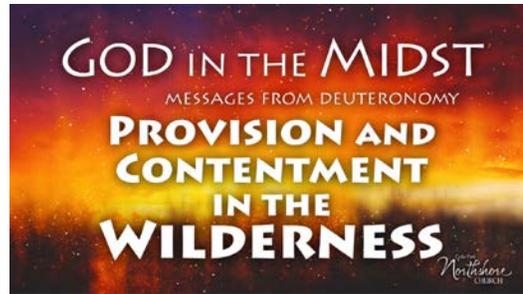


Provision and Contentment in the Wilderness



We are back in our series from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy that we are calling *God in the Midst*. We started with chapter 1; today we will be in chapters 2 and 3. These first three chapters make up the introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy.

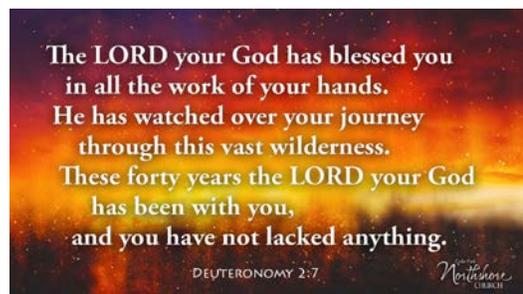
Deuteronomy has been described as “a book on the boundary.” These are the final words of Moses. Last time we described Deuteronomy as a *bookend* to the five books of Moses, the first five books of our Bibles (the Pentateuch). Genesis is the book of beginnings. Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers detail the lives of the People of God under the leadership of Moses. And Deuteronomy summarizes God’s work through the People with an eye to the future.

Deuteronomy is a book “on the boundary¹” in that it is written on the boundary of the Promised Land, after Moses led the People of God out of Pharaoh’s slavery, and after their forty-year wilderness experience. Chapters 2 and 3 summarize that wilderness experience.

There is a key verse upon which I would like to focus our attention; it is verse 7 in chapter 2, and it records Moses saying to the People:

⁷ The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything. ²

I’m not sure what you might think of that *wilderness experience*; but it seems that this verse should determine what we think of it.



¹ Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 22). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

² *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 2:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Maybe you don't think anything of it at all... just a bunch of ancient history. But we ought to think *something* of it since it is such a significant part of history... even in purely *secular* history, these events of the Jewish people securing this homeland has a great deal to do with the *news of the day*; our President was there just last week, highlighting how Israel's place in the world has a whole lot to do with world peace... with **our** peace.

Maybe you think of the wilderness experience merely as a consequence of failure... a significant consequence of a really big failure. God called Moses to lead the People of God out of Egypt, freeing them from the tyranny of Pharaoh. God performed spectacular miracles leading up to the Exodus, and continued to do miracles as the People followed God (like the parting of the Red Sea). But on the eastern banks of the Jordan River, after hearing the *majority report* from the scouts who went ahead of them, the People determined that they could not take possession of the Land. God, in response to their faithless decision, turned them back into the wilderness for forty years... time enough for a generation to pass away.

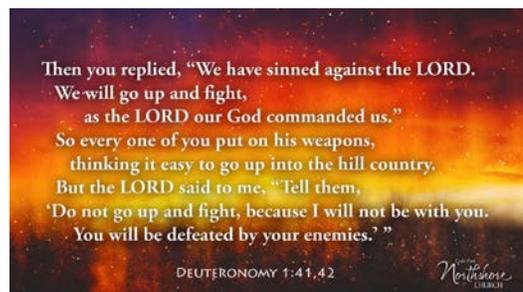
While there *was* failure there... it had to be more than *merely* failure, since there was also God's blessing there in the wilderness. Moses proclaimed it with absolute clarity:

⁷The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything. ³

What do we make of that?

What do we make of that in contrast to what we find in chapter 1? We can read that after their *initial* decision to **not** enter the Promised Land, after the Lord pronounced judgement, the People reconsidered. Moses put it this way:

Then you replied, "We have sinned against the LORD. We will go up and fight, as the LORD our God commanded us." So every one of you put on his weapons, thinking it easy to go up into the hill country.



³ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 2:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴² But the LORD said to me, “Tell them, ‘Do not go up and fight, because I will not be with you. You will be defeated by your enemies.’ ” ⁴

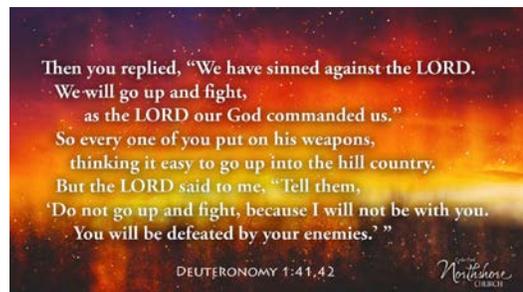
They changed their minds. They had the same resources, the same army, and the same enemy... but God told them they would fail. Everything was the same, **except** the leading and blessing of the Lord. Even though they feared, they would have succeeded with the Lord’s blessing. Now with resolve (the power of their new positive thinking), they would fail. The leading of the Lord is the only difference required between success and failure.



Do we know that is true? Do we know that is true from personal experience?

That is a *sermon in itself*... let that sink in. We may know it from experience, and we can certainly know it from the testimony of God’s Word.

There were lessons to be learned. The People of God had it wrong when they thought they could so easily change their minds, and they had it wrong when thought it would be easy to just *strap on* their weapons and take possession of the Land. They failed to understand that there would not only be physical battles fought with swords and such, there would be battles for their minds and hearts. While they may have been prepared for the physical battles, their faithless decision to not move forward with God was proof that they were not prepared for the battles over their minds and hearts.



There were lessons to be learned in the wilderness.

⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 1:41–42). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The wilderness was an awesome time of testing in which a whole generation failed. The promised land was full, not only of giants in the eyes of the Israelites, but of idolatry and wickedness in the eyes of God... In each case, the primary challenge was to faith and loyalty in the midst of change.⁵

You may have heard me say it several times before: **God does not waste pain.** While the wilderness was, in part, pain from a self-inflicted wound, God intended to use the wilderness to teach His People lessons of faith, loyalty, and obedience.

The truth is, there is always preparation before performing God's work... and that preparation often seems like a wilderness experience.

We ought to know that from personal experience, and we can know it from observing the lives of others. Perhaps the best example is set before us by Jesus.

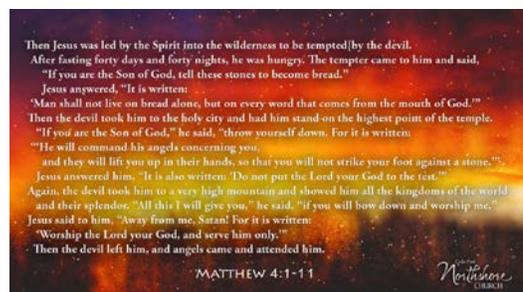
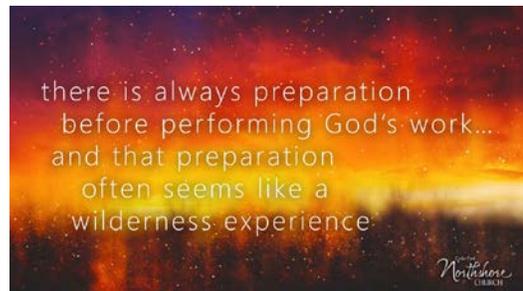
Before crossing His own *Jordan* into His ministry, Jesus had a wilderness experience... a 40-day wilderness experience.

It turns out that 40 is a number that shows up in the Bible from time to time, often associated with **preparation**. That is why I don't trust anyone under the age of 40.

It is no coincidence that Jesus fasted for 40 days in preparation for His ministry. Allow me to point out another coincidence that likely isn't so much of a *coincidence*.

The preparation of Jesus in the wilderness was capped off by temptation by the devil. It is recorded in Matthew 4.

The enemy directed three specific temptations at Jesus, and in each case Jesus quoted Scripture as He refused to entertain the devil's enticement.



⁵ Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 9). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

It turns out that all three of the quotations came from the same Book in our Old Testaments. Would anyone like to guess which Book that was? Of course it was Deuteronomy.

When Jesus said:

“It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”⁶

Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 8:3.

When He said:

“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”⁷

Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 6:16.

When He said:

“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”⁸

Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 6:13.

Shouldn't we conclude that Jesus was making a tie between His 40-day preparation in the wilderness and the 40-year wilderness experience of the People of God? The 40-years in the wilderness was a foreshadow of the 40-days Jesus prepared in the wilderness. What could not be fully accomplished with the 40-year wilderness experience by the *People* of God, would be fully accomplished by the only truly obedient One, the *Son* of God.

Yet even the perfect, holy, Son of God was subject to suffering... including suffering with the fasting and temptation in the wilderness.

Of course, we too, suffer times of preparation in wildernesses.

I would go so far to say that... If we find ourselves doing God's work but can't look back on hard times of preparation, it could be that we are not yet really doing God's work.



⁶ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 4:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 4:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Mt 4:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We can think about it from either perspective. We can look at the way God uses us **now** and *think back* to what prepared us; or we can *think back* on hard times and consider what we learned that God is using in our lives **now**.

Had any hard times? Our son went blind for a while; I learned a lot through that, and I know he did too. I got fired once; that really stunk... but I sure learned a lot through that, and wouldn't be doing the work I am now had it not been for that tough time. Can you relate?

Sometimes those lessons are learned recently; other times those lessons go *way back*... even to our childhood.

I often think of a benign episode from my middle-school years. When I was in ninth grade I served on our middle school's yearbook staff. It was a *pretty big deal* since we had to apply and only a very few were accepted. Middle-school was grades 6-9 for us back then, and we could apply starting in 7th grade. I applied every year, but didn't get in until my third try (my best friend Ross Fortini got in on his first try in 7th grade; Ross was way cooler than me).

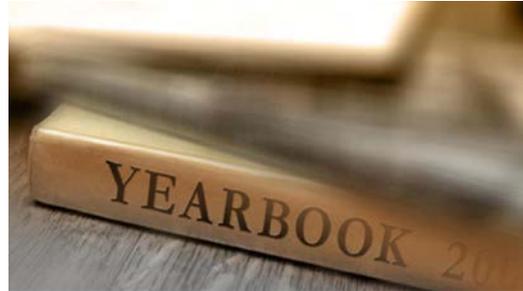
Our yearbook was called the *Apollo*, because our school was named after Virgil Grissom, a famous Hoosier (I'm from Indiana). Gus Grissom was an astronaut, one of the original *Mercury Seven*, the second man sent to space. Grissom died, tragically, during testing for Apollo One... incinerated with two others, White and Chaffee, while testing the launch capsule.



On this Memorial Day weekend we can remember that those who died in military service not only gave their lives in war, but in other meaningful service too, like leading humanity in pursuits of technology and exploration.

We thank God for their sacrifices on this Memorial Day.

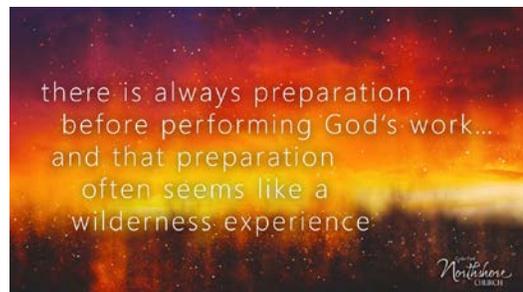
So we thought we were *pretty cool* on the Apollo staff, putting together our middle-school yearbook. Early in the year we got our jobs; we had to apply for those too. I determined to apply for the coolest job: photographer (Ross Fortini was a photographer; I told you he was cool). I figured I had an in, since my best friend Ross was now the grizzled, old, seasoned photographer, and I had been his unofficial assistant on shoots, and even in the darkroom (back in the days of black-and-white film, and darkrooms for developing film and making prints).



Not only did I **not** get the coolest job... I got the least cool job: the advertising section. We were responsible to sell ads, gather the information, and layout the ads in those last several pages of the yearbook to which nobody pays any attention. (I know... I had a really tough childhood).

But here's the thing... I learned a ton that year. I learned business principles, and selling tactics. I learned about layout and design. It was my first *marketing job*... and it led to other marketing jobs. The ad-design skills acquired in that least-cool job provided opportunity in the small business in which I later worked. Skills developed there made way for other marketing jobs. I use skills developed on that yearbook staff to this day. It was preparation for the way God is using me in various ways now.

Now... seriously... doing that job in 9th grade doesn't seem like much **suffering** now... but it didn't seem so great to my dumb teenage brain. I have, of course, suffered far worse... and learned more meaningful lessons. (I just thought I'd keep it *light* on this holiday weekend.)



We get the point, don't we? God has a way to work things together for our good. He weaves the experiences of our lives, even the failures (perhaps especially our failures), into something useful for His purpose and glory.

Can that be an encouraging reminder for those who may be in a wilderness today? If you are finding yourself in an especially difficult season, just think what the Lord might be doing. Could today's wilderness be preparation for God's promise in the days, or even decades, ahead?

God was in the wilderness with His People then, and He is with us in our various wildernesses now. Know that He is watching over our journeys, even through the vast wilderness.

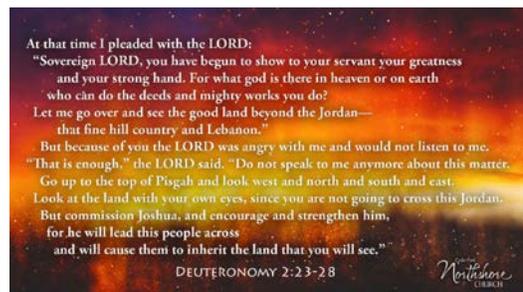
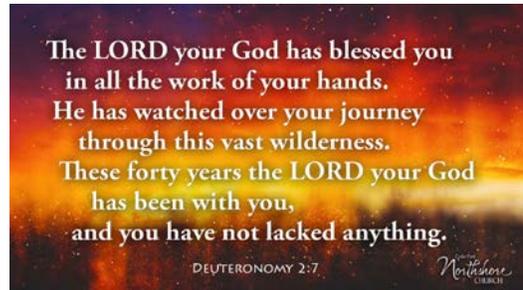
Before we leave today's text, let's give our attention to the end of chapter 3. Reflecting on the closing days of the wilderness experience, Moses wrote:

²³ At that time I pleaded with the LORD:
²⁴ "Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do? ²⁵ Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan—that fine hill country and Lebanon."

²⁶ But because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me. "That is enough," the LORD said. "Do not speak to me anymore about this matter. ²⁷ Go up to the top of Pisgah and look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan. ²⁸ But commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see."⁹

Does that seem fair? If anyone deserved to enjoy the Promised Land, it would have been Moses, right?

First off... *Nobody* deserved to go into the land! Moses' death outside the land would witness to the reality of *judgment*, just as Joshua's victorious entry would witness to the reality of forgiving, covenant *grace*.¹⁰



⁹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 3:23–28). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 42). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

In verse 26, Moses blames the people for his predicament. There is a great deal of writing about this, since what Moses writes in Deuteronomy might not seem to be in alignment with the account he wrote in Numbers 20... a situation in which Moses was carelessly disobedient; a moment where God pronounced to Moses that he would not enter the Land.

So which was it, did Moses not enter the Land because of His disobedience, or because of the faithlessness of those He led. Was it the price of leadership, or his personal sin? Did the fault lie with Moses or the people? It seems to me that it is both.

Lessons we can learn here is that sometimes our wilderness experiences are not entirely our fault, and sometimes those wilderness experiences are for the benefit of those that will come after us.

Again, on this Memorial Day weekend, we are reminded that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, and sometimes our individual suffering is for the good of the greater whole.

Besides, Moses was not alone in unfair suffering. Only ten came back with a negative report, and only a majority determined to not possess the Land... there must have been others (even beyond Joshua and Caleb) who were full of faith and ready to receive the Lord's Promise. And then, of course, there was the generation born in the wilderness... they suffered too, having no part in the original disobedience.

In our journey, through wildernesses and otherwise, do you ever wonder, with me, if you are a Moses or a Joshua? As we are part of enterprises bigger than ourselves (like the Church), are we the ones to enjoy the next victory (like Joshua) or are we the ones who are setting the stage for those who are following (like Moses)?

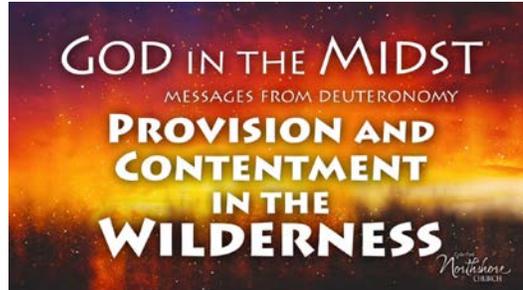
Maybe we think it is obvious... the old are more like Moses and young are more like Joshua... and those in between are, well, just ***in between***.

I think we all find ourselves like ***both*** Moses and Joshua. We each have a future, ***and*** we all are setting the stage... making a way for those who follow. God uses us both ways, all the time. That is what it means to be among the People of God, part of God's family in community with one another.

So take courage. God is not done with any of us; there are days ahead... and there is eternity ahead. And we are part of something bigger than ourselves, and we have responsibility to the community. We need those like Moses and those like Joshua, and we are all likely a bit of both.

Let's learn lessons and apply them well... lessons of contentment with God's provision, in all times, especially the wilderness.

Are you **beyond** the wilderness? Give God thanks for the way He does not waste pain, thanking Him for the valuable lessons learned.



Are you **in** the wilderness? Thank God for His presence and blessing in the wilderness, knowing that He is accomplishing His work in us, even in suffering.

Maybe you find yourself outside of the People of God; perhaps you have not turned to God in faith, trusting Jesus with your life and eternity. Today is a day to believe, knowing that believing may not relieve suffering, but it will certainly give meaning to suffering. Join us on this journey.

God we turn to you, thanking you for your presence now... both in victory and defeat, pain and plenty, and yes, even in the wilderness. For we who are in the wilderness, give gifts of faith and courage to trust You. For those like Joshua among us eager to take on tomorrow's challenges we give thanks. And for those like Moses among us who are making the way for our futures, for these too we give thanks. Bless us all in these various ways.