



Pilgrimage

MY JOURNEY TO A DEEPER FAITH
IN THE LAND WHERE JESUS WALKED

LYNN
AUSTIN



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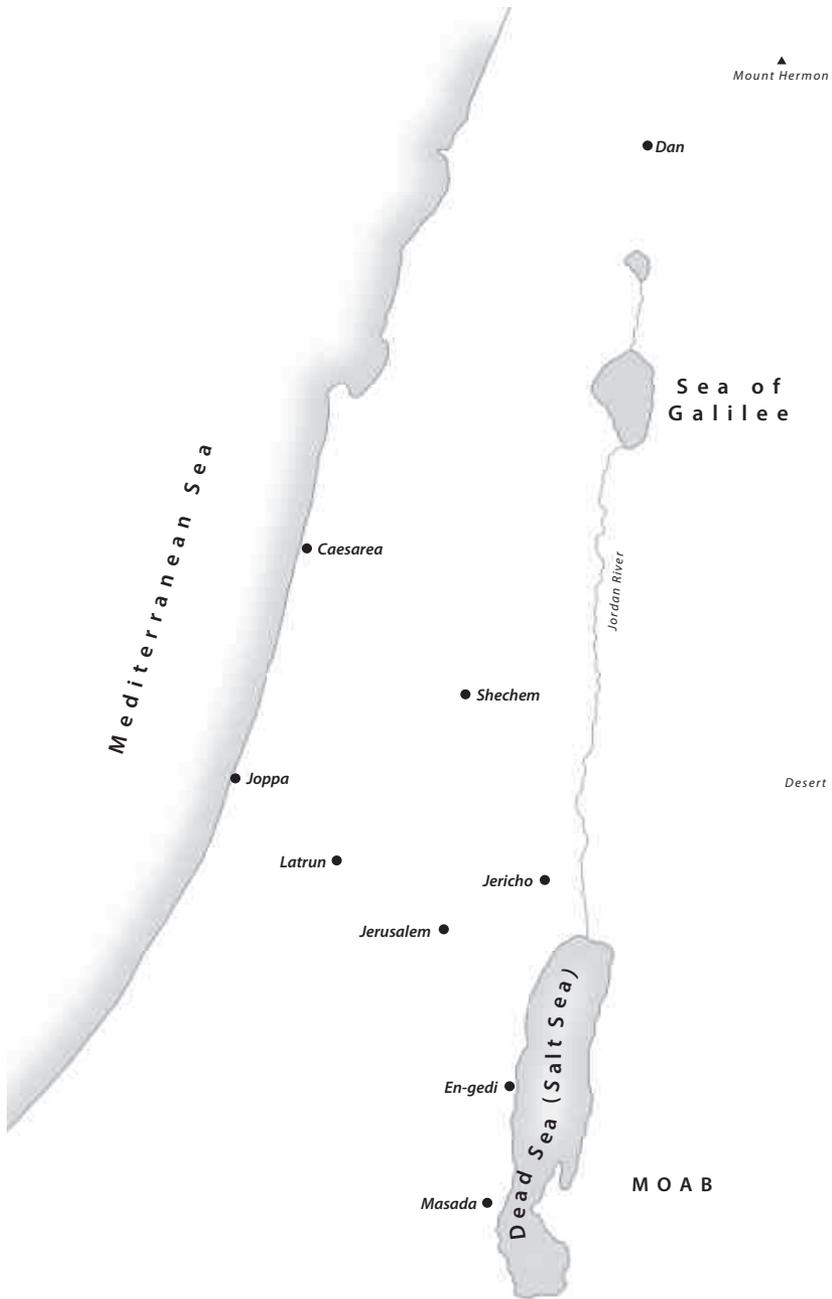
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To my dear friends and fellow writers
Jane Rubietta and Cleo Lampos

And to my faithful friend and
cheerleader Cathy Pruim

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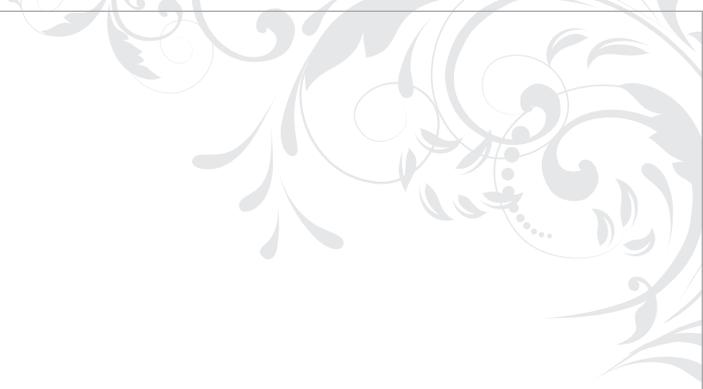
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WILDERNESS of ZIN

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1

LEAVING HOME AND HO-HUM

I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.” Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.

Psalm 122:1–2

My journey to Israel has been long and wearying. I feel like a bedraggled contestant on a TV reality show as I near the end. I’ve endured two airplane flights totaling twelve hours—hours spent sitting, standing, rushing through airport corridors, hauling bags and passports and suitcases. They were confusing, jet-lagged hours when I didn’t know if it was day or night as I tried to wedge myself into a cramped airplane seat and sleep. At some point during the night, I wandered lost through Heathrow Airport during a stopover in London. I have run the hectic obstacle course of airport security three times and waited in endless lines, the final one here in Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport where

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the no-nonsense passport inspectors wear pistols. The journey has been a parody of my life recently: rushing, waiting, wandering, feeling lost and losing sleep, wondering if I'm getting anywhere.

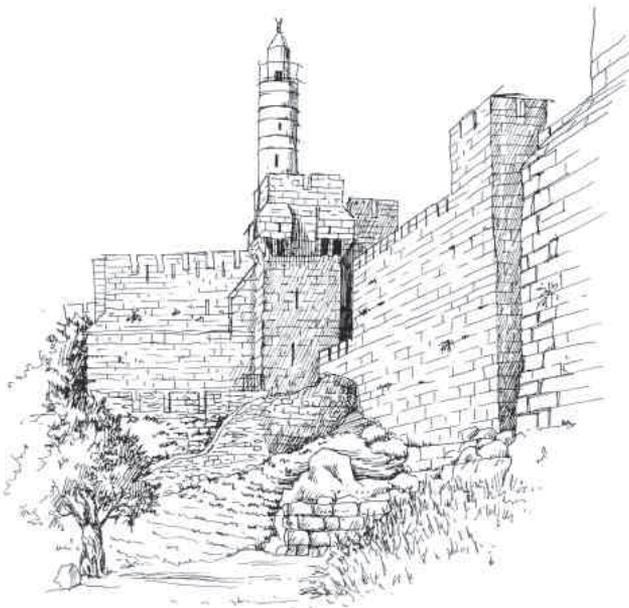
But at last I pull my limping luggage through the airport doors to claim my prize. And what a prize it is! Palm trees rustle and sway in welcome. The warm evening air smells of sweet spices and green earth. I've arrived in time to watch the setting sun gild the Israeli sky before it disappears into the Mediterranean Sea. Something inside me releases a sigh. A tangled knot in my soul relaxes and begins to unwind. I have arrived in the land where Jesus walked. My pilgrimage has begun.

The opportunity to tour Israel came at a good time. For months, my life has been a mindless plodding through necessary routine, as monotonous as an all-night shift on an assembly line. Life gets that way sometimes, when nothing specific is wrong but the world around us seems drained of color. Even my weekly worship experiences and daily quiet times with God have felt dry and stale. I'm ashamed to confess the malaise I've felt. I have been given so much. Shouldn't a Christian's life be an abundant one, as exciting as Christmas morning, as joyful as Easter Sunday?

I have to wait a few minutes for our tour bus to arrive, so I drop my suitcase near the curb and shrug off my carry-on bag, aware of the symbolism of laying my burdens down. It feels good to walk a bit and stretch my legs. In twelve hours I've gone from snow to sand, from bare trees to palm trees, from biting cold to merciful warmth. I needed a change, and I welcome these. But back home, too many changes—unwelcome and unexpected—had erupted in my life like dormant volcanoes, rumbling and smoking and creating havoc.

Within five months, all three of our adult children moved far away from home, leaving our nest permanently empty for the first time. Our older son and his wife found new jobs in another state. They no longer attend the same church we do, share a pew with us, join us for Sunday dinner. I feel their absence like a pulled tooth, and I can't stop probing that still-tender spot, surprised by the pain and the hole they've left behind. I had imagined that they would always live nearby, where I could watch my grandchildren grow up and be part of their lives. My imagination is the problem, you see, especially when it collides with God's plan for my life and the lives of my children.

Our younger son has moved to Europe for four years to study for his doctoral degree in Biblical Studies. I'm proud of



Tower of David

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him and excited about what God has for his future, but that doesn't stop me from missing him. The move also forced me to acknowledge that his intended career as a Bible professor and theologian would likely keep him far away on a permanent basis. In fact, one of his goals after he completes his studies is to teach at a seminary in a third-world country, helping to train local pastors and leaders. Again, my dream of having my extended family nearby will be sacrificed to God's plans. Why couldn't He call my son to live next door and teach in a seminary nearby?

Our only daughter left her job and her apartment close to home and has moved here to Israel to study. How could I welcome such a change, watching my youngest child set off all alone to live in a land that is the constant target of terrorists, enemy missiles, and suicide bombers? When she was fourteen years old she visited Israel with my husband and me and fell in love with this land. Afterward, she befriended several Jewish schoolmates and their families. "I think God is calling me to a ministry with the Jewish people," she said after hearing a sermon on discovering God's will for her life. In my heart I hoped she was mistaken, that it was a case of youthful exuberance. But time has proven that her call was from God, and now, after she completes her studies here in Israel, she plans to stay here, live here, work here. It helps to know that she is in the will of God—the safest place to be. But it doesn't stop me from worrying about her and missing her. I will see her on this trip, even though our visit will be brief.

There have been other losses in my life, as well. My sister Bonnie, my dearest, lifelong friend, died of cancer. My husband's brother and one of his sisters also died recently, leaving empty places in my heart and life. I can no longer call them

on the phone or sit and visit over coffee. A dull physical pain has settled on my chest as I've confronted these losses, mimicking the deep, emotional ache my children's absence leaves inside me, as if an important part of me has been hollowed out. I think I'm a little angry with God because things haven't turned out the way I always pictured them. Depression, I've learned, is sometimes caused by anger that we keep locked up inside. Was this why I've felt so ambivalent about going to church? Why my daily devotions are as gray and limp and lifeless as a soggy tissue? Why my prayers have become a dull routine? I've wanted my will, not God's. But what is His will for me in all these changes?

On the outside, I'm in the same place that I have always been, pursuing the same calling of writing Christian fiction. But inside, I sometimes feel so disoriented that I think I've exchanged my life on land for life in a sailboat on the high seas—and I don't know how to sail. I don't even know how to swim.

I have experienced similar spiritual upheavals at other times in my life, times when the Scriptures were just words on a page and my prayers failed to lift off, grounded by a thick cloud of doubt. Each time, God has taught me some important lessons after I made up my mind to dig in and search for Him with all my heart. The lessons were life-changing—there's that dreaded *change* word again—but they brought me closer to God.

During one of those desert times as I wrestled with unanswered prayer, wondering why God was silent in the face of suffering, I came across a novel called *The Chosen* by Jewish author Chaim Potok. It's the story of the relationship

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between a father and his son, and what happens when the father makes the radical decision to raise his son in silence. Not as a punishment, as the story eventually reveals, but as an act of love for the son's ultimate benefit. In this novel, I saw a picture of Father God and His sometimes inexplicable silences. It enabled me to look beyond my own unanswered prayers and see God's love.

But the book did much more than open my eyes. It inspired me to consider writing fiction, taking readers into the world of Christianity the same way that Chaim Potok had taken me into the world of Orthodox Judaism. Christian fiction was in its infancy back then, but I felt a calling to write novels that would touch readers' hearts with Christ's love. Without that dry time in my life and my wrestling match with God, who knows if I would be writing fiction today?

So, yes, I understand that God might want to set me adrift on the high seas to shock me out of my complacency. I've decided to accept the churning waves as an invitation from God to draw closer to Him, to dig deeper into His Word, to seek Him with all my heart and soul and strength. Most of all, to begin to pray to Him in a better way. Perhaps I will find a compass or a book of sailing instructions, or at least a life preserver. Maybe, just maybe, this pilgrimage to Israel will get me started on that new journey.

I will be in good company on my trip. God commanded the Israelites to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times a year for the three annual religious festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Did they feel the same way I do as they began their journey: tired from slogging through the same old routines, worried about their children and families,

battered by unexpected changes? Who has time to give more than a fleeting thought to God when life gets hard? But three times a year the Israelites had to pause in their labor and put aside their daily tasks as an act of faith and make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

I can see God's wisdom in making it a command. Otherwise, like most of us, they never would have found time to shoehorn God into their crowded lives. Excuses take over. We're much too busy. Most of us have such long to-do lists that even the Sabbath, the day He ordained for us to stop working and worship Him, is hardly a day of rest. God knows human nature, and unless He commanded it, His people never would have taken time off to worship. But worship helps us recognize our need for God. During these three yearly festivals, Israel remembered what God had done for them and reenacted the history of their salvation. They left behind their routine lives to celebrate God's goodness and renew their faith so they could return home refreshed and reconnected with the God who walked with them every day.

Spiritual renewal is what I long for, too, as I begin this pilgrimage. I want to see the bigger picture of His plan and learn to accept His will in all things. I want to revitalize my prayer life, really listening to what He is saying to me and asking His help through these changes. Maybe I'll be able to let go of my own will and face the changes in my life with joy and faith. That's asking a lot for a two-week trip. But this is Israel—the stage on which the Old and New Testaments are set, a land where Scripture springs to life in three dimensions like a children's pop-up book. Old friends from the Bible's pages populate these sites, and the words of patriarchs and prophets take on new significance as I gaze at the same rivers

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and mountains and lakes and deserts that they once viewed. In the landscape of Israel, I can visualize Jesus' parables and teachings because the cues are all around me—sheep and rocks and city walls and olive trees. Each site I visit is a rich layer cake of history with archaeological ruins dating not only to the time of Christ, but all the way back to Abraham's time. Since I will be "surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses," maybe—just maybe—by journey's end I will be ready to "run with perseverance the race marked out" for me (Hebrews 12:1).

The tour bus has arrived, and the driver loads our luggage as our guide and my husband wait. I want to linger in the fading, golden light a moment longer, yet I'm eager to begin. We will start in the south—the Negev—then travel up through the central hill country to Jerusalem, and finally to the region of Galilee in the north. I will be exploring the land from south to north, the opposite way that Abraham explored it when he arrived in the Promised Land four thousand years ago. But it's the direction that the Israelites traveled as they left behind a life of slavery in Egypt, ended their aimless desert wanderings, and arrived at last to reclaim their homeland and worship their God.

And so my journey begins in the Negev . . .

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." . . . So Abram left, as the Lord had told him . . . Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem . . . From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel . . . Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

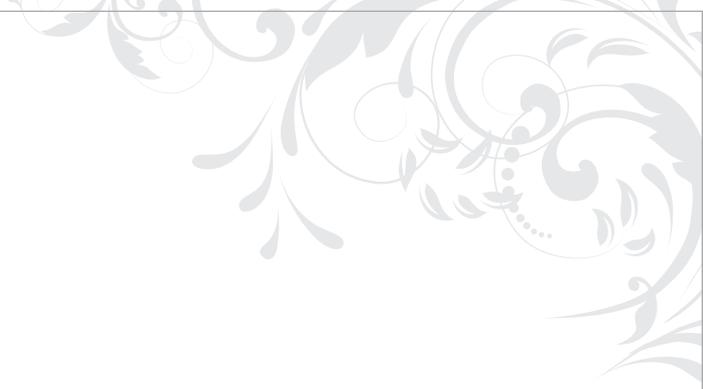
Genesis 12:1, 4, 6, 8–9

A NEW PRAYER FOR THE JOURNEY

Heavenly Father,

I praise You for Your vast, unending love, as high and wide as the skies I have just flown through. I confess that I have behaved like a whining child, ignoring all of the ways You have provided for me as a loving parent and complaining instead, wanting my own way, my own plans. Forgive me for allowing disappointment and loss to hinder my prayers and my relationship with You. Stand me on my feet again, Lord, and teach me how to walk on the paths You have chosen for me. Help me to accept Your comfort for my losses and Your will for the changes in my life. Teach me how to pray on this journey in a new and better way so that I can draw closer to You, the Source of all good things. Thank You for the new beginning we have in Christ Jesus and for this new beginning in my life.

Amen



2

THE WILDERNESS OF ZIN

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:1

The sun blazes overhead in a cloudless sky. The expanse of dry, trackless land all around me resembles the surface of the moon. There are no boundaries in this wasteland, no landmarks on the barren earth, nothing but rocks and dirt and inhospitable peaks stretching to the horizon in every direction. Sweat rolls down my face and the back of my shirt. I guzzle water like a cartoon character.

My pilgrimage in Israel has begun in the Wilderness of Zin, a vast stretch of colorless desert south of Beersheba and the Dead Sea. The bleak scenery mirrors the state of my soul: parched and lifeless. Only a fool would venture into this

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wilderness without a water supply and a guide who knows the way. No fool, I'm carrying two water bottles that slosh like lapping bloodhounds as I walk. And since I can barely discern the path we're on from the rest of our surroundings, I stick very close to our tour guide. I follow him in faith, trusting that he knows the way.

After two hours of vigorous hiking with no end in sight, I have a newfound empathy for the Israelites, condemned by their unbelief to wander for forty years in this wilderness. I picture them plodding forward, one foot in front of the other, as hot and miserable as I am. But unlike me, the Israelites carried goat-hair tents and heavy clay cooking pots and bedding for the freezing nighttime temperatures. And they had their children with them—hordes of weary, whining children. No wonder Israel's murmuring against Moses grew louder and louder: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have brought us to the desert to die? . . . It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (Exodus 14:11–12). I now understand their complaint from firsthand experience. I will be hiking here for only a few days; any longer and I might prefer a life of slavery, too.

I wonder if the fear and aversion we feel in these desert places spring from the fact that God created us to live in a garden. He provided everything we needed in lush, fertile Eden: water, food, and unhindered communion with Him. Out here, with no visible source of food or water, no shelter from the elements, it's easy to succumb to the fear that we've been abandoned by God in this desolate place. Maybe that's why we call the dry, parched times in our lives, when our soul withers and God seems very far away, "a wilderness experience."

Such experiences often come at times of change and upheaval. When God wants to shake us free from our old habits and lead us into a new walk with Him, He sometimes begins with a desert journey. The Israelites left a life of slavery—and the leeks and melons and cucumbers of Egypt—and began their new life of freedom here in the desert. And even the modern nation of Israel began in the desert at the time of its founding in 1948. More than half of the acreage allotted to the Jews by the United Nations' partition was in wilderness areas like this one. For bewildered immigrants from the Holocaust-torn cities of Europe, this vast emptiness where I'm now walking must have seemed like a strange new beginning. Talk about adapting to change!

God knows that we all need to be brought out to the desert from time to time to free us from our comfortable self-sufficiency. If He strips us of all our own resources, we just might learn to lean on Him. And to start praying again. With the luxuries of Egypt far behind them, Moses and the Israelites had no choice but to trust God, who graciously provided unlimited manna to feed them and fresh water from a rock to quench their thirst. The desert journey was supposed to build their faith for the years ahead when they would have to face enemies and conquer the Promised Land. If God could protect and sustain them here, they could trust Him anywhere. Maybe that's what this desert time in my own life is supposed to accomplish. Maybe God wants me to stop grumbling and looking back at the past and learn to trust Him for my future.

The truth is, I really don't want to walk by faith. Do any of us? I prefer comfort and safety, a well-stocked pantry and an abundant water supply, a map that shows exactly where I'm

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going and how long it will take to get there—and I would like to choose the destination myself, thank you. But who needs God if I have all those things? Israel’s downfall didn’t come when they were homeless wanderers in the desert, but when they lived in cities where they were self-sufficient and well fed. God had warned them that, “When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down . . . then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who . . . led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land” (Deuteronomy 8:12, 14–15). God must have known that I needed this walk beneath the relentless sun, through this dry, empty wasteland to remind me of my need for Him.

The sun has reached its peak and is beginning its descent toward the western horizon. My last water bottle is nearly empty. We have been hiking for miles with no idea where we are, trusting the guide to lead us out of here. I don’t think I can walk much farther. When I look ahead and see that our path is about to end at the foot of an imposing mountain ridge, towering above us, I want to sit down and cry. Will we have to retrace our steps through all those long, wearying miles in the barren desert? Our guide continues forward, straight toward the base of the cliff. The only way out appears to be straight up. Impossible.

We soon reach the dead end and sink down to rest on the bare ground, weary and discouraged. It wouldn’t take much for us to start hurling stones at our guide. But after letting us catch our breath, he prods us to our feet—and shows us a nearly invisible, hand-hewn staircase cut into the side of the cliff, complete with iron handholds. I think I know how the parched Israelites felt when Moses struck the barren rock

with his staff and water miraculously gushed out. I follow the guide up the treacherous cliff, one careful footstep at a time.

At last I reach the top, breathless from the climb, and see our air-conditioned tour bus waiting for us. As the other hikers snap photographs from this dizzying height, I wander off alone and savor the panoramic view of endless wilderness all around me. I remember the long, long way I have come. There is a beauty in this formidable place that I wouldn't have wanted to miss. The wilderness has given me a sense of my own frailty and of my need for God. He seems very near to me now as I stand alone in the stark, pristine silence. Before today, I thought I faced a dead end in my life. But even though the path may still be hidden from my sight, even though the climb may be steep and treacherous, God truly does know the way.

It's time to board the bus and be refreshed by the cool air. I sink into my seat for a much-deserved rest. I still face frightening changes and challenges back home, but I no longer fear the wilderness. It's where I will learn, all over again, to trust God.

Helpless

After a bountiful meal and a good night's rest, we're hiking once again in the wilderness areas of southern Israel. Today we'll explore the Ramon Crater, a smaller version of America's Grand Canyon, but no less beautiful or awe-inspiring. We begin at the canyon's rim, gazing down at the jagged slit in the earth's crust, twenty-five miles long and five miles wide. I'm told that the rainbow layers of rock and dirt and sediment are a geologist's paradise, complete with prehistoric fossils and

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the remnants of an extinct volcano. The desolate, reddish-gold landscape is how I picture the surface of Mars—lifeless. But our guide assures us that this area is a nature reserve, home to wild ibex, gazelles, hyenas, and an animal I don't wish to meet along the trail—leopards. We take photographs from this vantage point, inhale the clean desert air, enjoy the surprising breeze, and then board the bus to our hiking trail along the canyon's bottom, five hundred feet below.

Soon I'm trekking through an alien landscape like something from a cheap science fiction film. The deeper we walk into the canyon and the farther we go from the bus, the more aware I become of my utter helplessness. I can't build a shelter to escape from the heat in a place without trees. We've been warned that scorpions and vipers make their homes among the rocks. What appears to be an oasis is often a mirage. There is no place to turn to for help—and the emptiness goes on and on with no end in sight. All of my self-sufficiency vanishes in this hostile, unforgiving place.

Before leaving my hotel room this morning, I read Psalm 63—"A psalm of David when he was in the Desert of Judah." David spent years living in desolate places like this while hiding from his enemy King Saul. How did he survive the doubt and discouragement he must have felt, the terrifying helplessness?

The psalm begins, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (v. 1). In other words, David was in a spiritual wilderness as well as a physical one. I imagine him walking a desolate trail like this one, hot and weary and discouraged, knowing that on the other side of the hill, Saul's army is encamped with their weapons and provisions and water supplies. To David, the day that

the prophet Samuel poured oil on his head and anointed him as Israel's king must have seemed like a fading dream, as disappointing as a mirage. How easy it is to doubt God's promises when we're weary and thirsty and afraid.

David combats his feelings of helplessness by looking back and remembering what he knows about God: "I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory" (v. 2). He recalls God's great love for him, and even if David's current circumstances seem as hopeless as this wasteland all around him, he doesn't trust what he sees. It's a mirage. God's promises are the reality, and so David confidently says, "They who seek my life will be destroyed" (v. 9).

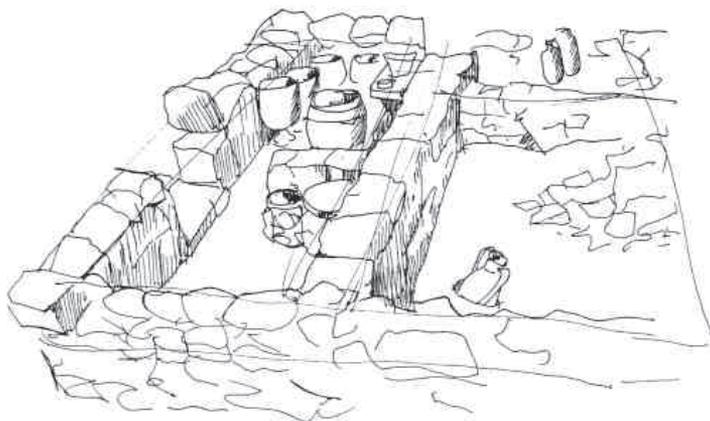
We know the end of the story—Saul and his armies were destroyed and David became king—so it's easy to forget that when David wrote those words, he didn't know if he would survive the desert, let alone become king of Israel. But he chose to trust God, and I can do the same. Instead of focusing on my current circumstances, I can look back and remember what I know about God, about how far He has brought me in this journey. I can recall His goodness and faithfulness to me in the past, the storms and dry places He has carried me through. I can look up into the endless desert sky and trust His love for me, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him" (Psalm 103:11). David trusted that his time in the desert would end one day, and so would his spiritual drought: "My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods," he wrote. "I sing in the shadow of your wings" (Psalm 63:5, 7).

A group of students hiking ahead of me begins to sing. I hear my husband's laughter behind me, and I remember that David wasn't alone in the desert. He not only felt God's

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presence with him, but he also had flesh-and-blood companions: “All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader” (1 Samuel 22:2). *Distressed* and *discontented*? Yikes! That’s hardly the company I would choose! I’ve been with disgruntled, self-pitying complainers in the past, and I couldn’t wait to leave them. Unhappiness can be as contagious as chicken pox. Grumblers nibble away at hope like a child eats candy. But God gave those four hundred discontented men to David to be his companions. They endured years of hardship with him in this treacherous place, and when David finally became king, they shared his triumph, as well.

Comfort also came from David’s close friend Jonathan, the son of David’s enemy King Saul. “While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph . . . Saul’s son Jonathan went to David . . . and helped him find strength in God” (1 Samuel 23:15–16). That’s the kind of friend we need in our wilderness times—like a dear friend of mine who once dropped everything to sit in the hospital waiting room and pray with



Burnt House

me when my husband underwent emergency surgery. It's the kind of friend I should be to someone else.

So often I have felt alone in my journey, yet I've been afraid to let anyone see my fear and weakness. What would they think of me? Someone who has been a Christian for as long as I have shouldn't feel afraid or discouraged. As in the words of the children's song, shouldn't we be "happy, happy, happy all the time"? Again, I look at King David's example. He was a powerful warrior who had faced a giant single-handedly, yet he wasn't afraid to turn to his friends for strength or to ask for help in fighting his battles. Why do I try to be so independent, facing discouragement and change and loss all alone? Why am I too proud to ask for prayer? Even Jesus asked His friends to pray with Him in Gethsemane.

I turn and look behind me and see a college student from our group hiking all alone, plodding dispiritedly, sweating and red-faced. I slow down and wait for her to catch up to me. Her water bottles are empty, so I offer her a drink from mine. "Where are you from?" I ask her. "What are you studying in school?" As I listen, I forget about my own aching feet and weary body for a while, and I think she feels better, too.

The wilderness is a place where we can lean on God and trust His promises, but it's also a place to discover that the arms He provides and the ears that listen to our fears sometimes belong to flesh-and-blood people. Instead of carrying my discouragement alone, I need to accept help and then offer help in return. Like David's distressed and discontented companions, the people God sends my way might be just as weary and fearful of the future as I am. Maybe together, praying for each other, bearing one another's burdens, the journey will be lighter for all of us.

Falling Stars

We are nearly to the end of the trail. I am looking up, marveling at the beautiful, cloudless desert sky, when I happen to see a shooting star streaking across the heavens from horizon to horizon. “Did you see that?” I ask my husband. “I just saw a falling star!”

He stares at me as if I’m crazy. “Lynn, you can’t see stars—it’s broad daylight.” It takes me a moment to realize what I have just seen. A missile! We are, after all, in Israel, a nation continually on the alert for enemy attacks.

This tiny country the size of New Jersey has been surrounded and outnumbered by enemies since its founding. Its territory covers only 8,000 square miles, while more than 5 million square miles of land belong to the surrounding Muslim nations. And Israel’s population of 7 million is tiny compared to its neighbors’ combined populations of 330 million. No wonder we’ve seen Israeli fighter jets patrolling the skies every day, watching from above. Once or twice, I’ve jumped in surprise when a jet has broken the sound barrier with an explosive sonic boom.

Our bus has traveled through military checkpoints manned by unsmiling, well-armed soldiers. We’ve seen barbed wire security fences and protective walls and signs that warn about the danger of buried land mines. We have passed through metal detectors on our way into restaurants and shopping malls and had our purses and backpacks searched. And it is commonplace to see teenage Israeli soldiers munching French fries at McDonald’s with rifles strapped to their backs. Yes, Israel is very much aware of her enemies. Yet I feel completely safe here. The price of freedom, someone once said, is eternal vigilance.

At the moment I'm not aware of any enemies stalking me out here in the desert—except thirst or weariness, perhaps. But I recall from Scripture that enemies often choose wilderness places such as this no-man's-land to launch their attacks. Moses led the Israelites only a short distance from Egypt when Pharaoh and his armies came thundering after them in chariots, their swords and spears gleaming. Further down the road, before the weary Israelites could reach their destination at Mount Sinai, the Amalekites launched a surprise attack. And where did Jesus face temptation from His adversary, Satan? In the wilderness.

Enemies like to take advantage of our disorientation and vulnerability to sneak up on us, ambushing us when we're lost and weak. Like predators in a wildlife documentary, our enemies always go after the stragglers, the young, the feeble. The assault is even more horrifying if we're not expecting it. Remember our shock at the 9/11 attacks? We discovered that day that we had enemies we weren't even aware of. For months afterward, Americans were told to remain vigilant, watching for suspicious persons and activity. And then we grew complacent, trusting that the Department of Homeland Security was doing its job.

The missile that just flamed across the sky has jolted me from my slumber. I have been in a desert place for months, spiritually weakened and vulnerable to enemy attacks, yet I have not been vigilant. Seeing Israel's constant state of readiness reminds me that as a citizen in the kingdom of God, I will always be at war until Jesus returns. "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). And the devil isn't my only enemy. The attractions that the world

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offers, along with my own human desires and fears, conspire to lure me away from God's path. The depression and inertia I've felt lately is probably the result of such an assault. I have allowed the enemy to rob me of my greatest weapon—joy. And “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

When the Philippian Christians were under enemy attack, the Apostle Paul wrote to them saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). Beaten and chained in prison, Paul and Silas sang praises to God. And for all three of Israel's annual pilgrimage festivals, the people of God were told to “rejoice before the Lord your God, you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants” (Deuteronomy 12:12). Joy explodes throughout the book of Psalms like fireworks and is the most potent antimissile defense system there is.

Besides re-arming myself with joy, I need to know the holes in my defenses, the places where I'm vulnerable and where the enemy has successfully attacked me before. One of my greatest areas of weakness is worry. I can fret over a problem obsessively, rehearsing arguments and counterarguments, wasting days at a time in nonproductive stewing. Most of the things I worry about never happen. I need to develop a defensive strategy to combat worry, such as keeping a prayer journal and rereading it when I'm under attack. It will remind me of all the ways that God has taken care of my worries in the past, answering my prayers in ways I could never imagine. The price of freedom from worry and fear is eternal vigilance.

The young Israeli soldiers who carry their guns with them everywhere they go display this vigilance. Back home, no one walks around my community fully armed except the police. But once I understand that my enemy is never going

to lay down arms and sign a peace treaty with me, I would be wise to remain on full alert at all times. “Put on the full armor of God so you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes,” Paul warned the Christians in Ephesus (Ephesians 6:11). Jesus used a piece of that armor, “the belt of truth,” when He was in the wilderness, countering Satan’s lies with truth from God’s Word. And when His disciples rejoiced that even the demons had submitted to them in Jesus’ name, He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Bam! A successful anti-missile strike!

Like the nation of Israel, I need to stay continually watchful, prepared with the whole armor of God if I want to combat the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. I have an enemy whose strategy is a sneak attack, especially when I’m weak. And I know that with all of the changes and upheavals in my life, I could become easy prey. From now on I need to wear the belt of truth at all times, along with the helmet of salvation, especially during wilderness times. And “In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Ephesians 6:16).

[God] brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert. He guided them safely, so they were unafraid. . . . Thus he brought them to the border of his holy land.”

Psalm 78:52–54

A NEW PRAYER FOR THE JOURNEY

*Heavenly Father,
Source of all life, I praise You for lovingly providing
us with everything we need. Just as You gave water*

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to the Israelites from a rock in the desert, You give us Jesus, the Living Water, and the promise that we will never thirst again. Forgive me for grumbling about this desert where I've been traveling. I see now that You long to use it to show me my helplessness, my need for You, and to teach me to trust You. Let this wilderness time in my life accomplish that work, Lord. Thank You for the companions You've given me for this journey. Help me to stop wallowing in my own misery and pride and remember that we were created to walk with each other, pray with each other. Show me someone I can be a companion to in this place. And restore to me the joy of my salvation, so that I might become a spring of life to other weary travelers.

Amen