



InterVarsity Press
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Taken from *Enough for Today* by Donna Barber.

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Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com



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Introduction

LIVING ON MANNA

JESUS SAID TO THE BAPTIST, do this thing that I'm telling you to do. It may not make sense. It doesn't seem right or fitting, but do it anyway. In doing so you will fulfill all of what is right. And the heavens opened and the Father spoke and the Spirit descended. Hallelujah!

The next thing we know, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The road to freedom and new life is often through the wilderness. The road through the wilderness begins with the waters of baptism and death. Dying to what was and can never, should never, be again. Dying to the slave that we were.

For many of us the past years have felt heavy with the plagues of illness and dying, anger and violence, fires and wrath. And numerous pharaohs, from the church house to the courthouse to the White House, have risen up to withstand the move of God toward freedom and new life for his people. But YHWH will not be denied.

We often talk about “clinging desperately to life” and “letting go” in death. The road through the wilderness begins with baptism, dying, letting go of the trauma and hurt of the past. As we are plunged down into the waters of our own death, we must let go of the slave that we were—of slave thinking and doing and ways of



being. We close our eyes, take a deep breath, and release ourselves into the strong, capable hands and arms of the Baptizer.

In one full swoosh the water covers us, like the dirt of the grave. A moment later we come up dripping with the waters of new life. Our eyes open, we find our feet beneath us, and we take in that first breath. Now strong hands reach down to pull us upward and out, and the water that rolls down our cheeks mixes with the salty tears of joy. Then often, like Jesus, we step out of the pool or onto the banks of the river and into the wilderness.

More than twenty-five years ago, I drove out of the city of my birth and rebirth, Philadelphia, and into the wilderness of Atlanta, Georgia. I didn't know where I was headed. I didn't realize what lay ahead. Still, the road to my freedom began on the I-95 south interstate highway.

For a follower of Jesus, the wilderness is a place of testing, a special place where our identity as the people of God is established. It is the period when we are questioned by the enemy and the world and even ourselves on who we are and what we believe. It is a place of trial and temptation, discomfort and thirst. It is a place between. Between death and resurrection, between the inhale and the exhale. Between Egypt and the Promised Land.

The wilderness can also be a time apart when we are separated from comfort and familiarity. The people and landmarks we know have fallen away and the way ahead is unclear. When we packed our children and all we could carry into the back of a minivan and headed south, we were giddy and excited to begin the new adventure. But when we arrived in our new city, eight hundred miles from our old life, there was no party or friends to receive us. Our new "home"



was littered with trash and boards covered the windows. Our van was soon stolen and the people we came to join were all away on vacation. We spent our first nights angry and disoriented, sleeping on bunks in the basement of an empty building belonging to the new “ministry” we came to serve. Wilderness.

The protests and marches over the years have led many through the path of a vast sea that cannot be recrossed. We have left the work and ways of a colonized life and faith on the other side, but the fertile land of promise appears still a long way off in the not yet. So, we are left in this present wilderness of now. Mud on our feet, dust in our mouths, arms tired and backs sore.

The whole congregation of the Israelites [grew discontented and] murmured and rebelled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the Israelites said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate bread until we were full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this entire assembly with hunger.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will cause bread to rain from heaven for you; the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, so that I may test them [to determine] whether or not they will walk [obediently] in My instruction (law).” (Exodus 16:2-4)

Two and a half months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites entered the wilderness. With their food and energy depleted, they began to grumble and complain. The suffering and oppression of Egypt had faded in their minds, and many began to long for the good old days



of slavery where at least they could count on the overseer's food. Instead, God himself provided food for his people, raining down manna, bread from heaven, each morning. Just enough to nourish them for the day. Through this small prescribed act of obedience, the Lord began to shift their thinking and their dependence from humanity to the living God. They had to lie down each night storing nothing for the future other than a growing faith in the one who promised to provide.

There is no map for the wilderness, no street signs or rest stops with snacks. No Siri with a clear indication of how long it will be or how far you have yet to go. But in the wilderness, stripped of our distractions, we remember or discover our God. Divorced from the empire's daily rations, we must look to God to be bread. We can welcome that dryness that we feel in our throats knowing that Jesus said within us we carry a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

I do not know the boundaries of your wilderness, when it began or how long it will last. But this book is meant to be a tool for your journey—a daily devotional pause for reflection to remind you of what is true and honest, just, pure, and lovely, and despite this present darkness, still worthy of praise. Many of us are familiar with the imagery of the wilderness as a place of testing. But it can also be, as we prayerfully traverse each section of this book, an invitation to discover God and calling, face our fears, and more deeply understand ourselves. It is an encouragement to look for a God who shows up in the pillars of cloud and fire and the burning bushes of our everyday lives to speak to, guide, and protect us. In this space between what was and what shall be, we must pause each day to read, pray, and drink from the well. For it is the sword of the Spirit, the



Word of the living God, that will prepare us for and take us through the days of testing ahead.

When the journey becomes too much, perhaps we find ourselves in the wilderness like the prophet Elijah. Thankfully, our God provides manna for days like these, and it will be enough.

Then the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Get up, and eat, for the journey is too long for you [without adequate sustenance]. So he got up and ate and drank, and with the strength of that food he traveled forty days and nights to Horeb (Sinai), the mountain of God. (1 Kings 19:7-8)

Arise and eat.

Part One

DISCOVERING GOD



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AS ABBA FATHER

The Spirit Himself testifies and confirms together with our spirit [assuring us] that we [believers] are children of God.

ROMANS 8:16

SUPPOSE I WAS FORTUNATE to grow up, for the most part, in a two-parent home. My parents met, married, and then separated and reconciled many times over the course of my childhood. My dad was complicated. A black man, born in the twenties and raised in the South with an eighth-grade education. He entered the army in 1943 during World War II. Then, after receiving an honorable discharge, he returned to eventually meet and marry my mother and settle down in the northern city of Philadelphia. He ended up finding work as a weaver in a local textile mill. He worked hard five days a week and partied in the local speakeasy throughout the weekend.

He was not warm or affectionate toward me. But I suspect now, through my grown-up understanding, that perhaps his life did not allow him to be. Still, I think I desired some form of meaningful



connection with him. Instead I settled for the occasional walk with him to the neighborhood deli to pick up a “cold one,” my short legs scrambling to match his long stride.

Other than this and the financial rewards I received for my straight-A report cards, I felt largely unseen by him. He reserved most of his energy for his gruff interactions with my mother. She complained about money and he complained about her lack of cooking and unwavering devotion to the church. He was not what my child’s mind expected a father to be—protector, provider, loving comfort, or playful friend. I needed him to shape and affirm my beauty and character. To make me feel safe and loved. To tell me everything would be all right and to make it so. Unfortunately, broken, flawed, and limited by what appeared to me a godless life, he could not be what I needed him to be.

Thankfully, I met God as Father, the big, strong presence speaking to me through Word and Spirit of unconditional love. I met God as Father with promises of protection and provision that only he could fulfill. I met God as Father, a daily comfort and abiding peace for my worst days and my best days and all the excruciatingly hard and beautiful hours and moments in between. I met God as Father and found him to be the perfect, immutable parent I needed him to be.

Now, of course, I understand God in these more recent years in other forms and expressions. For God too is like a mother, the giver of new life and the Creator of all things. I am acquainted with the triune God, uniquely three in the divine One. And I recognize that God as Spirit is not housed in, confined to, or limited by human gender, masculine, feminine, or any other. I know that God was not

conceived or born like a man in time and therefore has no beginning and no end but is, was, and is yet to be. The Almighty.

I also acknowledge that for some, the image of God as Father feels foreign. It may conjure decidedly negative associations that tempt you to resist God or walk away. The gift of grace, however, is that while God may be consistent across a broad range of experiences and understandings (Creator, love, truth, etc.), God is also uniquely distinct to us as individuals in the express ways we need God to be. Which allows us to discover ourselves, remember ourselves, to be precisely who we were meant to be and to reflect that understanding to the people we encounter in our lives.

God revealed himself to that little West Philly girl as Abba Father, not because he was limited to that expression by any patriarchal colonial representation. I met God as Father for the same reason God showed up as a burning bush for Moses, an angelic army surrounding Elisha, and a bright light for pre-converted Paul. Because in the chaos of our daily lives, God in love appears expressly as we need him to be.



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