

Devotional: Mercy Forgives: STOP in the Wilderness, May 22, 2022

Monday

Read Nehemiah 9:12–19 (bonus points for reading all of ch. 9!)

This week we talked about the physical and spiritual wilderness. When you hear about a spiritual wilderness, you might think of people who are “lost” and “don’t know Jesus.” That is true, they are lost. But today, I am thinking about people who call on Jesus as Lord and Savior, which I am betting are most of my hearers (and readers) today. The spiritual wilderness isn’t just lost people stumbling around. There is a wildness to the Kingdom of God that unfolds before our spirits in magnificent and beautiful ways when we step out the front doors of the comfortable “faith house” we have built with the Lord and venture into unexplored territory. There is adventure and discovery and growth. But it is also possible to know God and get lost in the spiritual wilderness through circumstances or our own choices.

The first thing you should do before you go out on an adventure in the spiritual wilderness is to plan ahead and tell someone where you are going and when you plan to return. You might not always know when you are in the spiritual wilderness until you find yourself lost there, but it is possible and preferable to choose to go out there. Perhaps you are going to engage in outreach or mission work that will be spiritually challenging. Perhaps you need to have difficult conversations with someone you love. Maybe you are going down a path in your personal study or ministry that is taking you into the wild. Maybe you are about to engage in a long, arduous treatment for an acute or chronic disease. You should tell someone where you are going. You should tell God where you are going. You should tell other Jesus followers where you are going. That way, if you get lost, it will be easier to find you – to ask the right questions, to provide the proper support, even to know to look for you. Even if you aren’t intentionally going into the wilderness, it is always a good idea to be in communication with people and let them know where you are at in life... this is the spiritual equivalent of having jumper cables or a can of “fix-a-flat” in your car, just in case.

Have you planned ahead for your journey into the wilderness (if you knew you were going there)? Do you have some baseline planning always in place – your spiritual jumper cables and fix-a-flat?

Tuesday

Read Romans 10:5-15

The second thing you should do before you go into the spiritual wilderness is pack the essentials. Do you have your bible and do you know how to use it? Having a bible isn’t much more useful than having waterproof matches if you don’t know how to start a fire. If you find yourself lost in the spiritual wilderness with your bible at hand but you don’t have your go-to passages that bring you comfort and a knowledge of God’s love and care, start with the gospels. Open up the gospels and go from there. The number of people in this country who regularly spend time in scripture has dropped dramatically since the onset of the pandemic and it doesn’t seem a mystery that a lot of those same people feel more lost, hopeless, and without direction.

If you don’t have your bible with you and you can’t bring it up on your phone, you have your head, heart, and spirit knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Tap into everything that has been poured into you by the Holy Spirit. Pray the Lord’s Prayer and use it to open a channel from your heart to God’s heart. Recite the Apostle’s Creed – which contains the barebones basics of the faith. We don’t engage with these words every week because I can’t think of anything better to do. It is so that we know them and can draw upon them when we don’t know where to go spiritually and need a rock to cling to in good times and bad.

Have you packed the essentials?

Wednesday and Thursday

Read Nehemiah 9:12–19 and Genesis 3

When Adam and Eve sin they cover their bodies and attempt to hide from God. When Moses goes up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, the people quickly turned to making other gods for

themselves and tried to run away from the true God. This is what Ezra is referring to in the passage we heard from Nehemiah.

When Jesus was arrested, the disciples scattered. Judas ran away from God until he took his own life. Peter ran from God until that rooster crowed and reminded Peter what he had done in running from Jesus. When we find ourselves lost, the first thing we should do is to stop, not run around frantically searching for a better-looking path.

This is especially true spiritually if you are a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is because God is looking for you when you've gotten yourself lost. God does not wait for Adam and Eve to feel good about themselves and start looking for God. God seeks them out when their strongest desire is to hide. When the Israelites run away from God and want to go back to slavery in Egypt instead of the Promised Land, God does not abandon them until they get their lives together and can prove they are worthy. God seeks them out. He continues to lead them by a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. He continues to feed them. And over the years they are in the desert, they learn to trust the goodness of God and God's unwavering and unfailing love and leadership.

We don't know what became of Judas, but I seriously doubt he is outside of God's loving embrace. Peter and the rest of the disciples became the bedrock foundation of the Church Universal by God's gift of the Holy Spirit to them. When they fled, God ran after them. God will always look for you because of God's mercy. His undeserved forgiveness and unearned kindness towards you is deeper, richer, and more wondrous than you can imagine. If you are a disciple of Jesus, God continues to forgive you and forgives you before you even realize to come before God and ask for forgiveness.

All this is to say that when you find yourself lost and you know you are lost, stop. God by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is looking for you. The Spirit can find you if you are still moving, but you stopping is a recognition that you are lost and need to be found.

Do you need to stop today? What would happen if you stopped?

Friday

Each week in 2022, we are praying for the most dangerous places to be a follower of Jesus. Please spend today in prayer for Myanmar and the Christians in Vietnam. You can get more info, and this info comes from, here: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

What is life like for Christians in Vietnam?

In Vietnam, the most intense persecution is reserved for non-traditional Protestants and converts from indigenous religions, especially in the remote areas of central and northern Vietnam. The majority of the population in these areas belong to the country's ethnic minorities, like the Hmong, and face social exclusion, discrimination and attacks. Homes are sometimes destroyed, forcing Christians to leave their villages. In several cases, Christians fled abroad and claimed asylum only to be sent back due to Vietnamese pressure.

Areas for prayer:

- Pray that local authorities' suspicion against Christians will ease and be replaced with an appreciation of their value to society.
- Ask God to strengthen believers who are under pressure to renounce their faith as they cling to Jesus and follow Him.
- Pray that young Christians will grow in their love for Jesus, their understanding of the gospel and their appreciation for the Bible, giving them a foundation for life.