scientists and innovation researchers say is true: rhythms of rest, movement, and listening help us to produce better insights, more original ideas, and deeper reflections. I believe this is true because the Holy Spirit usually moves in the wilderness. Here are a few of the rhythms that cultivate a wilderness of solitude and listening in my busy life:

- Daily: I take about fifteen minutes at the end of the day to notice where God has been present and moving in my life, and I say thank you. In the mornings, I take at least thirty minutes to reflect on Scripture and pray.
- Weekly: I take a twenty-four-hour *sabbath* where I choose not to work, and I also try to practice activities that will rest and renew my soul.

- Monthly: I take one day a month for a full-day prayer retreat. Sometimes it is focused on Bible study, other times on prayer or reflection. At least every other month I meet with a spiritual director.
- Quarterly: I try to take a longer silent retreat about three times a year where I'm away for two nights. This helps me catch up on rest enough to find a deeper state of quiet in my heart and mind.
- Annually: With my ministry team I take a weeklong Ignatian prayer retreat each year. The retreat takes place in silence but includes a conversation with a spiritual director once a day. Each time I experience this retreat I find God speaking into deep areas of my life and history that need healing and transformation.
- Every seven to ten years: I have had the privilege of a sabbatical lasting multiple months. These have always been times where God renews my calling and shapes my future.

Please don't be intimidated by the long list of practices here. I find I need them all, perhaps because I am such an action and control addict—or perhaps because I'm so deeply in need of God's care and healing. Consider for yourself, though: what one rhythm of consecration would best help you encounter God in the wilderness of your experience? Consider the concrete option described in the practice that closes this chapter.

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### PRACTICE: THREE-HOUR RETREAT OF SILENCE

Find a day where you can reserve three hours for silent prayer, rest, and contemplation. If possible, arrange a place where you can be relaxed and uninterrupted. I'm offering prompts and time frames below as a guide, but feel free to adapt them as needed. If you need rest, then take a brief nap. If the Spirit leads you to a different passage or reflection, follow the Spirit's lead.

#### **PREPARATION (30 MINUTES)**

When you arrive at the time and place, start by slowing down and noticing. Take note of the feelings in your body, as well as your



emotions and thoughts. Consider writing those down in a journal. Sometimes writing things out helps us let go of distractions and begin to focus. Intentionally offer everything you have noticed to God. It may help to spend a few minutes breathing deeply and praying in rhythm with your breath:

Inhale: "Lord, I'm here."

Exhale: "Lord, I offer myself to you."

Inhale: "Lord, I'm here."

Exhale: "Lord, please speak to me."

(Repeat.)

### **REMEMBRANCE (5-15 MINUTES)**

Spend a short time remembering a time when you felt close to God or had real joy. Savor that memory. Write down as many of the details as you can. Give thanks to God, and continue remembering.

### **SCRIPTURE (30-60 MINUTES)**

When you feel that you're ready, read Isaiah 40:1-5 slowly a few times. Note what stands out to you and what makes you curious. With the passage from Isaiah in mind, consider journaling about one or more of the following prompts:

- Reflect on a challenging "wilderness" time in your life. What made it challenging? Tell God what the experience was like and ask him to speak tenderly to you about it. Wait and see if you sense God speaking to you in response.
- Ask the Lord how he wants to use that wilderness experience to "prepare the way" for you to meet him. God does not intend pain for his people, but he sometimes uses difficult experiences redemptively to meet us. Wait and see how God may respond.
- Ask the Lord how he may want to reveal his glory, as in verse 5. Listen and notice how he might respond.

### **RELAXATION (30-60 MINUTES)**

Go for a walk if you're able, or just observe the setting around you. Ask God to speak to you as you relax and move or observe. Don't force yourself by trying to be profound—just open yourself to God and notice what beauty or truth he may want to reveal to you. As you



relax your mind, you may notice God speaking to you out of your reflections on the Isaiah passage or in other ways. Just take note of what you sense and thank God for it. You may also notice tensions or anxieties coming up. If so, just gently hold those before God and ask God to speak comfort to you.

**CONCLUSION (15-30 MINUTES)**

When you return to your place, read over Isaiah 40:1-5 once more and write down what you are hearing from God. Ask him for what you need in order to be faithful to him. Give thanks and ask if he has anything else to say to you. Take note of what you may hear.

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