

Ready for the Wilderness

For most of 2020, the King family ended every Lord's day thinking about where in the world we would go next. China or Guatemala? Patagonia or Papua New Guinea? The Arctic Circle or the Scottish Highlands?

We weren't booking flights or planning travel, of course. We were choosing where we would go with Bear Grylls in our next episode of *Man vs Wild*. It's our custom to eat a simple dinner and have a family show we watch together on Sunday nights. Once we tried an old episode of *Man vs Wild* and all four of us got hooked, Colin especially. So we were wilderness globetrotting with Bear Grylls most Sunday nights, with good pizza while we watched Bear subsist on insects and worms.

Most of you know this show which had a great run of about 7 seasons, where Bear Grylls jumps from a plane into a rugged wilderness or jungle with only a backpack and a knife as his supplies. It's a proud moment as an Anglican when you see one of our own make the sign of the cross just before leaping out of a plane.

Bear draws on the training and survival skills he acquired over many years while serving with the SAS, the elite force of the British Army. The goal of each episode is finding rescue out of the wilderness whether by makeshift raft, finding a road, a village, even a passing train. Bear makes it look easy but you know he's undertaken rigorous training before he enters the wilderness.

In recent seasons, Bear has moved from expert survivor to teacher. We've watched some episodes where Bear and his team take middle schoolers into the wilderness to learn survival skills. They find some success finding food, water, and shelter, which builds their confidence. But it's not long before their inexperience in the wilderness becomes evident. When night falls in the Welsh mountains; when near gale force winds begin blowing, they really have to lean on their teachers to make it through the night and out of the wilderness.

Lent *is* a wilderness and Lent is *spiritual training*, too. It's an interesting kind of spiritual training though. Lent is not a simulation, we're practicing disciplines of self-denial; we're examining patterns of sin in our lives. Yet Lent inevitably humbles us. If you practice the

season in the right way, you will hit the wall at some point, you'll come face to face with your spiritual limits. We discover how attached we are to comfort; how often we depend on food and drink, social media and entertainment to revive our weary souls, instead of the Word of God. At some point in this season, we realize how unprepared we were for the wilderness when wilderness days began.

If we're going to make a good beginning in this season; if we're seeking a holy Lent that will change us, we have to face this truth. And then seek help from those who have the most experience and skills walking through wilderness days. First and foremost, we look to our Lord Jesus Christ, not only when he was in the wilderness, but how he prepared himself for trials and temptations. Secondly, we look to our spiritual mothers and fathers who have passed on wisdom from their spiritual battles in the wilderness. We have a strong heritage of saints who acquired spiritual toughness in the midst of trials.

It may seem a strange occasion to speak about spiritual toughness, tired and weary as we are. However when you're ready to give up or give in, that's when the Enemy is especially near. When you begin losing hope, it's time to fight for your life, fight for your soul.

Jesus' Readiness for the Wilderness

Turning to the story of Jesus' wilderness days, I'd like for us to focus on Jesus' own training for these 40 days of testing. Jesus reveals what true readiness and true faithfulness in the wilderness looks like.

First and foremost, Jesus receives the love of the Father and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The first step in surviving the wilderness is not something you achieve; it is remembering who you are. At Jesus' baptism, the Father said, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." In our own baptism, God professes the same love, "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased." The saints describe God as having a 'manic love' for his children. Remember the love of God for you—this is the first step in spiritual wilderness survival.

The second skill in spiritual wilderness survival is clinging to the Word of God. Mark has a very brief in his account of Jesus' wilderness days, but we find more detail from Matthew's Gospel. Satan issues a threefold temptation to our Lord Jesus:

- End his hunger by turning stones to bread
- Leap off the temple to prove God will protect him
- The glory of all earthly kingdoms in exchange for worshipping his ancient Enemy

Jesus is ready for the Enemy's deception. How is he ready? He has the holy words of God written on his heart *before he enters the wilderness*. For each temptation Jesus recites the truth of God that we find in Deuteronomy 6 and 8. It has been said that you will know the true character of a man when you see his actions in adversity. I believe you will also find the character of a man in the words he speaks when his strength is spent.

Jesus trained himself, submitted himself, disciplined himself with the words of God long before he entered the wilderness. Luke tells us the boy Jesus increased in wisdom and stature in favor with God and man. The word for 'increased' in Greek means 'to make headway in spite of blows.' Jesus' growth in wisdom came through strenuous effort. He has Moses' words in his heart when he enters the wilderness. He knows the Psalms, not only the words but also the truth of those words. The devil quotes Psalm 91 to Jesus in the second temptation, that great psalm of God's protection. Yet Jesus has so embraced the Scriptures through his life that he recognizes the counterfeit from the real article. Jesus engraved these words on his heart and he was ready for the wilderness.

When trials come, you might discover that you weren't ready for the intensity you're facing. You might realize that Scripture hasn't been written on your heart for a moment such as this. To that sentiment I would say, don't spend too much time thinking about lost time. There's no time like the present. That's what Lent gives us: a new season to train ourselves with God's wisdom.

One of the psalms we pray each day in Lent, Psalm 95, says "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Paul said to the Corinthian church, "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." Renew your commitment to the

Scriptures, forgetting what lies behind, and press on so that you're seeking God in these wilderness days and you're ready for whatever comes next.

Acedia

I also think it wise that we consider what kind of temptation comes to us. Satan attacked Jesus with strategic, targeted, personal temptations. Satan approached Jesus when he most vulnerable with personal temptations.

I believe that our ancient Enemy sees our present weariness as an opportune time, and I believe he targets Christians, especially as we near the one year mark of this pandemic, with two specific temptations. These are two temptations that are as old as the hills, yet arising in such a time as this. They are two temptations in the seven deadly sins: despondency and acedia.

Acedia may be a new term, but it's very important you know the name of this temptation. Acedia has been defined as sloth, but it's not just simple laziness. The desert fathers called acedia "the noonday demon." Acedia is the temptation to give yourself over to a spirit of apathy, listlessness, or resignation. *Acedia is a spirit that opposes perseverance.* Acedia tempts you to find comfort by *running away from spiritual adversity*. Acedia is that inner voice that justifies every excuse. The Enemy's strategy with acedia is plain: keep you from taking up your cross when you're really weary.

We haven't heard about acedia as a sin or temptation because it was so common among monks. And, well, we ain't monks. But here's where I find a profound and timely connection for us: monks suffered from acedia most when they grew sick and tired of their life at home—their cells, their rooms. That's when the enemy tempted monks and nuns with acedia. St Cyril of Alexandria said that's when the Enemy "makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long." Sound familiar? If acedia isn't resisted, Cyril says the Enemy "instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself."¹

¹Cyril of Alexandria. *Festal Letters*, 1–12. Edited by John J. O'Keefe. Translated by Philip R. Amidon. Vol. 118.

Despair

When acedia goes unchecked, a more intense temptation enters the picture: despondency. Acedia and despondency are siblings in the unseen warfare of the soul. They finish each others' sentences. Where acedia leads to resignation, despondency decides to nurse our sorrows and reject hope.

Now, it's very important that we make important distinctions between despondency and depression. They are significant differences.

Depression is a mental illness, a mood disorder, *not a sin*. If you saw someone walking with crutches due to a broken foot, you'd be cruel to say 'if you had enough faith you could walk without those crutches. If you prayed enough you'd be just fine.' **Depression is a brokenness and illness of the mind, not a sin of the soul.** Depression requires compassion and encouragement.

You can fight the mental illness of depression and still choose hope. I know. I have been there. You'll need to cling to the Scriptures, you'll need to seek the Lord in prayer, even when you don't feel like it. *And* you'll need to humble yourself and seek additional help: pastoral guidance, therapy from a Christian counselor, and possibly medication.

Here's how the sin of despondency works differently from the mental illness of depression. Despondency involves a deliberate decision to *remain* in darkness; despondency rejects hope. The Enemy attacks the will, tempting you to choose despair instead of choosing hope.

Here are two signs of despondency in the soul:

- refusing or rejecting godly counsel
- a bitter or cynical spirit

That's what takes root in the soul when despondency isn't renounced.

The attacks of despondency are like termites. Termites feed on decaying wood. They go underground, building tunnels to keep their food supply going. You don't always see these little bugs. But they can do tremendous damage to your home.

Let's say someone who lives near you wants to move an old woodpile from his yard and blesses you by putting that decaying woodpile right against your foundation. That's what the enemy does with despondent thoughts. He's not only dumping despondent thoughts, he wants these thoughts to build a network of hopelessness to attack the foundation of your soul.

The Weapons of our Warfare

When fighting against acedia and despondency, we have three formidable and practical weapons:

1. The psalms, particularly psalms of hope
2. Working with our hands
3. Praying with water

Let's keep things simple. Imitate Jesus by clinging to psalms. When you're tempted by acedia or despondency, cling to Psalm 42. Memorize Psalm 42.11 this Lent so that it's written on your heart:

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."²

Don't worry if you don't *feel* anything when you recite those words. Preach the words of hope to yourself and the Holy Spirit will strengthen your soul in the fight.

Secondly, work with your hands. It was a well-known practice in monasteries that if a monk was wrestling with acedia and despondency, the abbot would send him to work in the

²Psalm 42.11

garden. The apostle Paul gave the same kind of counsel to the Corinthians. Occupying your hands with good work builds a wall of defense around your soul.

Clean the kitchen. Plow the garden. Plant flowers and vegetables. Organize your workshop and do some woodworking. Bake bread or sew. Working with your hands is vital for your body and your soul.

Thirdly, pray with holy water. You have heard preachers say that God loves you over and over. I think we need to make that truth more physical this Lent. Take holy water that we have blessed (bottles in the narthex); pour water in a dish; make the sign of the cross and pray this simple prayer from the Old Testament:

“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”³

The saints described the unseen temptations and warfare in our soul as ‘the arena.’ Mark says Jesus faced wild beasts in the wilderness; we are going to face wild beasts in the arena of our souls. But the Spirit of God has not left us without weapons to resist the Enemy in the arena. Daniel tamed the lion’s in the lion’s den; Jesus withstood the wild beasts, spiritual and physical, in the desert. So “be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!” (Psalm 31:24, ESV) For we are more than conquerors, even in the wilderness, even in an exhausting pandemic, through him who loved us, Christ Jesus, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

³Song of Solomon 6.3