In tonight’s message I want to talk to you about a common experience every Christian goes through in life, and that is the experience of going through “A Spiritual Wilderness.”

Do you ever go through periods in your spiritual life when you feel forsaken, confused, and isolated as though you have lost all sense of direction and don’t know which way to go?

Do you ever feel miserably and hopelessly trapped in a place you don’t want to be, and no matter how much you beg and plead with GOD to get you out of that unpleasant place, GOD responds with a deafening silence?

Do you ever go through periods when you seem to have lost your fruitfulness and effectiveness; times of spiritual dryness and darkness?

If you answered “yes” to any of those questions, then no doubt you have been through a spiritual wilderness, or perhaps you are going through such a wilderness right now.

When you and I go through a spiritual wilderness Satan will do everything he can to convince us that we have taken a wrong turn, or that God is punishing us, or that God doesn't love us; when nothing could be further from the truth.
When you carefully study your Bible, you will discover many of the great men of faith had “wilderness experiences” along their spiritual journey. Abraham......Moses........Joshua......David.....John the Baptist......Paul........and even Christ Himself spent time in the wilderness.

Read the writings of great preachers of the past such as Charles Spurgeon......John Bunyan....Dwight L. Moody.....and Oswald Chambers and you will discover all of them went through times of spiritual dryness and darkness.

If “wilderness experiences” are common to every Christian, we need to get a better understanding of just what these wilderness experiences are all about.

I would like to answer three important questions in this message. The first question is this:

I. Why Does God Lead Us Into The Wilderness?

Turn with me in your Bibles to Deuteronomy chapter eight, and let's read verses 1-5.

DEUTERONOMY 8:1-5 (NKJV)

1 “Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers.

2 And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

3 So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

4 Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.

5 You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the LORD your God chastens you.
1. One of the most important things you and I need to understand about going through a spiritual wilderness is that we don’t wind up in a spiritual wilderness by accident.

   None of us “wanders” into a spiritual wilderness on our own; we are led into a spiritual wilderness by God Himself.

2. Look carefully at the first part of verse 2 again......

   v. 2 And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness

   The Israelites didn't wind up in the wilderness because they turned right when they should have turned left after they left Egypt. They didn’t wind up in the wilderness because Moses was too stubborn to look at a map and got them lost.

   They wound up in the wilderness because God led them into the wilderness.

3. Right after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, Luke 4:1 (NKJV) says, “Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.”

4. When we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness our typical attitude is: “I don't like this,” “What have I done to deserve this?” “I want out of this wilderness now.”

   But it is very important for us to understand that when we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness God led us there!
5. But the question is: **WHY?** The answer to that question is very clear. Look again at **verse 2** of our text:

   v.2 And you shall remember that the **Lord** your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, **to humble you** and **test you**, to know what was in your heart, whether **you would keep** His commandments or not.

6. **GOD** gives the Israelites three definitive reasons why He led them into the wilderness.

   **(A)** First of all, **THE WILDERNESS IS A PLACE OF HUMBLING.**

   One of the greatest “pitfalls” in our spiritual life is **PRIDE.** Pride rears its ugly head in many different ways. Sometimes pride reveals itself in **arrogance** and **cockiness.** Sometimes pride reveals itself in **boastfulness.** Sometimes pride reveals itself in **self-righteousness** or **self-sufficiency.**

   The Israelites were “puffed up” with pride over being **God’s “chosen people.”** God led them into the wilderness to “strip off” every shred of pride and self-sufficiency they had. They had to learn that **God’s people are NOT a proud people, God’s people are a humble people.**

   God had led these people to a place where they couldn’t even find the most basic necessities such as food and water. They had to depend upon Him for everything!

   Look again at **verse 3**.......

   3. **So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.**

   (Remember when Jesus was in the wilderness He used that very last statement to refute Satan when Satan tried to get Him to turn “the stones into bread.”)
And that is exactly what GOD is trying to teach you and me when He leads us into a spiritual wilderness. Sometimes we become so proud, so self-sufficient, so self-righteous that we are of little or no use to GOD, and what better way to strip us of our pride than to knock all the props out from under us where we must depend upon Him completely?

(B) Secondly, THE WILDERNESS IS A PLACE OF TESTING.

It is one thing to “say” we trust in GOD, it is quite a different matter to prove it. GOD put the Israelites in situations in the wilderness where they had to prove how much they trusted in Him.

-When their bellies were hungry, they had to trust in GOD to supply them with “manna,” and later with quail.

-When their tongues were dry and parched, they had to trust in GOD to supply them with drinking water.

-When they were confused and thought Moses had led them on “a wild goose chase” they had to trust in GOD’S “pillar of cloud” to guide them by day.

-When they were fearful of an attack by enemies at night they had to trust in GOD’S pillar of fire for protection.

Every day in the wilderness was “a test” of the Israelite’s FAITH and TRUST in GOD.

Likewise, when GOD leads you and me into “a spiritual wilderness” He is testing our faith and trust in Him. It is easy to say we “trust” GOD when everything is fine and dandy in life, but the real proof of our faith and trust comes when GOD leads us out into the middle of a spiritual wilderness.
The real proof of our faith and trust in GOD comes when “the wheels are falling off” and “our world is crashing down around us.” The real proof comes when you are going through financial problems......or when you or a family member is going through health problems.......or after you have lost a loved one.....or after you have lost your job.

Will I quit or will I keep going? Will I retreat or will I forge ahead by faith? Will I wave the white flag of surrender or will I keep fighting the battle. Will I “tuck my tail and run” or will I stand up and fight like a man of GOD?

You will find your answer to those questions in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of TESTING!

(C) Thirdly, THE WILDERNESS IS A PLACE OF REVEALING.

It has been said, “Tough times don't make us, tough times reveal what we are made of.”

The wilderness revealed some ugly truths about what the Israelites were made of.

(a) For one thing, the wilderness revealed they were a COMPLAINING people.

*NUMBER 14 they grumbled and complained against the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

*EXODUS 15 they grumbled and complained about not having any water to drink.

*EXODUS 16 they grumbled and complained about not having anything to eat but manna.
Likewise, when you and I go through a spiritual wilderness don’t we have a tendency to complain?

“Lord, I don’t like this wilderness!” “I hate this wilderness.” “Get me out of this wilderness!”

You see, as much as we like to deny it, there isn’t much difference between us and the ancient Israelites.

(b) The wilderness revealed that the Israelites were an IDOLATROUS people.

Remember in EXODUS 32 when Moses was on top of Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments? Aaron and the Israelites were down at the base of the mountain worshipping “the golden calf.” You see, the wilderness exposed the evil, idolatrous hearts of the Israelite people. They gave into the temptation to return to their old sinful ways they had known back in Egypt.

Likewise, you and I will be greatly tempted to return to old sinful habits and sinful ways when we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness. Because the spiritual wilderness is NOT a pleasant place or a comfortable place to be in, we will be tempted to comfort ourselves with old sinful habits. This is why we must “take heed lest we fall.”

(c) The wilderness revealed that the Israelites were a FAITHLESS people.

Remember in Numbers 13 when Moses sent the twelve spies into the land of Canaan and ten of them came back with a negative report about how the giants in the land and how they couldn’t possibly defeat them? And the people were overwhelmed with FEAR and FAITHLESSNESS and chose NOT to move forward to the land GOD had promised.
The wilderness “exposed” every crack... every flaw... and every weakness in the Israelite’s faith. And spending time in a spiritual wilderness will do the same to you and me.

Likewise, a spiritual wilderness will expose every crack, every flaw, and every weakness in your faith. When “all of the props” have been knocked out from under you........when you have been isolated from everything familiar to you........when you have been moved out of your “comfort zone”........it will reveal the depth or the shallowness of your faith.

II. What Does God Want Us To Learn In The Wilderness?

1. The first thing GOD wants us to learn in the wilderness is that:

   (A) Sometimes the wilderness is a place of PURIFICATION.

   When the Israelites made their exodus from Egypt, Exodus chapter twelve tells us the Egyptians gave them anything they asked for just to get them out of their land.

   So the Israelites left Egypt with a surplus of food, gold, silver, and clothing that the Egyptians had just handed over to them.

   But about a month after they made their exodus from Egypt, the food supply started to run out. So here they were out in the middle of the wilderness where there is no food or vegetation to feed the people, let alone all of the livestock they had brought with them.
The people started to panic! And I dare say, we would have too! **When they were HUNGRY** they longed to satisfy their hunger with **the fish, and leeks, and onions, and melons** they had eaten Egypt.

**When they were THIRSTY** they longed for **the waters they had drunk from their wells in Egypt.**

**When they couldn’t see GOD AT WORK** in their situation they longed for the heathen gods they had worshiped back in Egypt.

Now listen very carefully! **GOD got Israel out of the land of Egypt, but then GOD led Israel into the wilderness to GET EGYPT OUT OF ISRAEL.**

**THE WILDERNESS was a place of PURIFICATION.** The Israelites could never be **truly set free** so long as they still loved the life they had left behind.

**APPLICATION** The same thing is true for you and me. Throughout the Bible, **Egypt is symbolic for the WORLD.** When you and I “passed through the crimson sea of Christ's blood” we made our “exodus” from the world. **But although we LEFT THE WORLD, THE WORLD MAY NOT HAVE LEFT US.** In our hearts we may still love the life we left behind, we may still cling to old sinful habits, and old sinful attitudes. **And we will never be truly set free** so long as we still have love for the life we left behind.
Listen carefully: The wilderness is that place between PARTIAL OBEDIENCE and FULL OBEDIENCE.

The wilderness is that place between PARTIAL SURRENDER and FULL SURRENDER.

The wilderness is that place between PARTIAL COMMITMENT TO GOD and FULL COMMITMENT TO GOD.

The wilderness is that place between LUKERWARMNESS and PASSIONATE LOVE for Christ.

The wilderness is that place between WHERE YOU ARE NOW and WHERE THE LORD WANTS YOU TO BE.

So sometimes the LORD leads us into a spiritual wilderness to PURIFY us from sins that are holding us captive to our old life.

2. The second thing GOD would have us to learn is:

(B) Sometimes The Wilderness is a place of PREPARATION.

We know GOD had called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but do you remember where Moses was when God called him? Exodus 3 tells us he was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, in the back of the Midian desert. In other words, Moses was in the most remote, most desolate region of the Midian wilderness.
And do you remember why Moses was in that wilderness? Forty years earlier he had tried to liberate the Jewish people by his own strength when he killed that cruel Egyptian taskmaster who had beaten the Jewish man.

For forty years Moses had lived in isolation as fugitive in the Midianite wilderness. He spent forty years doing the menial, mundane task of tending sheep. What Moses didn't realize was tending that “flock of sheep” was God's way of preparing him to tend to “His flock,” the Israelite people.

If God leads you to “a spiritual wilderness” understand this: He hasn't led you there to destroy you, He has led you there to PREPARE YOU.

GOD always has a PURPOSE in mind when He leads you and me into a spiritual wilderness. What we may perceive as a dry, desolate period in our life may actually be God's way of preparing us for some special work He will call us to do. This is why it is so critically important that we learn to “wait upon the LORD” while we are in the wilderness, and not do something rash or hasty before our time of preparation is through.
Finally and briefly, let us consider.....

III. When Will God Bring Us Out of The Wilderness?

1. **JESUS** spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness. **MOSES** spent 40 years in the Midianite wilderness. **THE ISRAELITES** spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. **DAVID** spent 10 years in the wilderness trying to stay one step ahead of King Saul who was out to kill him.

2. When GOD leads you and me into a spiritual wilderness, how long can we expect to be there? While GOD alone will decide that, we must understand our response to the spiritual wilderness may have a lot to do with how long we remain there.

   If GOD leads you into a spiritual wilderness to PURIFY YOU OF SIN you will remain in the wilderness until you confess your sin, and repent of it and forsake it. (Sadly, many of the Jews who came out of Egypt never put their faith and trust in God and refused to forsake their sins, and they ended up dying in the wilderness.)

   On the other hand, if GOD leads you into a spiritual wilderness to PREPARE YOU for some special task you will remain in the wilderness until GOD determines you are prepared to do what He is calling you to do.
CONCLUSION

Remember that chorus we sing: “In His time, in His time, He makes all things beautiful in His time, Lord please show me every day, as You're teaching me Your way, that You do just what you say, in Your time.”

If you are going through a spiritual wilderness right now let me encourage you to wait upon the LORD. Though the spiritual wilderness is never pleasant, we must understand it is sometimes necessary in order for GOD to mold us and shape us into the image of Christ.

Realize the wilderness is NOT your destination, it is simply a place GOD has chosen to take you through on your way to your destination.

In His time GOD will bring you out of the wilderness and you will discover your CHARACTER is stronger......and your FAITH is bolder!

And then you will THANK GOD FOR LEADING YOU INTO THE WILDERNESS!