

Counselor's Toolbox

More Than a Proof Text: An Introduction



Our “More Than a Proof Text” section features a short article that simply brings a word of God to life. It gives an example of how you might actually speak a vivid, relevant message to another person who is in distress. The emphasis is on *relevant* and on *message*. This is not a Bible study or an exposition of a passage. Careful study and accurate exposition reside in the background, but the purpose is to illustrate ministry happening in the foreground. Yet it is also not a proof text scattered into someone’s life like pixie dust. The goal is to connect the dots between a person’s complex struggles and a simple truth that bids to rescript that person’s life.

This issue’s “More Than a Proof Text” article describes how to help people work through their suffering using Psalm 63 and the biblical theme of wilderness. The authors describe how to lament and recount God’s past faithfulness so sufferers can connect to the Lord and learn to trust that he clings to them in the wilderness.

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More Than a Proof Text: “When you’re in the wilderness, God clings to you.” (Psalm 63)

 by WESLEY TUBEL AND JACKLYN TUBEL —————

Jesus said that every one of his people will experience suffering (John 16:33). It is a painful and difficult reality about life. Yet despite his warning, many of us are still caught off guard and surprised by suffering. Though we live with daily reminders that this earth is not our home, we often expect our lives to be easier. This surprise may be in part to popular prosperity teaching or the idea that our suffering is an indication of a lack of faith.¹ If we only had sufficient faith, so it goes, it would not hurt so much. These misleading ideas come in all denominations and circles. For others, it sounds like this: you would be suffering less if you had not made so much of an idol out of your health, job, or family.

But perhaps one of the most common reasons for this dissonance is simply the lived reality of how disappointing and hard suffering can be. We face so many troubles: disease, poverty, broken relationships,

1. Prosperity teaching asserts that faithfulness in the Christian life leads to material and financial blessing, and a life free from hardships.

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violence, abuse, war, oppression, and other traumas. Suffering is disorienting and paralyzing, overwhelming, and exhausting. It wears us down, body and soul, and has no clear ending date. In the midst of it, we are left with many questions: How did I get here? How do I persevere? Where is God in this? Is there hope for me? Will it always be this hard?

When we counsel people who are walking through seasons of suffering, we have found it helpful to explore the biblical theme of *wilderness*. The wilderness is one of the primary ways Scripture identifies and describes the suffering, pain, and longing every Christian experiences as we make the difficult journey home to God. We are most familiar with Israel's experience in the wilderness in Exodus. They leave Egypt but must wander for forty years in the desert, awaiting entry to the promised land. Wilderness themes then appear throughout the psalms and the prophets and are especially keen when Israel is exiled to Babylon. Ever since God's people were cast out of the garden, times in the wilderness are a vivid reminder of our homesickness.

The New Testament continues the theme of wilderness for God's people, though it starts to take on a metaphorical meaning rather than a literal one. For example, in the book of 1 Peter, God's people are called *sojourners and exiles*. We do not endure the actual wilderness as Adam and Eve, Israel, and King David did. Rather, our wilderness *experience* is the ongoing sense of living in exile because we have not yet arrived at our true, eternal home.

In the wilderness of suffering, we each need eyes of faith to be able to see what else is true beyond the pain. Psalm 63 is a helpful passage of Scripture that reorients sufferers to who God is, what he promises, and what he provides, even when it is not visible to our finite and fallible eyes. Scripture has a number of long-form narratives describing wilderness experiences, but this psalm provides a concise, beautiful picture of what living faith looks like amid suffering and hardship. We will work through the psalm and make suggestions for how to use it in conversations with counselees.

Finding God in the Wilderness

David wrote Psalm 63 while he was in the wilderness of Judah. It is an illuminating portrait of a God-oriented, honest, and faith-filled response

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