

RUNNING IN THE WILDERNESS

SERIES: DAVID: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

By Judy Herminghaus

Some years ago a friend of ours named Jeff went on a horseback trip with some hunting friends of his into the Bitterroot Wilderness Area in Idaho for a few weeks. They followed a guide for two days until they located an elusive elk herd deep in the wilderness. At that point they made camp by a stream. Jeff decided to check out the area, and he walked downstream for a time. Toward dusk he started back upstream, but somehow got on a different fork of the stream and found himself far away from his camp. Night descended, and he knew he was lost. He became increasingly afraid. He had one candy bar and one box of matches on him, and that was it. The Bitterroot Wilderness is miserably cold at night. He built a campfire and slept as close to the fire as he could. In that one short night of being lost in an untamed wilderness, he was confronted with the idea of his death. Perhaps this was going to be it for him. But the next morning he found his way back to his friends, only he looked different—he had singed off his eyebrows and eyelashes.

Jeff went into the wilderness because it's so beautiful and quiet. God seems closer when you are surrounded by majestic mountains and delicate streams sparkling in the sunlight. In the quiet you can hear your own thoughts and God's voice more clearly. But wilderness is also wild—uncontrollable and unpredictable. We humans don't always like that aspect of the wild, or of God's plans for us. We don't always come out of the

wilderness the same people we were when we went in. We may get a little burned. But God plans to mature us in the wilderness times of our lives, if we will let them lead us to a deeper experience of him, so we are more dependent on him and love him more.

In Scripture the wilderness is a very important place. Without all the comforts and securities that people normally need to feel okay, they are left to either depend on God as their source of security or perish. Moses had forty years in the wilderness with the Israelites, and Jesus had forty days of temptation in the wilderness. We too will have some wilderness times. In these times our safe world will be shaken up, and for an extended period of time we will not be able to get ourselves righted. But these can also be beautiful times in our lives as we draw closer to God and remember that he is creating something new through them.

I was up at our cabin at Tahoe for a few weeks this past summer. I spent hours on our deck reading books, retreating, and watching the hummingbirds buzzing around our two hummingbird feeders. We had positioned them close to the deck for easy visual access. I learned that when there are too many birds feeding in the area, they will not share their food, but will aggressively chase each other off. Sometimes a frightened hummingbird will accidentally fly into the window glass of our cabin and fall to the deck. If it lies stunned on its side or back for very long, it will die. But I found that if I picked it up right away and held it in my hands in an upright position, it would recover and fly off. I learned a spiritual lesson from these little birds.

When we are dazed and confused in our wilderness times, we have an opportunity to meet God in a deeper way. We are aware that we are needy, and we can let the God of the universe lift us in his hands and right us. When I hold a hummingbird in my hands, I can feel its heartbeat and its delicate wings trembling, and I feel that I have for just a moment tapped into how God feels about us. I imagine God saying, “Let me hold you. There is healing in my touch. There is joy in my future plans for you. Let me set you right.” When we allow God to be there with us in our wilderness, we become more of what we were always made to be: men and women with a deep connection to God and trust in him.

David, the man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), had an extended time in the school of wilderness. David spent the entire decade of his twenties staying one step ahead of death. It was in these wilderness years that David’s trust in God deepened, and he became the man God needed him to be so he could lead Israel spiritually as her king. Wilderness was woven into David’s soul.

David wrote almost all of his psalms in his wilderness years. He poured out his soul in verse to God. In his psalms we get a glimpse into what made David’s heart so special to God, and what made him a man God could use. David’s prayers are so vulnerable and honest before God that God uses them to teach people of every generation how to pray and worship him in truth.

In this message we're going to follow David as he plunged into that ten-year wilderness experience. Where did he go first? What was he feeling? What can we learn about those early days in David's wilderness journey that we can apply to our lives?

In the last message (Discovery Paper 5255) we heard of David's heroic defeat of Goliath, Israel's enemy. He was on top of the world. Now we will hear the story of David's running for his life in panic only a few years later. How did this happen?

Well, it happened that Saul, then king of Israel, went quickly from being thrilled with David's victory over Goliath to absolutely hating David. It came about through a little song that the women were singing:

Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands."

The preeminence of David in the song was more than unstable King Saul could take, and his bent mind yielded to jealousy and fear of David. He soon set his mind on murdering David.

The irony of this turn of events is great, for when Israel was challenged by Goliath, David was the only one in all Israel who ran toward the battle with Goliath. All the others in the Israelite army ran away in fear of Goliath every time he shouted his taunts. Now the hero

who saved the day had to run from the very people he saved. Through no fault of his own, David was thrown into a confusing time full of pain, hardship, and fear.

How quickly our circumstances can change. This week Kevin Everett of the Buffalo Bills was paralyzed in an injury during a football game. It must be such a long journey of the soul for an athlete like him to not be able to use his body. His doctors think he may recover, but it will be a long process. Such times come upon us like a 7.0 earthquake. We know life can bring these kinds of circumstances, but when they hit we are rarely prepared for the full emotional impact.

David was not expecting this sudden turn of events on his way to becoming king of Israel, so it is interesting to see where he ran first.

The presence and power of God

1 Samuel 21:1-9:

David went to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech trembled when he met him, and asked, “Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?”

David answered Ahimelech the priest, “The king charged me with a certain matter and said to me, ‘No one is to know anything about your mission and your instructions.’ As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find.”

But the priest answered David, “I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women.”

David replied, “Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men's things are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!” So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away.

Now one of Saul's servants was there that day, detained before the LORD; he was Doeg the Edomite, Saul's head shepherd.

David asked Ahimelech, “Don't you have a spear or a sword here? I haven't brought my sword or any other weapon, because the king's business was urgent.”

The priest replied, “The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the Valley of Elah, is here; it is wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you want it, take it; there is no sword here but that one.”

David said, “There is none like it; give it to me.”

Psalm 7:1-2 might shed a little light on how David was feeling when he was forced to flee for his life:

“O LORD my God, I take refuge in you;
save and deliver me from all who pursue me,
or they will tear me like a lion
and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me.”

He felt as if he were about to be torn by a lion, eaten alive. Have you ever felt like that?

The first place that David thought of to run for help was Israel’s priests in the priestly city of Nob (north of Jerusalem, only a couple of miles from Saul’s home). God’s man David ran to God’s priests and home. It was a great place to run. David found help in this familiar place.

But perhaps you noticed that he seemed to secure the help through deception. What do we make of that? It is interesting to me that so many commentaries and teachings make such a big deal out of David's deception here. David was afraid for his life, running from an enemy he pictured as vicious as a hungry lion, so I don't think his reaction very unusual. David was either very shrewd in how he answered the priest here, trying to protect the priest from too much dangerous knowledge, or he was out-and-out lying to save his own skin. But either way, that is not the point of the passage. The point is that God was at work providing for and making a way for his new, imperfect, and totally human king.

We want David to always be doing it right. But this raises a question: What are we like when we come to church? Are we always completely honest and transparent? Do we do everything perfectly and then come to church to be confirmed in our goodness? Or do we come as beggars looking for the bread we need to sustain us?

David can make us uncomfortable with his up-and-down performance. We like our heroes to be consistently heroic. But God's people are just people. I am encouraged that God used David and loved David as he clearly did. That means God can handle my doubts, fears, and inconsistencies, too.

In Acts 13:22 the apostle Paul affirms David: "After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'" Apparently David did not have to be

perfect to please God in his life. That is very good news, because none of us are perfect, especially in times of pressure and stress. No one acts their best all the time in the wilderness.

David had always found comfort with God's people and in God's house, so he ran to it. In his most terrifying hours David received two things from the priest at Nob: bread to sustain his body and a sword to fight God's enemies.

Why do we come to church? I hope it is to receive bread for the journey and a sword to go out into the world and do spiritual battle. Let's look a little deeper into what the bread and the sword symbolize in Scripture.

The consecrated (holy) bread in our text was a specification of the Law in Leviticus 24:5-9. Twelve loaves were placed on the altar every Sabbath to represent God's presence with his people. Ahimelech wisely gave to David the consecrated bread that was meant only for the priests on the Sabbath. Jesus commends him for doing that in Mark 2:25-26. Jesus' point was that Sabbath was made for man, not man for Sabbath. Human needs come before ritual (Mark 3:4). We need the sustaining presence of God every day of our lives.

Goliath's sword was kept as a remembrance of God's deliverance of his people through David. David was going to fight on behalf of Israel. This sword symbolized God's power with David. Hebrews 4:12 gives us a more fleshed-out picture of what the sword

represents beyond simply being a weapon for physical battle: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit...it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Ephesians 6:17 tells us the word of God is the sword of the Spirit.

So David left the priests at Nob with food for the journey, which comes with the spiritual message that God’s presence was with God’s man and God’s people, and with a sword, the word of God to fight God’s battles in the wilderness.

The wilderness then would be a place where David would learn in an ever-deepening way that God was the provider of all his needs. His presence and word went with David.

So encouraged with bread and a sword, where do you think David ran next? Gath! Enemy territory! Now we know for sure David was a stress case! This was as far away as he could get from Saul’s reach: the land of the Philistines.

Enemy territory

Verses 10-15:

That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath. But the servants of Achish said to him, “Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances:

**“Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands’?”**

David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath. So he pretended to be insane in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard.

Achish said to his servants, “Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?”

This is really nuts, isn't it? Gath was Goliath's hometown, and David showed up there with Goliath's own sword. Perhaps he thought they would accept him as a mighty champion since he had defeated Goliath. Perhaps he hoped they had heard through the grapevine that he and Saul were at odds since Saul had tried to kill him numerous times. Words travel fast when it concerns your enemy. Or perhaps he was just running out of

fear to the place he knew Saul wouldn't go. David was thinking and running really fast at this point, pursued by the "roaring lion" Saul.

David found out quickly that he had made a mistake in fleeing to Gath. He had to feign insanity to get out of the situation he had put himself in. In those days people didn't harm crazy people, feeling they were possessed by some spirit. The final scene of David's dribbling saliva onto his beard is the narrator's commentary on the foolishness of David's running to Philistine territory for protection.

I have to ask again, why would David run to enemy territory? Well, don't we often do the same? When fearful and suffering, sometimes we hang on tight to God, but at other moments we run to our old ways of coping. We do both almost in the same breath. We trust God and then we work it out ourselves. The narrator pictures this thoughtless and fearful turning to one's own resources as madness.

Can you think of some time in your life when you did something as silly as this? I can give you an example from my life. I had been smoking for nineteen years. I had also become a Bible study teacher, and I decided Bible study teachers should not be smoking. I reached this conclusion because I wouldn't smoke at church for everyone to see, but I smoked freely at home. So the word "hypocrite" came to mind. I wrestled with God over my smoking problem for about three years. "I know you have the power to remove this," I prayed. "I trust you and believe in you. Help me to stop smoking." But I just could not quit. Finally God revealed to me that my smoking was a self-destructive way of trying to

take control of my own life because I didn't trust him with my life. Well, with that illumination I did stop smoking—sometimes. I would do pretty well, praying and working with trusting God, and I would say, "I don't smoke. I don't have the urges anymore. It's getting better!" And then some stress or disappointment would happen, and where would I run? I had a pack of cigarettes hidden under a flowerpot in the backyard, and I would go out and smoke a cigarette and feel much better temporarily. That's what I call running to enemy territory.

Where do you go when you're stressed? Do you eat too much, smoke too much, gossip too much? I'm so glad God included in Scripture that not only did David do things right, he also did things wrong, because so do we.

Well, thank goodness, David had God to rescue him from his own foolishness. He writes about it in Psalm 34:

"I will extol the LORD at all times;

his praise will always be on my lips....

I sought the LORD, and he answered me;

he delivered me from all my fears....

This poor man called, and the LORD heard him;

he saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,

and he delivers them."

(Verses 1, 4, 6-7.)

What do we learn from this account of David's running to enemy territory?

- God went with him.
- God delivered him out of it.
- God didn't shame David for that mistake.

Even in his foolishness, David found God working in his life, and he recognized it and praised God for it. God was working to bring things together for good for David even when David was acting nuts. This is certainly encouraging to me. Wilderness times are confusing. We can get lost, and in our pain and weakness we can make some mistakes. But God is present with us and is working his will out in our lives. David here tells us to thank God for saving us from the dumb things we do. We don't need to shame ourselves or beat ourselves up when we make mistakes. We need to do what David did—turn to God, discuss it with God, realize that God is active and will deliver us. God did deliver David out of Gath even though it was not a very noble moment for David.

Now, David was alone at this point. There was no one to whom he was accountable, no one to encourage him. He had no community to help him see God's perspective, to give him wise counsel. I think that is significant. We have times of solitude with God, but then we come out of those times and into community. God's plan is to build a people for himself. We individually have faith in God, but we live it out in community. Community

is a safeguard against falling back into our old sin patterns, and living in community encourages us to keep going forward with God when we are discouraged. We need each other. I come to church to be encouraged by your faith. We hear the word together and we are reminded that we want to follow God, that his way is the best way. We need one another to help us stay encouraged in God.

It is often said that community gives us accountability. What this does *not* mean is that I'm going to call you on everything you do wrong, and you're going to call me on everything I do wrong, and that way we'll stay within safe parameters. Rather, accountability is having someone who knows what you're struggling with pray for you and support you. When I was trying to stop smoking, I had a friend who fastened a little heart pin on my blouse and said, "I'm going to pray for you every single day, and this is a reminder that I'm with you in this battle." That's what true accountability is. It encourages us.

David's next stop in the wilderness brought him rest and the community that he so needed. David found refuge from his running in a cave in Adullam, which is located in the Judean wilderness. In the wilderness, David found God to be his ultimate refuge.

The gift of community

2 Samuel 22:1-2:

David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. When his brothers and his father's household heard about it, they went down to him there. All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him.

Psalm 142 is ascribed to this time in David's life. Listen to how sad and desperate he was.

“I cry aloud to the LORD;

I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.

I pour out my complaint before him;

before him I tell my trouble.

“When my spirit grows faint within me,

it is you who know my way.

In the path where I walk

men have hidden a snare for me.

Look to my right and see;

no one is concerned for me.

I have no refuge;

no one cares for my life.

“I cry to you, O LORD;
I say, ‘You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living.’
Listen to my cry,
for I am in desperate need;
rescue me from those who pursue me,
for they are too strong for me.
Set me free from my prison,
that I may praise your name.

“Then the righteous will gather about me
because of your goodness to me.”

Wilderness is an opportunity to get real with ourselves and God. David was alone, desperate, sad, and persecuted.

Then God brought David a gift. He brought him a community. David needed that. This new faith community was coming together under David’s leadership as he took refuge in the cave of Adullam. Notice this is the first time that David was not running—now he was resting. He was no longer initiating but receiving from God.

What he received, though, was surprising. His family came to him, which is a shock, because he'd had issues with his family from the beginning. In the last message we saw that his brothers didn't respect his call as king at all; they hated him and were jealous of him. Now they were coming to him, probably because Saul was persecuting them in some way. Then there were the three D's: the distressed, the debtors, and the discontented. There were four hundred of these folks. A new community was being formed, and actually a new kingdom was launched, with these very people. What an unlikely bunch! The three D's are not what we would think of as a good place to start a new kingdom, are they? Yet Jesus launched his kingdom with the same kinds of people.

God was birthing a new Israel out of the wilderness under David's leadership. And he was taking these unlikely candidates and forming them into a people who would belong to him and bring him glory. This is what God does with us when we get real with him in the wilderness of our lives. He births something new in us. It is good and beautiful, but often very painful.

Learning to trust God in the wilderness

I have asked Carol Lind to share some of her wilderness journey with us. I knew Carol when she was going through it and I've seen God build beautiful things in Carol's life as she walked with him through some very difficult times.

Carol Lind:

“When Judy asked me to share, it seemed only fair, because she has been on this journey with me for seventeen years at this point.

“My wilderness journey started when I was about to enter into a season of being divorced. I didn’t want to be divorced, or to face the pain, shame, disappointment, and fear of it. So I wanted to run away. I thought I would run to Idaho, where I didn’t know anyone. I didn’t want to be here and have to face into what was going to be a really difficult time. If I could get away where people didn’t know me, I thought, I wouldn’t have to face the shame, the failure of a fifteen-year marriage, the pain of personal rejection, the deep core pain of having someone I loved walk out of my life and take with him all the dreams I had for the future. I figured running away would give me a fresh start.

“I also didn’t want to face into a house under construction and in chaos, and my hopes for a family that were completely torn apart. I had so much fear for my young family—my kids were ten and seven—and every book I read on being a single parent told me they were going to turn into drug addicts and never know how to love people. I couldn’t see anything good in the future. I was angry at people and angry at God. I was also hurt, confused, and really panicked.

“Well, thankfully, I didn’t run to Idaho. I would have entered that time in the wilderness alone. I believe God would have met me there, but his plan was to meet me here in the middle of his community, with people who wanted to help me walk through that wilderness. So God surrounded me, captured me through his community and himself. A large number of people, many of whom are at PBC, came and walked alongside me in love.

“They were not perfect. A couple of weeks ago Steve Zeisler shared what Ruth Graham wanted on her gravestone: “Construction completed, thanks for your patience.” We all mean well, but we don’t always love perfectly. So a community of folks both loved and wounded me, but I’ve come to know they were just in process along with me. And the longer I’ve stayed in this community, the deeper those relationships have gotten, and the deeper my understanding of real love has grown.

“I have learned so much. I discovered through my time in the wilderness that the only real way out of shame and grief and fear is to go through them. You will come out the other end of the tunnel even if it is dark and long. There’s no predictable timetable for it. Just keep clinging close to God in every raw emotion and staying in connection with people who will help you go through it. I remember going through cycles of hurt and pain

and realizing that God was just healing a deeper section of my life. So I trust him for that.

“Psalm 142 has been very special to me. I’ve kept asking God to set me free from my own prison of shame and fear and guilt and to help me become the person he knows I will be. He’s still working at that, still forming me.

“I remember asking him specifically, ‘Why couldn’t I learn to love others by being loved?’ That seemed logical to me. He would reply, “You *are* loved.” Is it enough to believe what he says about me? Will that be enough for my life? I wrestled with him, and he patiently loved and led me through it. God is not afraid of our emotions, we are. He taught me to love and to be the mother my children needed me to be and to be a good friend for a lot of folks. The real truth ‘Cease striving and know that I am God’ is what became written on my heart and soul.

Could I believe that he was doing something bigger than my personal plan for my life? I had to learn to surrender my stolen dreams and my ruined future for his plan for my life. He knew what I was building on wasn’t really going to last anyway. What he gave me instead was a secure foundation and a building of joy and trust in my life. He rescued me from

myself and my false sense of security to give me true security. I had to learn how to yield and to lean in close.

“I still sometimes have questions about why it had to happen that way. I’ll still have moments when I run across some old friends whose marriage managed to make it through all the tumultuous times that mine didn’t survive, and I might have some pain, wondering, ‘Why me, Lord?’ But I lean in and trust him. I know he’s holding me through those times and I’m learning to be content with no real, solid answers. The times we live in are the meanwhile times, the times between what was and what will be. He holds us in those meanwhile times if we let him.

“I am incredibly grateful to God, and out of that has come a great deal of hope and peace. He took the pain of my past and molded it into a future that I could not have imagined. When someone meets you in the hardest and worst place and loves you, there is tremendous healing in that. I look back in awe and look forward in hope and peace. God truly has been and is setting me free from my prison of fear and shame and pain, and I praise his name.”

I have heard it said that you will never know that Jesus is all you need until he is all you have. Let me repeat that: you will never know that Jesus is all you need until he is all you

have. That's the gift of wilderness in our lives. It teaches us that God is our refuge and strength.

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1 Samuel 21:1-22:2

Second Message

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