

Ash Wednesday Devotion 2026

Hey church, if you didn't get to join us for our Ash Wednesday service this morning, I wanted to send out the devotion that I gave for your encouragement. I hope that this edifies you on this Ash Wednesday.

Every year for our Ash Wednesday service, we choose a theme from the season of Lent and take time to meditate on and consider what the Lord might have for us regarding that theme. A few years ago, we talked about Repentance. Last year we talked about Dust. This year, we are talking about The Wilderness.

It seems fitting to consider this theme for a few reasons:

- We're going through Exodus in Bible Study.
- In Matthew, we've just seen that John the Baptist was living out in the wilderness.
- And, in Matthew 4, Jesus goes out into the wilderness for His temptation.
- Even the Bible Project recently put out a video on this theme!

What might the Lord have to say to us about the wilderness?

The Wilderness is a harsh, dry, and desolate place. It is a place of suffering, a place of nothing. Matt, in his sermon on John the Baptist a couple weeks ago, said, "Town is where things are at, not the wilderness."

The wilderness is often compared with all of the ways that we suffer or that feeling of exile. We will sometimes say, "I'm going through it." Trials and sufferings and pain feel like that desolate place. I once heard someone say, "Either you're in it, you just came out of it, or you're about to go through it." *It feels like that sometimes, doesn't it?*

In the biblical story, the wilderness is also a place of testing. When we look through the story of Scripture, we see men and women brought into the wilderness in order to be tested by the Lord. We often balk at testing, "Why would God do that? Doesn't He know that we will fail?"

But, if it is a means of testing by God, then it is also a means of *preparation*. **The wilderness is not the place where God takes His people for their end, it is the place that He takes them for their beginning.**

- Creation began in a wilderness chaos.
- Hagar was in the wilderness when she met God and His provision.
- Moses went out into the wilderness and met God at the burning bush.
- Israel was out in the wilderness for forty years, and then God took them into the Promised Land.

In fact, this is where the prophets provide a surprising twist. They often foretold coming judgment upon the people of God for their sin. Judgment in the form of exile. Yet, just when you

thought that this would be the end for the people of God, the prophets would give some form of hope for redemption.

The book of Isaiah is just such an example. Chapters 1-39 of the book are filled with prophecies about Judah's coming judgment. Because Israel sinned by chasing after other gods in idolatry, God was going to send them into exile in Babylon. The just punishment for sin would be the experience of wilderness that they would endure.

In between chapter 39 and 40, however, Isaiah shifts the people that he is speaking to. Chapter 39 ends with the final prophecy of exile. And, chapter 40 picks up with prophecies and promises written to the people who would be in exile. Here are the words of Isaiah 40:1-5:

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries:

"**In the wilderness** prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

As we saw a couple weeks ago, that prophecy is fulfilled in John the Baptist. Yet, what God is promising here is a highway through the wilderness! As one pastor said, "God is putting an 8-lane expressway through the desert back to Him!" From this point on, Isaiah is filled with prophecies about hope in exile. Hope in the wilderness. Hope for a new beginning.

Here's my hope for us this Ash Wednesday: I hope that as a church we can—with faith in Jesus Christ and not in ourselves—begin to see our present sufferings and sojourn in this life—our wilderness wanderings—not for the situation that it is but for the future that it holds for us.

We talk about suffering well. I'm not sure if that is always the best language. Our hope should never be to punish or castigate someone who is struggling by saying, "Be better."

However, in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, each and every one of us should desire to be more like Him in our suffering and more faithful in our times of desperation.

So, I want to conclude with four words for our wilderness wanderings: See, Surrender, Rejoice, and Go

1. **See** that God is with you in the wilderness. A little further into the book of Isaiah, God gives us this promise.

Isaiah 43:2 & 5

²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

⁵Fear not, for I am with you...

If you are currently going through it, this is what I hope for you. You need not hear anything else from the rest of this article. Just look for Jesus Christ and His presence in the wilderness. For the rest of the folks who aren't yet, I have more to say, but for you, just look for God's presence. You will find Him. See that He is with you.

2. **Surrender.** Trust Him and Rest in His provision. As we suffer and as we wrestle in these wilderness places, we want to begin to surrender our control, our grip, on our future. This is where things begin to get harder. Jesus prays and leads us to pray, "Your will be done." This is ultimate surrender to the God who holds tomorrow. We say, "Lord, I trust you with my future, not what I think is best. If you know that it would be better for me to experience this trial, then your will be done."

3. **Rejoice**

This is where it gets a little harder. Who wants to rejoice in trials? But, consider all of the biblical encouragements to find joy in difficult circumstances! It would be one thing if there was only one command to rejoice in our sufferings. I could disregard Paul if he was the only one to say it. He was a little crazy. But, then we see that Peter and James say it as well:

- Romans 5:3–5; ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
- James 1:2–4; ²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
- *This is the big one for our purposes.* 1 Peter 4:13; **But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.**

Each of these encouragements to rejoice in our sufferings are filled with the hope that Jesus will bring about greater meaning and deeper purpose from our trials. Each of them fits the biblical pattern: First comes suffering, then comes glory.

4. **Go** to Jesus Christ in the wilderness

This is where we need some clarity. Christianity is not stoicism or asceticism where the end of our religion is voluntary suffering. NO! We believe that the end of pursuing Jesus Christ is ultimate joy! Yet, in order to have that ultimate joy, we understand that we will have to suffer. So, in that regard, we should seek Jesus Christ where He is.

- Hebrews 13:12–14; ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate [in the wilderness] in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

When we observe the season of Lent, we are seeking to imitate this approach. We are fasting from the pleasures of this earthly city so that we can enjoy the lasting pleasures of our heavenly city. We give up our temporary enjoyments so that we can partake of an eternal reward.

The biblical pattern is this: First comes suffering, then comes glory. We wander in this wilderness sojourn now in the hope of the coming greater glory of God.