

Growing God's People

a journal for teachers and other learners

Seeking Solace in Desolate Places

The map lies on the table with mountains rising in four shades of brown, and valleys guard the towns with blankets of green. In this rendering, our region looks as though God sculpted it with fingers sliding down through wet rock toward the southwest.

In recent years, TVA has played with that ground and planted concrete and steel to form massive lakes and flowing rivers, and the little brooks of hidden valleys have formed reservoirs that lap at the forests and gently wash away shoreline soils to reveal a base of angled rock once hidden beneath the soil.

Our mountains are ancient and golden, with trees older than our country and critters that tell of God's creativity and humor. High atop the Smokies, the trails' early-morning perfume reminds

the sojourners that vitality gives way to death and decay, that life is a journey, and that we are all small and yet wondrously cherished by our Creator.

God first placed us in a garden, and hearts are strangely warmed when we return to places both desolate and teeming with life. This edition of *GGP* invites us to find ways of escape to the wilderness of East Tennessee and there spend time alone with God in prayer, reflection, Scripture, and song.

Lace up your boots, grab a blanket, fill up your thermos, pack journal and Bible in your napsack, and head for the nearest nature center, state park, national park, remote urban locale, or suburban garden to feast on the presence of God!

Escaping to the Wilderness

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When we practice the spiritual disciplines, we stand against the basic principles of this world. Through participation in these "disciplines of grace" we come to know more deeply the intimate love of God and the sufficiency of His grace.

By Robert Hodge

While the disciples were still sleeping, Jesus would get up in the early morning hours and tiptoe past them, open the door quietly, and walk or run into solitude to pray.

Mind-boggling perhaps—the Son of God who made the created world that surrounded Him was soothed in the blanketing of open air, the rocks reflecting the moonlight, the ground releasing the lingering warmth of the previous day's sunlight.

The same escape is offered today to those of us who would hear the call to flee to desolate places and pray, to discover in the quiet the voice of God.

MEETING PLACES

Like other parts of our spiritual journeys, retreats are by necessity inconvenient. As it is with fasting, our routine is interrupted and our availability to "outside" influence is curtailed for a measured time set apart for intentional fellowship with God.

Uninhabited places provided

Christ and the Twelve with a meeting place (for references see *Preparing to Teach* on page 4) in which the crowds could no longer press in—which is akin to our modern captivity to e-mail, mobile phones, and cubicles—and where the soul could feast on a multi-course meal of spiritual nourishment.

According to his *Memoirs*, none other than Jonathan Edwards found retreat to the New England woods an ideal place for meeting with God: "Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension...I have several other times had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects."

PRACTICAL HELP

If you are journeying through Mark with your Sunday school class (HomeBibleStudy #2), you have likely been tasked already with finding places of escape and then retreating for an exercise in solitude and prayer.

If you haven't yet, then it would



Retreating to the Wilderness, continued.

be beneficial to take out a map of the state and find two or three places that are within a one-hour drive of your home or office, where in going you would be surrounded by wilderness. Choose a place and carve out a time on the calendar and stick to your commitment.

As you go, you may find that moderate activity helps you stay focused. I am able to meditate, pray, and reflect on Scripture while paddling gently down a river or across a lake on a calm day. For some reason, I'm not able to do the same while hiking along a trail. I'm persuaded that a certain rhythm or cadence accounts for the difference, and I would encourage you to experiment with activities to which you are already inclined. But mostly, try staying still.

When I picture Jesus alone in the wilderness, my mind paints a scene in which He is sitting or walking about as he talks with

the Father. With Bibles opened to the book of Psalms, we can sit along the bank of a stream or the edge of a cliff and pray, and from our reading be led into further conversations along similar themes.

The wilderness can be hazardous or even dangerous, and you will have to use good judgment. Placing yourself in an isolated location may be unwise, and thus require you to be accompanied by a Christian friend who finds a place out-of-sight but within earshot of you. And you would be wise to visit a local outdoor store for some gear that will add to your comfort without detracting from the natural setting.

Once the practice of retreating to desolate places is worked into your lifestyle, begin bringing others into the practice and the hours spent in the wild quiet will build a deep reservoir of



Teaching and Learning God's Way

Wrestling for Blessing

By T.M. Moore

The blessing of God does not always come to us in convenient ways, and not always in the form we might like. We'd like to believe that God's blessings are easy to come by—through reading His Word or in prayer, during a service of worship, or as a result

of someone doing something kind or thoughtful. Our idea of what it means to *be* blessed has to do with things, conditions, or experiences that we think we need so that we will feel better or be more content in life. But the *way* to blessing, and the *very nature* of blessing are not always as we might suppose.

Consider Jacob, all alone in his fear and desolation, as he awaits the coming of morning and the arrival of his brother, Esau (Gen. 32:22ff). Jacob dearly wants to be blessed of God (v. 26), which, read: "Give me some reasonable assurance that Esau is not going to *off* me!" Or "Show me some way out of this confrontation!" Or some variation on that theme. A "man" comes and begins to wrestle with Jacob, who seems immediately to sense (*a la* Captain Hook before Peter Pan) "This is no ordinary mortal." He perceives that this wrestler is somehow divine, and has the potential to provide the blessing he seeks. So, messy, sweaty, painful, and exhausting as the wrestling must have been, Jacob would not let the visitor go until he received the sought-for blessing.

He was finally blessed, but that blessing seems not exactly what Jacob was after. His name was changed from Jacob to Israel. Oh, well, maybe Esau will just keep going on since the guy he's looking for is named *Jacob*, not *Israel*? Where's the blessing in that?

The blessing in Jacob's change of name is in the acknowledgment that he has learned how to learn from God: He has *striven* with God, and in so striving, has prevailed. He has shown that he is a man of God's covenant, because he has sought the promised thing, the blessing of God (even though his sense of what that would be was clearly askew), and poured himself out in exhaustion to receive it. And he *rests* in the blessing *received*, even though it may not have been the blessing he *sought*. He seems to sense that, whatever this change of name implies, it's precisely what he needed at that moment.

In the midst of desolation, wrestling with God. Out of wrestling, a change of name. Involved in that change of name, that meager, seemingly unsatisfying blessing, the continuation of God's covenant and the promises of Abraham. One small blessing realized through one night's wrestling in faith, and the assurance that greater blessings will follow is the implied result.

Whenever we feel ourselves slipping into desolation—fear, defeat, uncertainty, doubt, physical or personal setbacks—that should be a signal to us to start wrestling with God, and to refuse to let Him go *until He blesses us*. But be content for that blessing to be small—reassurance of salvation, a reminder of some forgotten Biblical promise, a word of encouragement from a friend—then cling to it with all your might. Each small blessing wrested out of the exhaustion of striving with God is the seed of more and more abundant blessings to come.

This prayer is found in [Celtic Prayers](#), by Robert Van de Weyer.

To capture the spiritual significance of daily tasks is the goal of those who pray in this way. We would encourage you to create prayers out of your routine chores, and find yourself praying without ceasing for the needs of family, friends, and Church.

Kindling The Fire

This morning, as I kindle the fire upon my hearth, I pray that the flame of God's love may burn in my heart, and the hearts of all I meet today.

I pray that no envy and malice, no hatred or fear, may smother the flame.

I pray that indifference and apathy, contempt and pride, may not pour like cold water on the fire.

Instead, may the spark of God's love light the love in my heart, that it may burn brightly through the day.

And may I warm those that are lonely, whose hearts are cold and lifeless, so that all may know the comfort of God's love.

–Celtic Prayer

Featured Book



TITLE: *The Snowflake: Winter's Secret Beauty*
AUTHORS: *Kenneth Libbrecht & Patricia Rasmussen*

Reviewed by Robert Hodge

My wife and I were once again in the Barnes&Noble buying gifts for relatives and friends when we spotted the attractive cover of a book on snowflakes. I opened the book and quickly discovered that the “artwork” on the front cover was actually a color photograph like hundreds of others in the book.

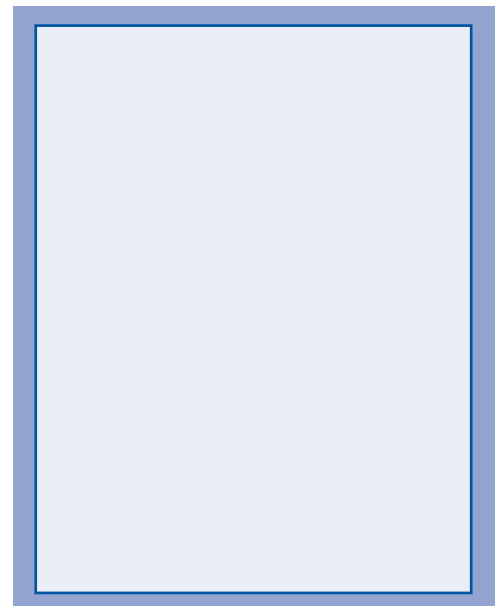
“Look at this! Look at this!” I said rather loudly to Gina, and others looked our way. “This is incredible! These are amazing!”

We study God (in the studious endeavor we call *theology*) because He has revealed Himself so that we would know Him and worship Him and live our lives consciously before Him. One of the most delightful windows of revelation is in what has been called *creational theology*. And if ever there was a tiny testimony in creation to the greatness of God, it is in the snowflake.

Patricia Rasmussen has dedicated countless hours to the difficult task of photographing a very cold subject in isolation. In some cases, the snowflake fills the whole page with a dozen shades of blue marching out in perfect symmetry, glistening at the ridges and darkened in the channels. Other pages have a dozen laid out in thumbnail size, a small tribe from the same species yet each having its own personality.

Libbrecht's technical writing is superb and will satisfy both the scientist and the nerdy liberal arts majors (I am one, thank you). You will learn the simpler and more complex crystals, the changes they undergo, and be provided with a “field guide” to studying the snowflakes that God sends upon your yard, your nose, or the trees of the Smokies this winter.

When you open the book to its first page you'll see in the photo that a blizzard is raging, and limbs are heavy with a blanket of snow. What took my breath away was that God saw (even as the photographer stood with wide-angle lens to capture the forest) every tiny flake, and His microscopic renderings of a Star of David, the rounded daisy at the center of a frozen throwing-star, and the myriad other designs revealing His delight in the world He has created.



Preparing to Teach

Biblical Interpretation

Mark 1:35–39

And rising very early in the morning while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.



1

WORD STUDY

See what you can learn about this passage from a survey of the following verses:

wilderness

Matthew 4:1/Mark 1:13

Matthew 11:7

John 1:23

John 11:54

Hebrews 3:8

solitary/desolate

Mark 6:31–32

Luke 5:16

Luke 9:10



Israel in the Wilderness

After Egypt came the wilderness. What was God able to do in that context that He couldn't have taught in an urban environment?

2



Jesus Tempted in the Wilderness

How is Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the wilderness a contrast with Israel's 40 years in the wilderness? Be as detailed as possible?

3



The Redeemed in the Wilderness

After spending time in a wild or desolate place, summarize the effect the environment had in contributing to your time alone with God.

4



text



word study



commentaries



meditation



outline



presentation