

Finding Grace in the Wilderness!

Jeremiah 31:2 *"Thus saith the LORD, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest."*

In a Church I pastored, I received a call - one of my members about 3-5 hours to live. As soon as I could get there, I went in to see him. I don't think I will ever forget what he said to me that night. He looked at me and said, " Pastor, you are right. I have heard you say it was so and you were right." I asked what he was referring to and he said, "Pastor, God's grace is sufficient. Pastor, just as you said, God's grace is sufficient."

During a difficult and trying time in the Apostle Paul's life, the word he received from God was: **"My grace is sufficient for thee"** (2 Cor. 12:9). Many of you like that husband and the Apostle Paul have found that God's grace is sufficient. There is saving grace for those bound by sin and sustaining grace for those broken by sorrow. As the songwriter said, "There is grace for every need," and I remind you that in all things and at all times, God's grace is sufficient.

I love the statement that is found in our text. The Bible says they **"found grace in the wilderness."** Like those of our text, many of you have found grace in the wilderness. You have found that in the wilderness experiences of life, there was grace to be found to strengthen you, comfort you, and even guide you.

Sitting in the waiting rooms of an Intensive Care Unit you found grace. When you watched a loved-one die of cancer, you found grace in the wilderness. When your children walked away from and abandoned everything you had taught them, you found grace in the wilderness. Lying awake at night in an empty house you found grace in the wilderness. When the doctor walked into the room with that solemn look on his face, you found grace in the wilderness. When your health took flight leaving you to battle pain and sickness each day of your life, you found grace in the wilderness. With each treatment, you found grace in the wilderness.

There is grace to be found in the wilderness. Look at the text with me and let's consider this wonderful statement made by the prophet Jeremiah. First, notice with me:

I. THE DIFFICULT PLACE!

Let's begin by underscoring the word **"wilderness."** The word simply speaks of a desert. When I think of a desert several conditions come to my mind. First, I think of:

a) Desolate Conditions

I think of a dry, arid environment. I think of an area in which rain is limited and scarce. I think of a place where all you see is sand and barren rocky landscapes. There are no beautiful trees, colorful flowers, or green grass adorning the landscape. There are no bubbling streams or refreshing springs from which to drink. Everywhere you look all is

desolate.

Life can at times be like a wilderness. We can find ourselves in dry conditions. Our spiritual lives can seem like a wilderness, barren and desolate. There are times when the showers of blessings are daily enjoyments. But there are also those times when it seems heaven is shut up to us.

We cry out to the Lord, but it seems He is nowhere to be found. We seek His face, but it seems that God has hid Himself from us. Job cried out in **Job 13:24**, "**Wherefore hidest thou thy face?**" The Psalmist in a similar fashion looks up to God and asks in Psalm 88:14, "**Lord, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?**"

There are those desolate and dry times. Let me call them wilderness experiences. Furthermore, when I think of the wilderness I think of:

b) Despairing Conditions

Many a lost soul or traveler has found the wilderness or desert to be the worst of the worst of environments. There is the burning sun during the day and the bitter cold at night. There is the lack of water or food that one can avail themselves of to exist. Many a bleached bone lies in the desert as a silent testimony to the harsh environment of the desert.

The wilderness experiences of life can bring us to a place of feeling helpless and hopeless. There are some experiences that stretch our faith to its limits. There are other experiences that push us to the brink of despair. We find ourselves feeling that we can't handle another day or push on another hour.

Have we not all felt like David in Psalm 102:6, "**I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.**" David so felt desolate, like a mournful-looking owl or a bird sitting alone. His strength was gone, he was inwardly depressed, and he had lost his will to live.

The wilderness is a difficult place to be found in. Yet, as we look at our text we see those who found themselves in such a place. Notice not only a difficult place, but secondly let me say a brief word about:

II. A DISTRESSED PEOPLE!

Underscore the words from our text "The people" and "even Israel." Jeremiah speaks of those who found themselves in such a difficult place. Distressful and depressing times had fallen upon the children of Israel. Notice their distress as described by our text. First, we see:

a) The Distressing Calamity Behind Them

We read in verse 2 of those "***which were left of the sword.***" Jeremiah was no doubt speaking of Assyria's devastation and destruction of the nation Israel. Our text indicates that many died by the sword of the Assyrians. City after city had been captured and conquered. Blood had run in the streets. Devastation and destruction had come in their wake.

Like any war torn country, we can paint images in our mind of the calamity that the people had experienced. Ripped from their homes, fleeing for their lives, many dying by the sword - one can understand the distressful conditions that had been experienced. Yet, their distress is not limited to the calamity of an enemies sword for we also read in our text of:

b) The Distressing Conditions Before Them

Our text seems to indicate that those who managed to escape were forced to flee into the wilderness or desert. They had not only had to flee for their lives, but now they found themselves in a desert having to fight for their lives. Those that were left of the sword only found they had another battle to fight - a battle with a hostile environment - the wilderness.

Once again I remind you that life can be a wilderness experience. Like the people of our text, we can find ourselves encountering distressing situations. Like them, we can find ourselves facing the brandished sword or the burning sand. Yet, for these distressed people, they made a wonderful discovery in the wilderness.

I think of the great Charles Haddon Spurgeon. His ministry was being significantly blessed of God. People by the scores were seeking to hear him preach. The Chapel where Spurgeon preached was packed with people - the halls, passages, side rooms, anywhere people could find room to sit or stand. More than 3,000 were packed into a building with a seating capacity of 1,500. For a while they rented out Exeter Hall for Sunday nights. It was not long before it was too small. Then the Surrey Music Hall, London's most commodious and beautiful building was rented. It could hold ten to twelve thousand people. On the afternoon of October 19, 1856 the opening service in the hall was held. The place was packed, with an additional 10,000 people in the gardens.

Shortly after the service began, a cry pierced the air, "Fire! The galleries are giving away, the place is falling!" There was no fire, just a bunch of malicious miscreants, but a terrible panic followed leaving seven dead and many seriously injured. The event was almost more than the great preacher could handle. As one writer stated, "It almost unseated his reason."

Spurgeon fell apart. He had to be carried from the pulpit and was taken to a friend's house where he remained for several days, so depressed that he was unable to get out of bed for days. In fact, He never fully recovered from what happened, the tragedy constantly brooded over him. Depression became a constant battle in his life. Spurgeon himself wrote of the tragedy, "Perhaps never a soul went so near the burning furnace of insanity..." He was only 56 when he died and a close friend and biographer wrote: "I cannot but think, from what I saw, that his comparatively early death might be in some measure due to the furnace of mental suffering he endured on and after that fearful night."

There are the distressing experiences of life - those wilderness experiences - for even the best of God's people and servants. Life can be comfortable and suddenly adversity comes storming into our lives driving us into the wilderness. Even in a time of great blessing we can find ourselves suddenly thrust into the wilderness. Yet, as we look at our text we find they made a marvelous discovery in the wilderness. Notice lastly with me:

III. THE DELIGHTFUL PROVISION!

Our text tells us that they "**FOUND GRACE IN THE WILDERNESS.**" In a place of desolation and despair, they found grace. They found grace that strengthened and sustained them. I remind you today that God's grace is sufficient and you will find grace in the wilderness.

Just like those of our text, you will find grace in the wilderness. What kind of grace did they find? They found grace for their:

a) Weariness

You can only imagine how weary they must have been. The word "**left**" in our text speaks of those that "survived." It would seem that those who survived fled for their lives into the wilderness. Days had possibly turned into weeks and the weeks into months. How physically, mentally, emotionally weary they must have been. Yet, they found grace in the wilderness.

Are you weary from the wilderness? Has the burdens and cares of life worn you down physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually? Do you find yourself feeling helpless and hopeless? Are you tired of the battles and burdens of life? There is grace in the wilderness for you.

Oftentimes our hearts have been blessed by the words of Frank Graeff:

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
 Too deeply for mirth and song;
 As the burdens press and the cares distress,
 And the way goes weary and long?

Frank Graeff was a minister who found himself in deep depression. He was to later say that his "Whole attitude had become one of despair and defeat." As his words expressed, the pressing burdens and distressing cares had made the way weary and long. As each day passed he found himself slipping deeper into depression until one day he felt he could stand it no longer and that he had come to the end of the road. As low as he could go, in his dark of hour of extremity he began to sing a song that had been written 75 years before by Joseph Scriven:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
 All our sins and grief to bear
 What a privilege to carry,
 Everything to God in prayer -
 Oh, what we peace we often forfeit,
 Oh what needless pain we bear..."

He could not finish the song, but fell to his knees and began to pour his heart out to God. Suddenly, the peace of God filled his heart and he began to shout, "I know he cares! I know my Saviour cares! Can I sum up what happened to Frank Graeff? He found grace in the wilderness! He found in the way that goes weary and long that:

O yes, He cares; I know He cares,
 His heart is touched with my grief;
 When the day are weary,
 The long night dreary,
 I know my Saviour cares.

There is grace for our weariness in the wilderness. Furthermore, they found grace for their:

b) Fearfulness

I not only imagine how weary they were, but also how fearful they must have been. Would the Assyrians find them in the wilderness? Would they survive the desert? How fear must have gripped their hearts and mind?

Have you found yourself in the wilderness and so doing found your heart filled with fear? Is there the fear of what the doctor is going to say? Is there the fear that the treatments will not or are not working? Is there the fear that you will be among the next layoffs? If so, may I once again remind you that there is grace to be found in the wilderness.

The great hymn writer, Isaac Watts, wrote a hymn entitled "My God, How Many Are My Fears." There are many things to fill our heart with fear. Yet I think of the words of another great hymn writer, John Newton, and his great hymn "Amazing Grace:"

Tw'as grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.

There is grace to relieve our fears. The Psalmist said in Psalm 56:3, "**What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.**" We can trust in the Lord at all times and in all things, and as we do so, we will find grace in the wilderness to relieve our fears. Furthermore, they found grace in the wilderness for their:

c) Emptiness

As our text states, these that are in the wilderness are those that were "**left of the sword.**" They were the survivors. There were those who had not survived - those who had died of the sword. No doubt those that had died had been a brother or sister, mother or father, son or daughter of those who had survived.

For those in the wilderness there was not only the distress caused by the conditions around them, but there was also the grief and sorrow they carried on the inside. The death of their loved ones had left a huge hole in their heart. Let me call it "emptiness."

Many of you know what I mean. The death of someone we love leaves a void and empty place in our heart. The empty house and the empty chair at the table is hard, but that emptiness in the heart manifests the depths of our sorrow.

Yet for these who had seen their loved ones slaughtered and had been forced to leave their bodies behind, they found grace in the wilderness. When the doctor walks out says, "I did all that I could," God will give His grace. When we have to go to the funeral home and make arrangements, there is God's grace. When we have to leave the cemetery, there will be grace. When we have to go back home without our loved one, there is grace to be found in the wilderness.

I love the old song, "God Will Take Care of You." It was written by Dr. William Stillman Martin. One Sunday he was scheduled to preach but Mrs. Martin awakened feeling ill. Dr. Martin, worried about her, said that he would cancel his engagement and stay home with her. Yet, before she could answer him, their seven year daughter spoke up and said, "Oh, Daddy, you don't have to stay home because of mother - God will take care of us." Dr. Martin did go on and preach and later wrote his great hymn. I remind you that if you are in the wilderness: "God will take care of you, thru every day, o'er all the way; He will take care of you, God will take care of you."

God will take care of His children. When they need grace, He will give it. Even when we are in the wilderness.