

CHAPTER ONE

WILDERNESS

Israel boasts many fascinating travel destinations. Visitors can walk amidst the crowded markets of Jerusalem and take snapshots of the impressive Temple Mount. They can float on the salty surface of the Dead Sea. Or watch Mediterranean waves crash along shores that are strewn with marble from ancient wonders. But few travel brochures feature pictures of Israel's wilderness. It is barren. Desolate. Scorched. The terrain is strewn with stone and sand. The landscape includes dangerous canyons and rocky crags. Few are able to survive for long here under the searing sun.

Perhaps that is why Israel's wilderness is dotted with the tents of Bedouin shepherds rather than five-star resorts. The wilderness is not a place of leisure or ease. It's a place where strength is tested and stamina is built. It's a land of uneven footing, where dust clings to the blistered feet of any who venture to walk its jagged paths.

Yet there is something compelling here. Without fail, the travel groups I lead always find their souls being stirred by the wilderness. For many, it is the most provocative experience of our trip. So what is it about this harsh, rocky landscape that connects so strongly with the human heart? Maybe it's the physical thrill of overcoming a long and difficult hike. Or the intellectual wonder of exploring an ancient and foreign place. But I suspect that the wilderness calls to us yet another reason.

Amidst the dust and the danger of Israel's wilderness, we see a picture of our lives. We see our painful struggles in its boulders and rocky hills. Peering down the canyon walls, our hearts remember the temptations that have pulled us dangerously close to the edge. And as the sweat drips and our muscles burn under the sweltering sun, we think of everyday pressures that make us feel as though we can't take another step.

Our hearts connect with the physical landscape of the wilderness because it resembles the landscape of our hearts. Certainly our Christian life enjoys peaceful meadows and joyous mountaintops from time to time. But more often, life feels like a constant struggle to survive. We live in a spiritually desolate world. We stumble over rocks on our path. We are tested by the difficult climbs. So often, we feel weary and discouraged. We long for a chance to escape the everyday wilderness of our lives.

Yet it is not the way of God to skirt around the wilderness. There are certain lessons He can not teach us amidst the palm trees and pools of our favorite vacation destinations. There are spiritual muscles that will never grow and be stretched if we do not walk the treacherous wilderness paths. Following God into the wilderness will test us and broaden us. Sometimes it will make us want to quit. But amidst the harshness, the wilderness can also be the place where we discover some of God's sweetest blessings.

A WILDERNESS PEOPLE

We may long for a pampered and easy life, but the truth is, God's people have always been wilderness people. The patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—all endured its dryness and dust for a time. After their rescue from Egypt, the nation of Israel wandered amidst the barren rocks for forty years, being shaped into a holy people along the way. And during a discouraging time when the prophet Elijah felt like giving up, God fed him, gave him rest, and spoke to him—in the wilderness.

But it's not merely a cast of Old Testament characters who spent time in the wilderness. As the New Testament opens, we read of John the Baptist's ministry; his call for repentance and baptism sounded from the desert. It was the wilderness that Jesus chose as a place to prepare for his own ministry. He went there for forty days of fasting and prayer. And it was under the desert's scorching sun where he faced Satan's tempting lies.

Time and again, God has led his people into the wilderness. It's the place where he's tested them and shaped them. It's where His people have been forced to turn to Him for strength and protection. But mixed in with the hardships and temptations of the wilderness, there has always been grace. God fed His people there. Spoke to them there. Prepared them for life and ministry there. With every step along the difficult, wilderness paths, God revealed his great heart of Love.

And so the pattern continues to play out today. Under the scorching wilderness sun, God's people discover who they really are—and *whose* they really are. Their faith is tested in difficult places. Their spiritual strength grows through grueling, rocky climbs. Though we may travel on to different destinations, the wilderness is always in our bones.

Given this wilderness identity, it's no wonder that many Christians find the Psalms to be an especially poignant part of Scripture. Many of them were written by David—a man who was shaped by the wilderness in a powerful way. He spent years there, literally running for his life from a murderous and determined King Saul. As he ducked into wilderness caves night after night, he questioned God's plan for his life and struggled to hold onto his faith.

David's poetry conveys these raw emotions, and we identify with the vulnerability and pain expressed there. But his psalms also reveal a steadfast spirit—a determined faith that was honed and shaped through his years in a sun-scorched land. I think his psalms give such comfort precisely because they speak of the wilderness. Like us, he endured hardships and faced obstacles to his dreams. He cried out to God with disappointment, doubt, and pain. But his psalms didn't end there.

From his wilderness heart, David offered a poignant hope: With God, enemies can be defeated. With God, the wilderness can be survived.