

a  
beautiful  
disaster

*finding hope  
in the midst of brokenness*

marlena graves



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## foreword

It is hard to imagine a more trustworthy guide in the wilderness than the author of the book you now have in your hands. Marlena Graves has been a friend of mine (Laura) for several years now, and the gentle wisdom I see in her is borne of the same long and painful winds that shape the hollow canyons of desert stone.

This is the kind of book the church needs now. Living in an age of easy distractions and constant comparison can result in a sort of nice numbness, a feeling that I'm all right and everything else is all right. Our worlds, able to expand with the click of a mouse, have never been smaller or more centered on ourselves. We are separated not only from other people but also from God and ourselves. This separation—this loss of integrity and wholeness—is a source of great grief in our lives.

Marlena's is the story of a faith rooted in crisis from a young age. Raised in poverty and amid great instability, she retreated into her imagination when things around her were out of control, which was often. She writes at one point of reading Genesis in her room in her family's trailer, walking behind Adam and Eve in the garden, inserting herself into the story of God at work in the world. The practice of *lectio divina* done, unknowingly, by a child.

In the words of Dallas Willard, a mentor and friend to both Marlena and me (John), “Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding spiritual formation this way—as a manner of development in which our hearts become more like Christ’s—is central to understanding the human condition. We do not become “new creations” overnight, by praying the right prayer or believing the right things. God makes us and renews us constantly and with our cooperation. This book takes that process seriously, reminding us that God does not take us to the wilderness to leave us, but dwells with us even in the most painful of landscapes.

The wilderness can take many different forms. Inspired by Jesus’s command in Matthew 19:21 to “sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor,” the desert fathers and mothers moved to the Egyptian desert to live alone or in small groups. Their lives were austere, but the wilderness was the place of their choosing. My own (Laura) wilderness experiences have been mostly of the unchosen variety, time spent paralyzed by anxiety and fear of the future, uncertainty and powerlessness looming like a Scylla and Charybdis from which I could never be free. Others have been brought to the wilderness in deep despair and have hoped the sands and the time would act as smoothing agents, hewing the rough edges of pain.

Some people spend their lives in the desert; some people are rarely there. The things that take us to the desert are varied. We may be there for a week or for years; we may be devastated or full of boredom; we may be alone or in great company.

But here’s what we’ve come to learn: time in the desert prepares us for more time in the desert. Whether we remain there

is beside the point; the point is the person we become when we are there.

One of the foundational questions this book addresses is our understanding of God. When we think of God, what and who do we understand God to be? I (Laura) have no trouble believing God to exist or be good, but I wonder whether God is truly close, whether God really wants to be a part of my life or if he is content to keep a watchful eye from far away. I cringe when people say they prayed for God to heal them from a cold or find the right parking place, but there is something of that intimacy that I envy too. For me (John), my early doubts were intellectualized. If God existed, I believed him to be near and good, but it was hard for me to trust someone with whom I could not use my senses to interact.

These are only two images of God that fall short of the whole; there are as many understandings of God as there are people on earth. But the great gift of this book is the search for a whole image of God. Wholeness, in this case, necessarily entails mystery—“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,” we read in 1 Corinthians 2:9 (NRSV). And *image* is the word to use here because what we can conjure up in our minds and hearts about God can only ever, at best, approximate his goodness and nearness, his pervasive and loving existence.

“*We are* his beloved children,” Graves writes, “the apple of his eye. But sometimes we do not feel like beloved children. Especially in the barren lands of wilderness exhaustion, we can feel like abused and neglected children whose father failed to provide.” The good news is that there is no need to talk ourselves into a cheerful attitude, to paste on smiles and platitudes about God’s provision. We can and must be honest about our desert experiences. We can and must remain where we are called, listen for God’s small, still voice, and remember the words of the

psalmist, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. / From where will my help come? / My help comes from the LORD, / who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:1–2 ESV). God is the beauty without and within us, and it is God who lends the beauty to the disasters we create and inhabit. The beautiful disasters.

John Ortberg and Laura Ortberg Turner



*part 1*

t h i s  
w i l d e r n e s s  
l i f e





# 1

## the way of the desert and beautiful souls

Do you want to be holy? Then you will suffer.

John Stott<sup>1</sup>

### **My Desert Wilderness Life**

The phone rings. It is 9:27 on a frigid Thursday night in mid-February. I'm sitting in my cozy living room in my weekly meeting with the six college dorm resident assistants who work with me. The caller ID shows that it's my dad. I silence the phone. A little after ten o'clock, I begin listening to my messages. All three are from him. In the first, he almost incoherently tells me that my sister-in-law's sister just died of a heroin overdose, and before I am finished listening to the message, "Call Waiting" flashes on my phone screen. It's my dad again. He repeats his message: my sister-in-law's sister

died of a heroin overdose. I thank him for letting me know and tell him that I plan on contacting my brother and his family immediately.

Suddenly I notice laughter and loud music in the background.

“Dad, where are you? Are you at a bar?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Dad, are you drinking?”

“No, I am just drinking ice water.”

“Dad, I don’t believe you. I think you’re lying. You know that you’re not supposed to be drinking. You don’t have to go to the bar to drink ice water.”

“What’s wrong with being at a bar? The church isn’t against it. I’m allowed to dance and have some fun. I’m not going to listen to my daughter lecture me and call me a liar.” Click.

The call resurrects the memories and now-faint emotions of an eight-year-old little girl. While my brother and sister slept peacefully, I’d fitfully lie awake, waiting up four, five, six or more hours for my dad to return from the bar or from God knows where. I’d lie in bed as stiff as a board, bracing myself for the worst possible outcome: his death due to drunk driving. I’d mentally and emotionally hold my breath until I heard him come in the door (my husband still catches me physically holding my breath every night and reminds me to breathe; I guess it has become ingrained). A good night’s sleep and peace of mind depended on his safe return home. Needless to say, I slept little and had very little peace of mind.

I am not sure how it happened, but soon after the long period of staying up nights, my parents and I switched roles. By the time I was ten, I was a parent to my parents and to my younger sister and brother. Although I so desperately needed parenting, circumstances forced me to function as an adult in a child’s body. Almost daily I tried to come up with adult-sized solutions to adult-sized problems.

I lived in a world of turmoil while supporting parents who were preoccupied trying to figure out their own lives and problems. Many days I felt as if my heart had been violently ripped out, thrown to the ground, stomped on, and left for scavengers. I became an emotional and spiritual orphan, left to figure things out and make my own messes. I was a child fending for myself in the wilderness. Since I had no one to turn to for guidance, I clung to verses in the book of Psalms that proclaimed God to be a Father to the fatherless. I begged him to father and mother me—to show me how to live. A song by Audioslave captures well my soul's sentiments at the time:

Nail in my hand  
From my creator  
You gave me life  
Now show me how to live.<sup>2</sup>

You gave me life; now show me how to live. I needed God to show me his path through the desert wildernesses of poverty, DUIs, adultery, mental illness, prison, a house fire, the death of loved ones, poisonous relationships, and my own bad decisions. I needed him (and still need him) to show me how to live.

Even as I write these words, I am in a deep wilderness tied to the phone call I received from my dad that night in February. His drinking and carousing are driven by a severe bipolar condition and by his refusal to take medicine because he doesn't believe there is anything wrong with him. Because of my dad's behavior in the last six months, my parents are homeless, jobless, and penniless. They're destitute. And at this moment, my dad is in jail.

In this present wilderness, I pray, I write, and I depend on my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ to share my burdens. And I wait. I wait on God. The desert is so prevalent in my life that I've adopted it as the metaphor of my life. It seems that I

am in and out of the desert on a frequent basis. But I find that I am in good company.

## **Formation**

Growing up, I begged God (what seems like thousands of times) to take the cup of suffering from me, but mostly he didn't. Instead, he used my pain and difficulties, my desert experiences, to transform me—which in turn alleviated much suffering. As I grew up in the desert, God grew my soul. And although I realize that the suffering I've endured is nothing compared to the suffering of countless millions, I've learned painful but essential lessons that I couldn't have learned anywhere else but in the midst of God-haunted suffering.

God uses the desert of the soul—our suffering and difficulties, our pain, our dark nights (call them what you will)—to form us, to make us beautiful souls. He redeems what we might deem our living hells, if we allow him. The hard truth, then, is this: everyone who follows Jesus is eventually called into the desert.

Jesus suffered hunger and temptation in the desert. His calling and his trust in his Father were put to the test. He was probably full of angst and despair. He was physically weak and emotionally and spiritually vulnerable. Why on earth would the Holy Spirit drive him into the desert wilderness and allow him to suffer?

Scripture is full of examples of how God used the desert to reveal himself and to spiritually form his people. Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Miriam, Moses, the Israelites, David, Elijah, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Paul all spent time in the wilderness. They weren't alone either—the desert fathers and mothers made their homes in the wilderness too.

All these giants of the faith spent time in the physical desert but were also intimately acquainted with the interior desert.

Eventually, God sends all who truly seek to know him into a spiritual wilderness. That's why St. John of the Cross calls this dark night, this desert of ours, a "happy night." The night is happy because, though it brings "darkness to the spirit, it does so only to give it light in everything; . . . although it humbles it and makes it miserable, it does so only to exalt it and to raise it up."<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright notes, "Wilderness has been used in Christian writing as an image for the dark side of the spiritual journey. Conversion, baptism, faith—a rich sense of the presence and love of God, of vocation and sonship; and then, the wilderness."<sup>4</sup> The spiritual desert wilderness is harsh, wild, and uncontrollable. Barely inhabitable and yet breathtakingly beautiful.<sup>5</sup> Inarguably dangerous and possibly deadly but also transformational and even miraculous. Solitary and unfamiliar but full of grace and spiritual activity.

The desert is a blessing disguised as a curse—a study in contrasts. While theophanies and divine epiphanies regularly occur there, so do unimaginable times of depression and despair. We hear many voices and sometimes have difficulty distinguishing among God's, our own, the world's, and that of devils toying with us, meaning to eat us alive. The desert heightens our senses; paradoxically, we're acutely aware of both God's presence and his seeming absence. Truths once obscure, or mentally assented to yet not experienced, suddenly stand out in sharp relief, while the superfluous recedes into the background. In the desert wilderness, miracles happen, temptations lure, and judgment occurs.

The wilderness has a way of curing our illusions about ourselves and teaching us to depend more and more on God.<sup>6</sup> When we first enter, we're convinced we've entered the bowels of hell. But on our pilgrimage, we discover that the desert drips with the divine. We discover that desert land is fertile ground for spiritual activity, transformation, and renewal. The desert mothers and

fathers knew this. Bradley Nassif, an Orthodox Christian and biblical scholar, tells us:

The desert fathers and mothers heard Christ's call to deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow him (Luke 9:23) in a time similar to our own. Under Emperor Constantine, large numbers joined the church for the social privileges it bestowed. Many sought status and prosperity more than the cross. This influx of nominal Christians made the church a spiritually sick institution, and a radical illness called for a radical remedy. Ordinary men and women, most of them illiterate, heard the death-call of the gospel and responded by fleeing to the desert to live out their calling; either alone or in community. Peasants, shepherds, camel traders, former slaves, and prostitutes were the first to go.

The desert was not a place of escape as much as a place of countercultural engagement. The desert was the front line of spiritual warfare; as in the Bible, a place of testing and death. It was where the heart was purified, the passions conquered, sin destroyed, and humanity renewed.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, it's not just the solitude of the physical desert that works wonders in the soul. God uses our interior desert as a radical antidote to our spiritual sickness. It is the place where, with the prodigal, we come to our senses, the location where we realize God is more real than anything else.<sup>8</sup> It becomes a place of God-encounters, conversion, transformation, salvation, grace, renewal, redemption, and reconciliation. We learn to trust God in the wilderness, and then we die. But it is not our end, for there we are raised to new life—made fully alive, truly human.

Isaiah 35 describes the consummation of our wilderness experience: "The desert and the parched land will be glad; / the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. / Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; / it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy" (vv.



1–2a). Our lives will not forever remain a barren wilderness. In our difficult experiences, we will see the glory of God as Isaiah says: “The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, / the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; / they will see the glory of the LORD, / the splendor of our God. . . . Water will gush forth in the wilderness / and streams in the desert” (vv. 2b, 6b). Our mourning will turn into gladness. “Gladness and joy will overtake them, / and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (v. 10). But while we’re deep within the desert wilderness, we may not believe a word of what Isaiah tells us. Not a word.

### **The Purpose of the Desert Wilderness**

According to theologian Robert Barry Leal:

Especially in the Hebrew Bible, wilderness is the privileged site where God comforts the Hebrew people or their representatives at times of crisis in their lives. In the wilderness God calls and leads them to decisions and witnesses their shortcomings; and God disciplines and punishes them for their sin and rebellion. Throughout the gospels wilderness is important for Jesus as a place of encounter with the Father.<sup>9</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, I’ve been in and out of the desert wilderness my entire life. I’ve come to expect it. I’ve also realized that I’m not the only one who’s been in and out of the wilderness; each of us, throughout our lives, journeys back and forth between wilderness and Promised Land. Just when we’ve gotten comfortable, we’re plunged back in. And then in the blink of an eye, each of us moves from our final desert wilderness experience of death into the Promised Land of eternal life.

When I consider the desert experiences of others, I think of my husband’s childhood friend Andy. He was a “wannabe”

missionary turned police officer who, senselessly, was shot at point-blank range and killed when he intervened in a domestic violence dispute. It could've been anyone else, but he was the first officer on the scene. He was a seminary-trained, hardworking police officer for three reasons: he deeply cared about people and wanted to help them—to be Christ in uniform, he wanted to faithfully and adequately provide for his family, and he desired to earn money for his missionary voyage to Thailand. Yet, that was not to be. He died at the age of thirty, leaving behind a young wife, a five-year-old, a toddler, and an infant. Frankly, I don't know why God allowed him to suffer such a tragic, untimely death, nor do I wish to speculate and offer unsatisfying answers. All I can say is that somehow God wishes to meet his family and friends in the wilderness of loss and that God does not force anyone into the desert out of cruelty.

On the contrary, God's ultimate desire is to use our pain and suffering, our angst and desperation, what the ancients and others (including me) call desert experiences, to form us into Christ's image, to steel our relationship with him. The desert can become a place of intimacy with God, for he desires that we intimately know him and be intimately known by him. But how does God use these desert experiences (or dark nights of the soul) to form us—making us fully alive, one with him? In the following chapters, we'll explore in more detail just how he does that.