

“The Search for Stability”

Who Needs the Past, Pt. 5

Well, good morning everybody. We are spending the summer looking for ancient solutions to modern problems through the prayer book of God’s people, the Psalms. And that’s good, because we’ve got plenty of modern problems don’t we? What a crazy year. School was supposed to have started last Tuesday. Nope! AISD is scheduled for Sept. 8. Anybody ready to wager on how this fall is going to turn out? Nothing is normal.

This is the time of year when we should be all returning from vacation mode. Did we *have* vacation mode? Is sitting on the couch watching Netflix for hours on end a vacation? Deanna and I were supposed to celebrate our 25th anniversary this year by going to Argentina in July. Exploring the Amazon! Instead we stayed home and *shopped* on Amazon. No place to go. I was thinking about last year and how we camped out in Yellowstone National Park – just incredible. Here’s a picture of our camp site. Yes, we were in tent. It got down into the 30’s at night, in July!

Now, that’s not a bad segue, because our Psalm for today is also about camping. Psalm 81 is about tents. But the camping we’re talking about today is a little different. How many of you know it’s one thing to *get* to live in a tent, it’s another thing to *have* to live in a tent? We’ve got homeless encampments in Austin, you know what I mean.

I’ll explain more in a minute, but first let’s read the text together, **Psalm 81:1-16**,

Sing for joy to God our strength;

shout aloud to the God of Jacob!

2 Begin the music, strike the tambourine,

play the melodious harp and lyre.

3 Sound the ram’s horn at the New Moon,

and when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast;

4 this is a decree for Israel,

an ordinance of the God of Jacob.

5 He established it as a statute for Joseph

when he went out against Egypt,

where we heard a language we did not understand.

6 He says, “I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands

were set free from the basket.

7 In your distress you called and I rescued you,

I answered you out of a thundercloud;

I tested you at the waters of Meribah.

8 Hear, O my people, and I will warn you—

if you would but listen to me, O Israel!

9 You shall have no foreign god among you;

you shall not bow down to an alien god.

10 I am the Lord your God,

who brought you up out of Egypt.

Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.

11 But my people would not listen to me;

Israel would not submit to me.

12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts

to follow their own devices.

13 If my people would but listen to me,

if Israel would follow my ways,

14 how quickly would I subdue their enemies

and turn my hand against their foes!

15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,

and their punishment would last forever.

16 But you would be fed with the finest of wheat;

with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

Ok, so **Psalm 81** is about a 40-year period in which the people of Israel, *had* to live in tents. This was a Psalm for what was – and *is*, Jews still celebrate this – called - The Feast of Tabernacles. We read in **v.3**, “*Sound the ram’s horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our festival.*” Now the ram’s horn – the shofar – was blown to announce the annual feasts that Israel observed, and the only month when the horn was blown twice – the new moon at the beginning of the month and the full moon which is 15 days into the month – it was the 7th month of the Hebrew calendar. And that was when they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, which was the annual time when they remembered their wanderings in the wilderness. They remembered what it was like to spend 40 years living in tents.

A quick recap, the Hebrew people had been slaves for generations in Egypt until God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh to “Let my people go.” And then there were the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. And God led them to the Promised Land *but* while He was giving the 10 Commandments to Moses, the people turned against God, so before they could enter the land flowing with milk and honey they had to wander around in the wilderness for 40 years.

And this entire Psalm is about that. V.6 talks about how God led them out of slavery in Egypt. V.7 talks about God speaking to them from Mt Sinai; on and on. It’s all about what the people of God did and didn’t do in the wilderness. Now, why would God instruct them to have that kind of festival every year? The Israelites had lots of festivals – they were and are a party people – nearly one every month. Passover – that one we can understand; an annual celebration of being released from slavery. That’s an independence day. But why take time to remember 40 years of wandering in the wilderness?

Well, the wilderness is a very important theme in the Bible. It’s not simply something that Israel went through in their history, but it was so important that God told them to go back every year and think about it. When you get to the New Testament, the very first voice you hear is a voice crying in the wilderness – John the Baptist. And he went around calling the people *back* into the wilderness to be baptized in order to meet God in a new way.

The first thing that happens in Jesus public ministry after he is baptized and anointed with the Spirit – very first thing – is he is sent into the wilderness. And the book of Hebrews in the New Testament – especially chapters 3 and 4, but the whole thing really - says that God calls all of us to consider ourselves still in the wilderness.

In other words, the Bible calls us to take the historical narrative of slaves set-free but wandering in the desert for a time on their way to the Promised Land – the Bible calls us to make that the key metaphor through which we understand our lives on this earth. We're supposed to use *that* picture of the Hebrews in the wilderness to understand *our* lives and the things that happen to us.

So that means the Bible is saying that right now, **life in this world is a wilderness**. What does that mean? I don't know about you, but when I think of a wilderness, I tend to think of a forest – some thick overgrown place. But when the Bible says wilderness, it's talking about the desert. And that's important to understand, because the thing about a desert is it cannot support human life. You can't grow enough food to live there, you can't catch enough food to live there, there's not enough water to live there.

When the nation of Israel moved through the desert – millions of them – the only reason they didn't all die was because of the miraculous intervention of God. Only through the miracles; the manna, the water, the guiding cloud by day and the pillar of fire at night – a giant nightlight - only by God's miraculous intervention were they able to survive - because by definition, a desert is a place that cannot support human life.

So why does the Bible say that you, right now, must understand that you're living in a wilderness? Right now, your life *is* a desert. Here's why; the Bible is saying that just as the physical desert could not support physical human life, so the world as you experience it today can never support the deepest longings of your heart. It can never fully support the deepest needs of your life. Never! The world will never satisfy you. Oh, with a lot of work you can build a city in the desert, but at best you've got Las Vegas – kind of fake at best and downright miserable at worst. But it can't give you what you really need.

So why is that important? Think about it; most people, when things go wrong – when they have wilderness experiences – when the wells they've been looking to run dry, when the food they've been looking to runs out – the wilderness means that the things that have been sustaining you dry up, they go away – your health goes, a relationship goes, your career goes, your money goes, something important dries up. And almost immediately, the first thing we say is, “Why did God let that happen?” And there's nothing wrong with that question, per se. The Psalmists often ask it.

But many times lurking beneath that question is an assumption; if my career *hadn't* gone south, if that relationship *hadn't* broken, if only I'd have gotten married by now, *or* if only I hadn't married *this* lump! We say "If only this hadn't happened, I'd be happy." And the reason we get mad at God is we understand that His job is to arrange the circumstances of the world - my health and my career and my relationships - so that everything works out so I'm happy.

And the Bible says, "Get real. You don't understand that this world can't support the deepest needs of your heart. The *best* marriage can't. The *best* career can't. The *best* relationships can't. They don't when you have them and you eventually will lose them. It's the nature of this world to be a wilderness." Your heart cannot find the rest it's looking for in anything here.

Both just the Bible, but the natural sciences back this up as well. You've heard of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics - the law of entropy, the universal principle that energy is in constant decay - everything is falling apart. Here's an illustration of what that looks like. Take a chicken out of the oven. You ever pick up one of those rotisserie chickens at the grocery store or Costco and they smell so good? Bring it home and put it on the table, umm, mmm. But let's wait...wait for three hours and it's cold.

Wait for three *days* and it stinks. Wait for three weeks and now it's a health hazard - the thing that used to nourish is now making people sick. You say, "Of course, that's what happens because everything is falling apart. Everything is losing energy."

But look at that chicken - getting smelly, then getting rancid, then getting diseased - and it's a picture of your future. But not just your future; every family, you get it just where you want it, but it won't be long before things start to fall apart. Every family, every neighborhood, every physical body. Even if somehow you could get all of those circumstances just right in that moment, go to the people who have had the very best marriages, the very best careers, the very best bodies, the very best everything and *even then*, this world cannot give you what you need without God.

The people of Israel would have died in the desert *except* that God intervened. And you will never, ever, ever, get the deepest needs of your heart satisfied by anything in this world unless you have God. This world *can't* do it...because it's a wilderness. We're really experiencing that now in this pandemic, but it's always been true. Life is a wilderness - there's a lot of good things in it, but they can't satisfy your heart without God. That needs to be the paradigm through which you view your life - that's what this Psalm is teaching.

But the second thing this Psalm shows us is *though* life is a wilderness – though life will continuously disappoint you, though life cannot support the deepest desires of your heart – **there’s a rock in the wilderness**. We’ll get to it in a few minutes, but the very end of the passage says, “If only you would have done this and this in the wilderness, I would have satisfied you through the rock.”

But the rock is also mentioned up in **v.7**, even though not by name, when it says, “*In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I tested you at the waters of Meribah.*” Now, what happened at Meribah? This is a specific location along the wilderness route that the people traveled, and, not once but twice – in Exodus 17 and in Numbers 20 – God miraculously saved the people from dying of thirst by causing water to come out of a rock. Happened at least twice and maybe more. **Psalm 78:15**, says, “*He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them water as abundant as the seas;*” See, “rocks” is plural, so at least twice and perhaps more.

So that by the end of Moses’ life, after all the wilderness wanderings, he composed a song – the Song of Moses in **Deuteronomy 32** – and he is the first one to say that God is the rock. This is what he said, in **v.3-4**, “*I will proclaim the name of the Lord. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! **He is the***

Rock...” And several more times in the passage he calls God “the Rock.” I could have titled this message, “Can You Smell What The Rock Is Cooking?” I don’t always make wrestling jokes, but when I do, I prefer them to be 20 years old!

But long before Dwayne Johnson, God was The Rock. In fact, very interesting in **v. 37-39**, “*He will say: ‘Now where are their gods, **the rock they took refuge in**, the gods who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offerings? Let them rise up to help you! Let them give you shelter! See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me.’*” So he said the people were even looking for *other* rocks to shelter them in the desert, but only the one true God could really be their rock.

What does all this mean? Even though, spiritually speaking, life is a wilderness, in the wilderness is a rock. What it means is it’s the wilderness where you meet God. The wilderness times of your life are not just times to be endured, not just times to get mad at God, no the scripture says that it’s in the wilderness that you *meet* God. The wilderness experiences are the premier times in your life when you can meet God. You see it in the metaphors you find over and over again in the Psalms – the valley of the shadow, a dry riverbed, abandoned and lonely, surrounded by enemies – those are the times you actually *meet* God in a very real way.

And it's all over the Bible. When did Moses meet God? Ever heard that burning bush story? He knew about God, he believed in God, but where did God become a *reality* to him? Where did God meet him face-to-face as it were? He was in the wilderness. The prophet Elijah had this incredible experience of an earthquake and then a fire and then the still, small voice of God speaking to him. He was depressed and discouraged and then God appeared. Where was he? He was in the wilderness. The Gospel of Mark very specifically says that when Jesus went away to pray, he went into the wilderness. We've already talked about John the Baptist.

It's in the wilderness that you meet God. This is a simple fact of human nature – and I wish it wasn't true, but it is – you may believe in God, you may pray to God, you may subscribe to the idea of God...but God will only become your *rock*, God will only become your *shelter* – you know in the desert, you run to the rock just to get shelter from the unbearable heat, just a little shade – but the Bible is telling you it hardly ever happens, you hardly ever meet God, *except* in the wilderness.

And so, what we thought was bad news – aw, life is a wilderness – isn't actually gloomy news at all, but it's also a hopeful thing. Because it's in the *desert* that people meet God. I know it's true for me. When things are good, I am easily distracted from God, but

when I'm in trouble, I run to Him. And so we have to work to remember that. God says, "You need a ritual to help you remember." So the Feast of Tabernacles had a water ritual because it was in the wilderness that God provided the water. The Feast of Tabernacles had a light ritual because it was in the wilderness that God was the pillar of fire and gave light.

And every time something really bad happens to you, there is a voice that comes and says, "Make me your rock in the wilderness, because all other rocks will crumble. Make me your light when all other lights go out. Make me your water when all other wells dry up." Don't you see now that in this life, all other lights *will* go out, all other wells *will* dry up, all other rocks *will* crumble...but not God, the true rock." And it's only in the wilderness that that truly becomes a reality.

I preach this stuff all the time – you're sitting there listening to it right now – but a lot of you are not going to hear it, not really. You know when I see these messages become reality for people? When we're in the hospital together. When we're at the funeral. In the courtroom. When you're unemployed and trying to figure out how to make your mortgage. When we're sitting down and trying to put a marriage back together. When your kids are keeping you up at night – and I don't mean when they're infants.

Only in the wilderness do you really find your rock. It's almost only when all the others lights go out that God becomes your light. It's only when all the other wells dry up that God becomes your source of living water – your food, your hope, your meaning. I don't want to say that you *only* grow when you suffer, but what the Bible must be telling you when it keeps saying, "Remember you are in the wilderness" is that unless you recognize this, when things go wrong, you won't see the opportunity. And you'll just grin and bear it and hope for it to go away, but you won't grow stronger through the experience. And what a shame, to take a test and not learn anything from it.

So first of all we're taught that life is a wilderness, second that there's a rock in the wilderness but the third thing this shows us is that you don't *just* get strength, you don't *just* get the bare necessities, but there is **honey in the rock**. See, if my people would only listen to me, **v.16**, "*...with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.*" Do you know what's so amazing about this? This is saying, "There is more in that rock than you imagined."

If you were out in the desert and you looked over and saw a big rock, would you go to it? Yes, you'd say, "I need the shade, I need the warmth of the rock when the sun does go down at night, there might be rain water still in a crevice of the rock." You'd go to the rock expecting some basic things, but you wouldn't

expect *honey*. So this is God's way of saying, "Out of the most unpromising situation, I can bring something good; something sweet. Out of the rockiest times in your life, I can bring love, joy, gentleness and beauty."

Well, somebody says, that sounds like Romans 8:28. And it does and it is, I think, linked to that, but let me give you a little caution as we approach this. **Romans 8:28 (KJV)** is a famous verse, lots of people love it, and it goes like this, "*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God...*" "All things work together for good." It's God saying, "If you trust me, I'll bring good out of bad. I'll bring something sweet out of the bitter."

And that's a great promise, but I think people often misunderstand this promise and you can misuse it. And that can set you up for disappointment. First of all, "all things work together for good" does *not* mean every individual thing has a good result. I think sometimes we think God's going to rectify every single negative thing. So somebody says, "I was up for the audition of my life but I broke my leg and didn't get the part and my career took a dive, but when I was in the hospital I met a nurse and we fell in love and she's the love of my life. So see, everything has a good result."

That is minimizing the tragic-ness of life. That is minimizing the wilderness-ness of life. New word today! The Bible doesn't say that every cloud has a silver lining. What it says is, all things work together for good – not that every single thing will be good. And the other thing we have to remember is that not everything is a blessing in disguise. When Jesus' friend Lazarus died too young and too soon, Jesus didn't put on some happy face. He wept and he was angry at the tragedy. Because God hates the evil that is inflicted on His children. He hates the bad stuff that happens to you.

He didn't build us for a world like this. If you want to see the world He built us for go back to Genesis 1 and 2; it didn't have death. God hates it. To bring something good out of something evil doesn't mean it wasn't evil to begin with. Doesn't mean God likes it. Yes, in the end God will cause everything to work out for His Glory and your blessings; one day God will take you out of the desert and into the Promised Land, but that doesn't negate the reality of the wilderness. So be careful when you quote these kinds of passages, not to minimize the tragedy and the pain that people experience in the desert of life.

So with that said, what does this mean? Here's what I think the Bible is telling us; that out of your wilderness, God makes you something sweet. Out of wilderness experiences, God can make *you* like Jesus; He can make *you* something beautiful, He can make *you* something sweet...for *other* people to be nourished by in their wilderness experience.

Quick example, wouldn't you like the sweetness of being a forgiving person? A person who doesn't stay angry at anybody? A person who doesn't wallow in the misery of being bitter? How do you get that forgiving spirit? It's not easy. See, the reason why you have trouble forgiving people is because you feel superior to them. "Well, I would *never* do anything that!" But in the wilderness you will be humbled. In the wilderness you will be *humiliated* – same word.

In the wilderness you will find you are nowhere near as courageous as you thought, nowhere near as smart as you thought, nowhere near as spiritual, nowhere near as unselfish. You will be humiliated by what the wilderness will show you about the weakness of your heart and character. *But*, out of the horrible humiliation of that – out of the rockiness of it – you'll become a more gracious person. You'll be able to forgive. Out of the rock...honey. God will make *you* something sweet.

But there is a condition to it. I know people who have suffered who have *not* become more forgiving, *not* become more joyful, *not* grown closer to God but actually driven further away from God. And it's because of the word "if." Look at **v.13**, "*If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways,*" then they would get the honey from the rock. Which means there is a condition here.

It's only by going to the rock – only by going to God – that you get the sweetness in the wasteland. I can't tell you how important this is. Everybody in the world will go through the wilderness – we're in it – no matter how charmed their life looks, everybody experiences the desert. And it will either make you more sour or more sweet. As the old preacher said, "You can get bitter or you can get better!" More like Jesus or less like Jesus depending on what you do with it. You are put to the test in the wilderness. And if you pass the test...*then* you get the sweet.

v.7 says, "*I tested you at the waters of Meribah.*" How do you pass the test? There's three things; three things that Psalms 81 says, "If my people..." Some of you are in the wilderness right now – who are we kidding, a *lot* of us are in the wilderness right now! - here are three things you *must* do if you want honey from the rock. **First of all, praise.** Notice how the whole Psalm starts, **v.1-2**, "*Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob! Begin the music, strike the timbrel, play the melodious harp and lyre.*"

It starts with a command to sing together; to worship God together. Don't overlook this as a discipline. God calls you to worship on schedule, whether you feel like it or not. To come and sing and pray and hear God's word, with God's people – corporate worship.

What most people do in terrible times of wilderness is they don't feel like going – of course you don't! – so they withdraw like a hermit in the desert. But hermits are weirdo's. We only make it through the wilderness when we stick together.

That's one of the things that's making our current wilderness experience extra difficult. We feel so disconnected from community. There are always people sick, but to not be able to visit them in the hospital is unbearable. People always die, but not to get to grieve together in a funeral is brutal. We are feeling the loss of social capital. And so we have to go the extra mile to stay connected.

I get that many of you can't physically come to church right now. Until we figure out how to bring nursery and childcare back, a large part of our congregation is stranded, I get it. But be disciplined about tuning in. Sing with us, even though it feels weird to be singing in your pajamas on the couch! But it's important, not just that you get the content, but that we have some semblance of getting it together. That's why we've continued to broadcast this live every Sunday at 9am – some sense of normalcy. Community counts. So that's the first thing – corporate praise.

The second thing is you have to meditate. Now we went in depth on what it means to mediate two weeks ago in the message *A Taste of Transcendence* on Psalm 63. So if you missed it, go back and give it a listen. But this is a big theme in the psalms. Over and over again, God says “listen to my voice.” He doesn't just say “obey me”, He says, “listen to my voice. When you are in the wilderness, what you need more than anything else is to sense God speaking to you. You need to open the Bible and read and reflect until you sense God speaking to you. You need *His* counsel. You need to hear *His* voice in the word of scripture. You mustn't neglect that discipline. You worship God corporately, mediate on God's word individually.

And then the third thing is – and I say it fairly often – **check your heart for idols.** Look at **V.9**, “*You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not worship any god other than me.*” What He is saying is, especially in the wilderness, look for your idols. And here's the reason why; when you are suffering, there's a very tricky balance. Part of the suffering is unavoidable. If you've lost your job, that *should* hurt. You were created to work. If you've lost someone who you've loved, that hurts. And it *should* hurt because you need relationships. Some of the hurt is unavoidable.

But, if your newly lost relationship or your job or your status or your reputation, if it's *too* important to you – if it's *all* important to you – if it's your main source of meaning in life, if it's your rock in a sense; then your suffering is going to be magnified through idolatry. There is always a hint of idolatry clinging to our normal desires and attitudes towards the things around us. Including *good* things; this church can be an idol for me if I'm not careful and this church is a *great* thing. And therefore God calls you – especially in the wilderness time – to the discipline of self-examination and repentance for inordinate desires. Repentance of desires that have been magnified by idolatry. There's a balance. You shouldn't think that *all* of your suffering comes from idolatry, or that *none* of it does.

So those are three incredibly important disciplines. If you do them – corporate worship, scriptural meditation and self-examination and repentance for your underlying idols and inordinate desires – there will be honey in the rock. There will be a growing sweetness in your heart. There will be a growing gratitude in your life. There will be a growing sensitivity to others. There will be a growing wisdom, humility, all those things. You'll be becoming more and more like Jesus...*if* my people – *if* you do those three things, *if* you pass the test, you will find honey in the rock.

Now, one last thing. That's all great, but I have a problem. See, we've said that life is a wilderness, there's a rock in the wilderness and there's honey in the rock if you pass the test. Great, but my problem is, I *don't* pass the test when I'm in the wilderness. More often than not I *fail* the test in the wilderness. I mean that is what Israel did. They failed the test continuously for 40 years - can you imagine being held back in school for 40 years?! So why should I expect to be any different? I guess there is no hope for me.

Well, hold on, when Jesus Christ began his ministry, he was immediately thrown into the wilderness. During Jesus' baptism we are told in **Mark 1:11**, "*And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'*" Well, that's awesome, what son doesn't want public affirmation from his father? But then look at **v.12**, "*At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness.*" Dad-gum! "At once"? Couldn't you give him a couple of days to enjoy the "well pleased" part. Nope, hop to it Hey-zeus, into the wilderness.

And for 40 days, he was tested by the devil himself. Very symbolic: Israel tested in the desert for 40 years and failed. Jesus tested in the desert for 40 days...and he passed with flying colors. He passed every test perfectly. He did all the things in his 40 days that the people couldn't do in 40 years. So he passed the test that we failed.

But here's where the hope comes in. Because just knowing that Jesus passed doesn't help me, because I still fail. I'm happy for you, but I'm still stuck out here. But Jesus didn't just pass the test as your *example*; he passed the test as your *substitute*. Let me show you this. In Exodus 17, the account of the test at Mirabah, goes like this, the people were thirsty and they blamed Moses, and through Moses, God – it says they "quarreled" with him. And that word "quarreled" means "sued." Now, if you are in a relationship and you sue your partner, you obviously don't want to keep that relationship. That's going to drive a wedge.

And so Moses is shocked, not only are they failing the test, but they are flunking out. It's one thing to fail a test, it's another thing to shoot the teacher the bird on the way out of the classroom. But that's what the Israelites were doing. So how is God going to handle such open rebellion? **Exodus 17:5** "*The Lord answered Moses, 'Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.'*"

Uh-oh. Moses got the staff, somebody's about to get a beat down. That staff was not just a walking stick. Moses' staff represented the justice and wrath of God. It was what he used to smack the Egyptians and unleash all those plagues. It was what parted the sea and closed it up again, drowning Pharaoh's army in the process. So what Moses was expecting was for God to use the staff on these people who just failed the test big time. Judgment.

But to Moses' absolute astonishment, here's what happened, God said, (v.6) "*I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.*" Don't strike the *people* with the staff; strike the rock. And Moses must have been so shocked; these people failed the test...and they still got the water. They totally failed the test and God still provided for them. Moses didn't understand.

But Paul understood, because in **1 Corinthians 10:4** he says that our ancestors passed into the desert with Moses and "...*they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.*" Here's what Paul understood; when you and I go into the wilderness we fail the test, but when Jesus went into the wilderness he passed the test. And what happened when Jesus died? Paul said in **2 Corinthians 5:21**, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*"

And what that means is, when I believe in Jesus – that he died for me – and when I say, "Father accept me because of what Jesus has done" – God treats Jesus as if he'd failed in the wilderness and God treats me as if I'd passed. The staff comes down on *him*. The staff that I deserve and the staff that you deserve.

And here's what that means very, very practically; I don't have to be afraid in the wilderness. Because if I pass the test, of course, the sweetness will come faster. But I can tell you personally that I find that God changes me and God loves me and God pulls me closer, not only through my few success in the wilderness, but even through my many failures. He meets me in my *failures* now, not just in my success.

Why? Because the staff came down on Jesus. He's leading me to the Promised Land. He's taking me to a place where there will be no more tests, he's going to get me there – faster or slower depending on how much I obey Him – but He *will* get me there.

If you are a Christian, God has set you free from the slavery of sin. And He's leading you towards the Promised Land. And where does He take you in between? To the desert! But there's a rock in that desert...and there's honey in the rock...and if you will go to him – go to the rock - you will be changed.

Let's pray...