
Subject: Chapter 7: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians.

Dear Saints

Below please find Chapter 7 of Andrew Strom's book: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians. Please visit his web-site at <http://www.streetrevival.com/>. His e-mail is prophetic@revivalschool.com. You can also subscribe to their newsletter by sending an empty e-mail to anzac-subscribe@welovegod.org.

Enjoy!

Eben Swart

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHY THE 'WILDERNESS'?

The 'wilderness' is not a concept that is understood too well in Christendom, despite the fact that it is all the way through the Bible. From the book of Genesis right through Revelation there are clear references to the 'wilderness' as being something God often employs in His dealings with men. The pattern is undeniable.

But why does God use it so often? And why is a spiritual wilderness so necessary? What is its purpose and how does it change us?

When we look through the Scriptures we see that the wilderness is often a place of spiritual "crisis" and also preparation. It is the place God sends us before the "real action" begins - before we enter into the full purposes of God in our lives. There must be 'death' before there can be resurrection. There must be a desert place before the "promised land".

The wilderness is a place of trial and testing, of brokenness and full surrender to God. The props and activities that have kept us continually striving to "make things happen" are stripped away. Our self-reliance is shattered and replaced with a total reliance on God alone. Every "idol" in our lives (often including our own ministry) is brought under the piercing searchlight of God. Our selfish motives and ambitions are shown for what they are. This process may take years. Finally we emerge broken, chastened and purified. The process has matured and cleansed us in so many ways. We are now ready for the fulfillment of all that God originally called us to do. But our heart-motives are vastly different from what they were before.

We see this pattern all the way through Scripture. Many lessons can be learned from what we read there. Let's take a look at some examples:

From what we can tell, the original patriarch Abraham went through at least two major 'wilderness' experiences during his walk with God. The first was when he and his family set out from their homeland, "not knowing where" - on the long journey to Canaan. The second instance was a major spiritual crisis in Abraham's life - where his future and everything he believed in was at stake.

God had promised Abraham a son - that he would be the "father of many nations". Yet when Isaac, the son of promise arrived, God commanded Abraham to journey to Mt Moriah and sacrifice Isaac to Him! All of Abraham's hopes and dreams were represented in that little boy, and yet here was God commanding him to kill the son of promise! This is very similar to what many people find in their own wilderness times. It is almost as if they have to put to death their own dreams and even the callings of God on their lives. Yet at the very last minute, God stayed Abraham's hand and gave him a ram to sacrifice in Isaac's place. It was Abraham's faith and total trust in God that was demonstrated that day. His willingness to sacrifice all of his dreams and hopes to God was exactly the heart-attitude that God required.

Another example from Genesis is that of Joseph - a story that has 'wilderness' written all over it. Joseph was the favoured son in his family, and had been given dreams by God of his destiny as a great leader amongst his people. Yet little did he realize that the path to this destiny was one of betrayal, pain, rejection and imprisonment. In fact, an essential factor in this story was the jealousy of Joseph's brothers, who sold him into slavery in Egypt. If they had not done this, then it is doubtful that his God-given dreams would ever have come to pass. Even after Joseph got to Egypt the nightmare continued. He was thrown into jail for years, for a crime he did not commit. All this time, God was breaking him and molding him to be the great leader that he was to become. For it is only in the desolate places that God is able to do this deep preparation work.

Then all of a sudden after years and years, in one day Joseph went from prison to palace! Because of his God-given wisdom in interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh, Joseph was made Prime Minister over all Egypt - second only to the king. His years of waiting in the wilderness were over. A new season had begun. A season in which he would see every promise that God had given him fulfilled.

Probably the best-known instance of a 'wilderness experience' in the Old Testament is the story of Moses and the children of Israel. There are some important lessons in this one as well. We all know the story. Moses had been raised and trained all his life in the palaces of Egypt. But when he came face-to-face with his heritage as an Israelite, he rose up "in his own strength" and killed an Egyptian slave-driver. He was then forced to flee into the desert, where he was to spend 40 YEARS as a simple shepherd in the wilderness.

What an enormous length of time! Imagine if every Christian leader had to spend that long in the wilderness before God would allow them to lead His people! It is almost impossible to imagine the depths of despair and "death" to all his dreams and hopes that Moses went through during this time. In fact, after 40 years it is hard to imagine anyone being "deader" to the usual ambitions and temptations of leadership than Moses would have been. And what PATIENCE these years of waiting must have produced in him!

Again we see here the lengths that God will go to in the "preparation" phase of a leader. (-Though 40 years is unusually long). The isolation, the chafing, the crying out to God for deliverance - all play their part. Such an experience is almost irreplaceable. That is why God uses it so often. The hearts of driven men are so similar in so many ways, that God's "cure" becomes similar also! He will even shut us up in a kind-of 'prison' for a time so we cannot escape the process. It is that important. He does not want 'self'-oriented leaders shepherding his precious sheep.

After his 40 years of preparation, Moses returned to Egypt at God's command to lead His people out of bondage. This was the beginning of the entire nation of Israel's wilderness experience. For when they left Egypt the only way to their "Promised Land" was through the desert. Some commentators say that in a straight line, their journey could have taken just a few weeks or less. But because of their disobedience and fear, the vast majority of those who left Egypt were destined to die in the desert, never reaching the Promised Land. In fact, their wilderness journey ended up taking 40 years!

Now we need to take special note of this fact:- Not everyone who entered the wilderness survived it. In fact, multitudes perished there. The wilderness tried them and found them wanting. They went to the place of testing and failed the test. This is a pretty crucial fact to realize in our day also. Just because we are "called out" and enter a wilderness time, does not mean that we will embrace the dealings of God and respond appropriately. It is entirely possible to lose everything out there. These people lost out completely. Only their children came through to inherit the promises of God.

Centuries later we read of another pivotal leader in Israel's history - who also endured a very long and trying 'wilderness' process. This was David - the shepherd who was destined to be king.

David spent years literally running for his life from Saul, the existing king of Israel, who felt jealous and 'threatened' by David. The young man knew he was called to be king, but it was through great tribulation that he would come into the kingdom. David spent years hiding in caves and even in the villages of the Philistines to escape the envy of King Saul. 400 other outcasts joined themselves to him, so he had his own small army of 'rebels' to lead. God was training him to be a good leader. But it was a terribly taxing and frustrating period of his life.

You see, God could not afford to have another 'Saul' leading Israel. That is why he had to test and try David to such a degree. He wanted to ensure that he was a man "after God's own heart". This process took years and years.

One of the key tests that David faced was the test of "rebellion". At one time he had the opportunity to take the life of Saul very easily, and his men urged him to do so. If he killed Saul the kingdom would be his. But David would not raise his hand against Saul. He still regarded him as the "Lord's Anointed", even though it was clear that Saul had been rejected by God as king. David would not move to bring about his own destiny by chopping down the existing leadership. He would wait for God's hand and God's perfect time. This was a crucial test for David.

Eventually, when Saul was killed in battle, David did indeed come into the kingdom at precisely God's appointed time. Thus began a "golden age" in the history of Israel. And David's lengthy time of preparation in the wilderness stood him in great stead right to the end of his life.

But the Old Testament makes it clear that it was not just future kings or leaders that God trained in the wilderness. Most of God's prophets were usually prepared for their ministry in these places of isolation and desolation as well. Every would-be Elijah or Elisha of God must go through such times of intense spiritual training. And this is true not just of the Old Testament but also of the New. In fact, to this day, if there is one type of ministry that is most associated with the concept of 'wilderness' it is the "Prophetic" ministry. And I believe that there is a strong 'prophetic' aspect to a lot of what we are seeing with the Out-of-church movement today.

We could give examples of 'wilderness' experiences for many of the Old Testament prophets, for this seemed to be almost a universal thing that they went through. But I think that one of the most interesting prophets to look at is John the Baptist, the prophet who 'prepared the way' for the New Testament era. Jesus declared that, "Among them that are born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist." For John had always been destined to be a prophet - filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. And yet, after thirty years of preparation, the duration of his ministry was to be only six months! But what a six months it was.

John the Baptist was truly a 'wilderness' prophet in the most radical sense. During his preparation and training time we are told that he was hidden in the desert places until the time of his showing-forth came. Suddenly he arrived, as if from nowhere, with a piercing word of repentance on his lips. His sermons were amongst the most fiery of any prophet in history. "And there went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mk 1:5).

Not only were John's days of preparation based in the desert, but his entire ministry as well! He was a wilderness man in every way. And it was he who had the honor of baptizing Jesus - the promised Messiah.

It is important to remember that Jesus too went through a wilderness period just before His ministry began. As we all know, when he was baptized the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. "Then was Jesus led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Mt 4:1). This wilderness period was a time of testing and trial, of fasting for 40 days and nights, and of relentless attacks from the enemy. When Jesus had made it through to the other end, He was truly ready to begin His ministry. Thus, even in the life of the Savior of the world, the 'wilderness' was a crucial milestone.

The apostle Paul was another one whom God required to go through such an experience. He records that immediately after being converted and filled with the Holy Spirit, he spent time in Arabia (-a desert region) communing with God and did not visit the apostles in Jerusalem for at least three years. (Gal 1:17-18). This again illustrates how important it is for those with a special message from God to spend time alone with Him before showing themselves to the world. They must be made ready first. And that is what the wilderness is all about.

As we have seen, all the way through Scripture many of God's future leaders and spokesmen were sent into a place of aloneness and brokenness before being brought into their true destiny. We have not even mentioned heroes of God such as Noah, Joshua, Jacob, Job and others who all had similar experiences. Part of this process lies in the "waiting" that takes place. Also, the fact that all the supporting 'props' are taken away. The waiting alone can be torture.

The wilderness also deals with any fear of man or 'systemized' way of looking at things. God often uses it to bring a whole fresh perspective, which is very important for leaders who are going to be representing a "new" approach or facing opposition because of the confrontational words that they are bringing. The lonely desert years give them backbone to stand up to the crowd or the powers-that-be, and declare God's truth without compromise. They now truly fear God rather than man. And they think differently from others.

The wilderness is vital for anyone who is wanting to bring fresh manna to God's people.

Below are a number of interesting emails I received relating to this topic:

From: Scott (-USA):

We're quick to equate "The Wilderness" to a negative thing. I don't believe that. I believe that some of what God is getting ready to do, some of it can't be taught from the pulpit. The old expression, "It can't be taught, it has to be caught" plays a large part of this.

"And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and WAS IN THE DESERTS till the day of his showing unto Israel" (Lk 1:80). There was an order change getting ready to happen... John the son of Zacharias was not going to learn that TRUTH in his father's home, nor in church on the Sabbath. It was a revelation that came while John was in the wilderness. What God was getting ready to do, the move of God that was getting ready to unfold (Jesus) had to be taught somewhere outside of the influence and the order of that day.

I believe there is an order change coming to the church today, just like in the days of John. I don't mean some new order of salvation or grace. I mean in the church. We've produced a lot of stuff that Jesus didn't have anything to do with. I believe the change of order will bring God's order back to His people. And I believe that God has those that He calls sons in those "wilderness" places because He's getting ready to impart and deposit something into their hearts that quite possibly can't be taught in the church today...

I'm not saying that the church is all screwed up. I love the church. I attend every week. I believe those in the wilderness love the church as well. I believe they are there at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. There are things and truths that God is opening them up to that can't be taught within the 4 walls of the church right now.

In your article, you mentioned that "thousands are already opting out. And many feel like they are 'waiting' for something." I believe that! I believe they're there with expectation. Fasting, praying, listening for the voice of God. I doubt many of them even understand why. But just by gut level faith, they believe Jesus has said, "Come away."

You mentioned that it's not possible for them to stay away for ever. Agreed. I believe they will return and infiltrate the church. And bring with them a message and a revelation that will stagger us.

Obviously, there are those who will use "hurts, wounds" as reasons to walk away and not be responsible. Others are just plain lazy and carnal. But there are those who have heard the voice of the Master compelling them to seek his face and his heart outside the 4 walls of the local church.

From: Deborah (-Location unknown):

Many have left the 'system' and don't know why. In Egypt there were great demands on the Jewish people to 'work'. This is symbolic of the weariness that comes with 'works'. Performance based righteousness is extremely exhausting. Most have bought into the system unconsciously. I believe that God is calling many out from this 'belief system'... He is calling us out of 'Egypt'...

When He calls us 'outside the camp' it is celebration time. Why? I believe it is because He says it is time for deeper relationship with Him and for preparation. Preparation for what we are to face up ahead. The call outside the camp, just like it was for Jesus, is for us to die. It will be the best of times and the worst of times. The best of times because we get to have a deeper more real relationship than ever before with Him and be less bound by 'works'. The worst of times because what is not of Him must die. Ouch.

From: Hari (-Australia):

Like many others, I am sure, we have been warned of the precariousness of being in this situation of being 'alone' and therefore subject to being set upon by wolves (although sadly I have met more of the wolves within the church) and of 'forsaking the gathering together' of the brethren.

The wilderness is a place void of distractions and pomp and fanfare, a place where the Lord alone awaits you. It has been 5 years to date and during that time we have attempted to 'get back in' but somehow we keep getting shoved 'right back out'.... We are not embittered, we are not unsubmitted but we are disillusioned.

You have to sometimes be on the outside to actually see what is going on. To be of help to a man trapped in the pit you have to be outside in order to pull him out. Of course being 'outside' is in itself an open sore to those 'inside'. It brings to the surface many questions that simply will not lay down, that do not want to be faced.

But in this wilderness we have found Him and He alone has led and fed us and caused us to grow in such a way that a thousand lifetimes of church meetings could never achieve. Perhaps like John the Baptist we are all awaiting a call to come out and go into the cities (Lk 3:2) and like him we will be a people prepared to prepare the way for His coming...

Perhaps then the world will see something different, perhaps then we will once again be a people that 'turn the world upside down'.

Many of those who wrote to me had some very interesting things to say about their own 'wilderness' experience:

From: Christopher (-USA):

I was mentored by two large ministries and by 1996, became second in command of a ministry here that became a known entity in prophetic circles.

By late 1999, the Lord began speaking to me about idolatry to ministry. This was very hard for me because I had simply followed the "how-to's" of my mentors and had also given up a successful career in corporate USA to answer the "call" (as I had been taught). Then in November of 2000, the Lord Himself came to me and began a dialogue...

I was sitting in my blue office recliner behind the desk when suddenly I heard the voice of the Lord begin to speak to me in a very pronounced fashion. He said, "Chris, would you be OK if I told you that we are going to take a trip to the backside of the desert and in that place, all of what you have come to think of and know as normal will cease. There will be no meetings, no activity, no visibility. It will seem as if everything has come to a stop - but - what you will have is my manifest Presence." There was a brief moment of silence at this point and then He came back to me and said, "Chris, if all you have is Me and Me alone, would I be enough for you?"

As soon as Jesus finished asking this question, I immediately knew that the right answer was "Yes" but something in me prompted me to stop and think about the question and not

answer hastily. It was as if what I said was going to prophesy what would happen - and it would be set in motion immediately after I spoke it. For a brief moment, I contemplated what a "No" answer would be saying ("No, Jesus, You would not be enough. We desire the ministry more than we desire You") but this was so ludicrous that I was ready to answer His question even though there might have been a twist to it that I had not thought about. I knew that any ministry worth engaging in MUST always begin with and end with Jesus. So, I said "Yes Lord, You alone would be enough". There was another moment of silence and then He simply said, "OK". The intensity of His Presence left and I did not experience another visitation like this again until the end of June 2002.

One morning near the end of June 2002, I was sitting in exactly the same chair in my office working and the Lord again came to me as He had last November. Although it had been several months since the last "meeting", He spoke to me as if we were still engaged in our last conversation. He said, "Chris, if I had given you the things you thought you wanted in ministry, you would have come to despise them even more than you despised the aspects of business that you felt were competing for your time and hindering My call on your life - making it difficult for you to walk out what I had called you to do."

.... He said, "In the coming days, My people's greatest desire will be just to sit at My feet and enjoy sweet fellowship with Me. No longer will they have their passions wrapped around the things they do for Me. I will be their greatest passion. Then, I will say to this one, will you go and deliver this message to this group, and I will say to that one, will you go and help this one on the street who is in great need, and I will say to another, will you go and encourage this one who is My sheep. Because of their passion for Me, they will have no desire to leave their place at My feet but they will do as I ask out of their great love for me. They will all go and complete their assignments exactly as I instructed, but when they have completed what I told them to do, their only desire will be to quickly return to their place, sitting at My feet. Never again will they displace their passion for Me to those things that they do for Me. I alone will be their passion."

We have "come out" and I don't see us going back. And, I look forward to seeing what the Lord will now do because I do believe He is the One behind all this.

From: Nancy (-USA):

I have to say that I don't feel like I'm in a wilderness. Maybe I am and I just don't know it (ha). To me, wilderness is somewhere where God is not there. I don't feel that way at all. I talk to Him every day. He talks to me every day. I'm following Him to the best of my ability. I'm trusting Him to bring me into greater faithfulness to Him, greater dedication to prayer, greater love for Him. Sure, I love fellowship with people, but I had fellowship with people all the years I was in church. The only thing missing was God!

From: Rodney (-USA):

About 7 years ago I began to realize that I had spent my whole life as a so-called Christian living in some kind of sin or another thinking the whole time that I knew God. I suddenly realized my great need of Him. I begged Him for six months to do something for me. One day He did. In a moment he came and cleansed me and completely redirected my life. At that time I began to wonder why after so many years in the church I had never seen that kind of power. Loving God more than ever and yet growing more and more detached from the organized church. I have struggled with guilt, extreme loneliness, many almost sleepless nights and many other emotions because for several years I felt like I was the only one that felt this way. Let me emphasize, my love for God continuing to grow this whole time. He personally teaching me things that I never learned in the church. God had filled my heart with so many wonderful things and I so much wanted to tell people, and yet there just were not ears to hear.

The wilderness has been sometimes excruciating for my family and I. It was much easier in the old days living in ignorance, just playing the game. Many times we have thought maybe we just need to go back and get involved. When we go to a "church service" we are often overcome with grief or great sadness. In the last couple of years we have been meeting other people like us and now have fellowship with a dozen or so families like ourselves and know of many more. We do from time to time attend a church service simply because we feel such a love for people that we never had before and we want to be with them (even people we don't know), yet sometimes it takes a week or so to recover from the trauma. I might add, the church we are affiliated with, as far as churches go, is probably about as good as they come.

After now going through this for 7 or so years, I would not trade it for anything. Even in the tremendous wilderness and lonely times I was so sure that it was God doing all this that I would have bet my life on it. He has been so incredibly faithful and it seems now that we are out of the wilderness and we feel something is ready to happen.

From: Nikki (-USA):

Sometimes when you're alone, knowing of none or a few others - you do think you must be rebellious - but the times with God are so rich, deep and the growing roots so good - you know something about this is right. We are learning to hear, walk with and follow our Lord - in a very real and personal way. He has His reasons - and I know that I know - we will have no trouble hearing Him when He tells us to "March" - but it will probably not be into a building - but into a living temple of His children - each obeying a call they hear....

From: Donna (-USA):

I have been out of the church for several years - I occasionally visit somewhere - but I always hear by the voice of the Spirit, "No - this is not your home." I have known for quite a while that my Father has had a purpose in this wilderness experience and I will understand in due time. Lately I have come to understand that it is in the desert that the highway is prepared...

I do not know exactly what my Father has planned for me, but it is something far beyond anything I can imagine. I do know that there is a revelation of restored truth that is coming to many in the desert that soon will be released. All should be making the purchases of Revelation 3:18, particularly the eye salve. Not all things come by grace - there is a price to be paid by those who would overcome.

From: Shearon (-USA):

Politics doesn't belong in the church, choirs on parade don't belong in the church, hat day doesn't belong in the church, etc. We have gotten away from what the church is all about. Lord take us back.

I too have gone through a wilderness experience so I can relate to what they are going through. The wilderness isn't easy, we should all have one. The wilderness has a purpose, I thank God for my experience, I learned so much. But yes, you are right, there is a time to come out. You can't stay in the wilderness (yes, I wanted to). There is a time when God will send you out, like He did with Moses and His Son. It may be 40 days, it may be 6 months, or it may be 40 years, but you must come out. If not, what was it for?