

## 1 SAMUEL 24 IN THE WILDERNESS

The wilderness - do you aspire to be Bear Grylls? Would you like to have been John Muir, the man from Dunbar who discovered the wilderness of America and founded the American national parks? You see Ansell Adams' pictures of Yosemite and there are mountains and forests seemingly untouched; there are no people for miles and miles! You need to be used to your own company if you're going to wander the wilderness; you are there on your own. Either, you find that kind of solitude refreshing or you can't cope with it and need the noise and chatter of city-life. The wilderness is a wonderful place, there is a rugged beauty to it, it draws people back time and time again to be filled with wonder at the wild beauty of the wilderness. But it is also a dangerous place: you can't take it lightly; it is a place where wild animals live; you need to be well-prepared to visit the wilderness; we've all heard stories of people visiting the Scottish mountains and the weather has been fine when they've set out, but it has changed so quickly and they have been ill-prepared and the dangers of the wilderness have caught up with them; they need to be rescued and some have died in the wilderness. It is dangerous, but full of beauty!

The wilderness is also a picture of the circumstances that sometimes come along in our lives, or in our faith. There are times in our lives when we don't really understand what's happening; we're not really sure what's going on in our hearts and minds; our emotions are complex; we call into question things about us that we've never questioned before. There is something frightening about that! We're not really sure where God is or what God is doing and sometimes think that God has gone away and left us and that's why we feel as if the wilderness is the place where we wander. In the Bible stories of wilderness, it is a dangerous place, but it is also a place for rediscovering what is important in life, for opening our eyes to see what really matters. Some people argue that Church in Scotland is going through a kind of wilderness experience at the moment, a dark place where there are all sorts of dangers facing the future church, but it is also a place where church is rediscovering what really matters; more of that later.

David was in the wilderness. He had run away from Saul at the end of chapter 20 because of Saul's jealousy and hate and his threats against David's life. David is wandering around the hills of Judah in the south of the country, trying to stay one step ahead of Saul. Saul hears that David is in such-and-such a place; he goes there to try to catch or kill him, but by the time he gets there David has moved on. The story is clear that God is keeping David safe. There is a story of David being on one side of the hill and Saul being on the other, but they miss each other completely. Saul wants rid of David; he is a threat to his throne; he is jealous of David's popularity! David is one step ahead all of the time. It must also have been the other kind of wilderness experience for David: here was a young man who was destined to be king, or so he had been told; God had promised him he would be king. He has run away and is as far as he could be from the corridors of power; it looks so unlikely that he will ever be king, since he is sleeping in caves, under the stars, in cold, dangerous places; the wilderness is a real challenge to the promises of God. Yet, this is also a place where he has a deep sense that God is there; that God is his refuge; there would have been the temptation to become ruthless, a hard-hearted killer, taking revenge on Saul, but we discover a very different David, a good man, walking in good, godly ways.

He has gathered a group of men round him, friends and supporters; together they make a life in the wilderness; the friends look out for David, they help him, fight with him, and protect him. In today's story, David and his group are hiding in the back of a

cave and as we said earlier, Saul comes into the cave, probably for the toilet. The friends urge David to seize the opportunity and kill Saul; not only that, they claim that this opportunity is God-given; after all, Saul has been trying to get rid of David; shouldn't David strike first and now would be a fine time; he would become king! "*The men...*" (1 Samuel 24:4) Here's the test: what kind of man is David? Is he the kind of man to take advantage of Saul in this way? Is he the kind of man who will take the king's life in cold blood? No! He's not that kind of man at all. "*David crept...*" (1 Samuel 24:4) Even then his conscience bothers him: "*David was...*" (1 Samuel 24:5f) David is full of mercy, grace, and compassion; David is a good man, his goodness untouched by the evil that lives in Saul's heart; he discovered that when the test arrived.

But, then, he tells Saul what he has done. David is being hunted, but Saul has listened to gossip that has been completely wrong (as gossip so often is!) Saul has finished his toilet and has left cave and David goes after him. "*Why do...*" (1 Samuel 24:9) "*See, my father...*" (1 Samuel 24:11) David holds up a piece of the robe that he has cut from Saul's coat; he demonstrates quite clearly that he could have killed Saul, but chose not to; he chose to show the king the deep respect and love that David has for King and for the fact that Saul is God's anointed king; there is no way David could hurt or harm the king; there is no way that David could take Saul's life. In the wilderness, hunted and hated, yet David discovers in his heart a basic sense of goodness and loyalty and godliness. He shows Saul up! Saul is humbled by David, but only for a time; later he will renew his attack and David will have to stay alert, will have to stay one step ahead.

What did David discover in the wilderness? "*Have mercy...*" (Psalm 57:1) God is there with him; the title of Psalm 57 puts these words alongside David in the cave, hiding from Saul. God is his refuge, his hiding-place, the One who saves him. His life is under threat from people who set traps for him, who chase him around the wilderness; God is One who saves. David discovers that, even in wilderness, even in the most dangerous place he has ever lived, God is there. He has discovered that even when life is at its lowest point, when his hopes and aspirations seem to be empty and kingship a long way away, even at the lowest point in his emotions and in his faith, God is there; God is the refuge of his life, his place of safety; he learns to trust God in a new way.

What else did David discover? It matters to be good. I can't help putting alongside this story, these words from Romans 12: "*If your...*" (Romans 12:20f) Good overcomes evil. I'm not sure that we'd always agree with that in our world, but it was the way Jesus taught and lived; goodness is more powerful than evil; the small light of goodness will break the darkness of evil in the world. David could so easily have gone down the road of giving back Saul like for like; his men urged him to do that. But he resisted that temptation, he resisted their urging and discovered that goodness works. Goodness is not weakness in the face of hatred; goodness is strength and power to bring hatred and evil to its knees. Had there been hatred and jealousy in David, it would just have produced more hatred and jealousy in a downward, vicious spiral; David learned that goodness matters more, that goodness is stronger and better.

What do we discover in the wilderness? As I said earlier, some writers describe the situation of the churches in the UK and W Europe as being in this kind of wilderness. These are dangerous times for churches: there are all kinds of threats to the well-being and to the future of the church, from aggressive atheism and secularism, to smaller, aging congregations and a growing sense of disconnect from the culture in which we live. But in the wilderness, churches can also rediscover what is important.

There are times when our lives are best described as being in the wilderness: faith is tested, emotions are unsettled, we're asking questions we've never asked of ourselves before; it is a dangerous place, perhaps even a time to walk away from God and give up faith? But the wilderness is also the place where churches, and we as individuals, learn what really matters. We learn the qualities of life all over again; we learn to focus our minds afresh on walking in the ways of the Lord. In Moses' wilderness story, the people learned to live in God's ways, trusting the Lord. In Jesus' wilderness story He learned to focus on His sense of mission and how He completed the mission of God in the world. What is there for us to learn?

There are three qualities: faith, hope and love. Churches learn that traditions are great, but that it is far more important to have these qualities. Christians discover that the most important thing is to be right kind of people! These three qualities are so often the way in which the Bible draws us back to what matters most. Faith, hope and love: faith - the quality that reminds us to trust the Lord, to see what God has promised us and has done for us in Jesus, and to learn to trust Him because He is faithful and is worthy of that trust. Hope is related to faith – the quality that reminds us that there is more to come, that God is still at work in our hearts and in the world, and that His work is not yet finished; He is still with us and is still at work in us, and the hope of heaven is real. Love - the quality that shapes our relationships with God and with other people, that we love the Lord and love others; nothing matters more than love and everything that is the opposite of love should be cut off and thrown away. Paul reminds us of what love looks like in Romans 12: sincere, devoted, hospitable, sharing others' joys and sorrows, not repaying evil for evil, but loving our enemies and living at peace. We re-learn these qualities in the wilderness: we learn again that nothing matters quite as much as faith, hope and love; we need to learn that again as a church, because we forget so easily and lose sight of God and lose sight of one another. As individuals, we need to learn that nothing matters quite so much as faith, hope and love.

What would you have done? If you had been in the back of the cave, surrounded by friends urging you to kill person who hates you, what would you have done? Would you have seized your chance? Would you have taken your chance to get rid of the king and become king in his place? What does that tell you about yourself? David discovered that it is better to be good, to return hatred with love, to return evil with good. David discovered that it is better to trust the Lord: God is working out His purpose in His good time and David learned to trust the Lord and be good. Faith, hope, love - three fantastic qualities: as a church, let us learn to trust the Lord for salvation; let us learn to put our hope in Him for the future; let us learn to love one another, really, truly, deeply devoted to one another. In the wilderness, nothing else matters!