

# The High Calling

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## The University of the Desert

By Stan Key



When I was a pastor, one of the things I disliked the most was having to attend local “clergy association” meetings. Trying to find common ground with Catholic priests, Episcopal rectors, Jewish rabbis, Presbyterian ministers, Baptist preachers, and Pentecostal apostles was, well, challenging. The meetings were a time when everyone sized up everyone else—like dogs sniffing one another! The conversation was always predictable: “How many are on *your* staff?” “What is *your* annual budget?” “How many attend *your* worship services?” Sniff, sniff.

Eventually the question would be raised that, perhaps more than any other, revealed what one really wanted to know about the clergyperson to whom one was talking: “Where did *you* go to school?” Yes, learning whether someone had a Ph.D. from Duke, an M.Div. from Liberty, an M.A. from Oral Roberts, a B.A. from Bob Jones, or a certificate from the Four-Square Fire-Baptized New Testament School of the Prophets told you a lot (one assumed) about the person you were talking to.

I’ve lived long enough to learn that such “sniffing” goes on in virtually all professional gatherings. Whether medicine, education, finance, law, or the military, we tend to think one’s educational pedigree reveals one’s true identity and worth.

Did you know that God is also interested in where people go to school? *Very* interested! But let me assure you that his interests are quite different from those you may encounter at a professional cocktail party. God is insistent that his children get the best education that grace can provide. The school he chooses may or may not make possible worldly success, but it is guaranteed to produce saints, if his children apply themselves to their studies.

I’m talking about the University of the Desert. All God’s saints have graduate degrees from Desert U. Moses, Elijah, David, John the Baptist, and Paul all spent years studying at U of D, preparing for the work God had called them to do. Even Jesus was led by the Spirit to enroll for 40 days (see Lk 4:1–2). “He learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8).

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**Finding your way on the journey of life**

# Stuck in Borderland

By Mark Buchanan



A pastor and author, Mark Buchanan is passionate about motivating Christians who are stuck in “borderland” to get off their duffs and march forward into “the holy wild.” The article below is a slightly edited abridgement of the Epilogue to Buchanan’s first book, *Your God Is Too Safe* (Multnomah, 2001: 247–49).

In 1996 the staff at Bridger Wilderness Park in Wyoming posted some of the suggestions that had been given to them by park visitors:

1. Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
2. Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests.
3. Please pave the trails so that they can be plowed of snow during the winter.
4. Chairlifts need to be in some places so that we can get to the wonderful views without having to hike to them.
5. The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals.
6. A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed?
7. Escalators would help on steep sections.
8. A McDonalds would be nice at the trailhead.
9. Too many rocks in the mountains.

The ancients had a word for this: sloth. Sloth wasn’t just laziness. It was boredom and bone-weariness, the heavy-limbed, heavy-lidded listlessness struck into us by the heat of the noonday sun. It was *acedia*: a death of purpose, a loss of wonder. The wildness of the wild stretches out and towers up in all directions, but we miss it, whining for a chairlift, pining for a Big Mac, chafing at the bugs, stumbling over rocks.

This is being stuck in borderland.

I hope you want off. I hope you want to venture into the holy wild, with all its danger and wonder and beauty. But one thing is for sure: It will not come cheap or easy. If we are going to walk that road to Emmaus and see, hear, and rejoice in Christ who walks with us, we will have to *walk*, one step after the other, and we will have to watch and listen with care and with shrewdness. We will have to *practice* his presence. And there are no shortcuts to that, no escalators in the steep sections, no artificial removal of obstacles and annoyances. It takes discipline—the steady, daily cultivation of holy habits.

If we were to gather suggestions from most North American Christians about how to improve the Godward life, we might get a list with items like this:

1. Give us quick, effective formulas for prayer.
2. Dispel our doubts without ever making us touch wounds.
3. Remove our wounds and disappointments.
4. Explain mystery, simply.
5. Take the risk and the work out of obedience.
6. Give us a God who’s safe.

The borders of borderland expand infinitely that way. Trying to reach the holy wild by means of an escalator, trying to live with a God we insist be nice, safe, docile, domestic, who hands us life smooth and tidy and sterile, is to watch the margins of that untraveled world keep fading into the distance.



**You’ll have to walk the whole way.**

In part one of this book, we explored what I called our “Jonah heart”—our impulse to flee the God who seeks us—or our “Peter heart”—our temptation to send away the God who comes near. We do this because we know, as Jonah and Peter knew, that God isn’t safe. “Arise and go to Nineveh,” he might say. “Come, follow me,” he might command.

So, we refine our instinct for avoiding God. We perfect the art of the sidestep. We live in borderland—the place between being saved and being sanctified, between coming to Christ and actually walking with him. There are, we saw, many things that reinforce borderland living, many excuses we make for staying stuck there.

But we only break the habits of borderland dwelling by replacing them with other habits, holy habits. There are no tricks or gimmicks for living with the God who is not nice but who is good. There are no escalators in the steep sections. You’ll have to walk the whole way. 🌲

# Desert Spirituality

By Alister E. McGrath



In his book *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), Alister McGrath, research lecturer in theology at the University of Oxford, examines the role of “the desert” in both its biblical usage and its influence on numerous contemplative traditions throughout history. Indeed, “desert spirituality,” for good and for bad, continues to influence how many today think about spiritual formation. The following article is abridged and slightly edited (101–03).

The desert is to be understood as a lonely place, devoid of distraction, in which the individual is alone with God, and thus has the opportunity to reflect on spiritual issues. A major biblical image which lies behind the use of the “desert” motif in Christian spirituality is the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness prior to their entry into the Promised Land (an episode, incidentally, which links the themes of “journey” and “desert”). Certain Old Testament prophets (especially Jeremiah and Hosea) spoke of the desert as a place of purification and renewal of Israel. The prophets often looked back to Israel’s period of wandering in the wilderness as a period in which the nation was close to God, before becoming corrupted by increasing wealth in the eighth century BC.

The desert is seen as a place of prayer, as well as purification; Elijah and John the Baptist are both associated with the desert in this manner. The gospels often refer to Jesus withdrawing into the wilderness for prayer. In particular, the gospels report that, after his baptism, Jesus withdrew into the wilderness for a period of forty days, during which he was subject to various temptations which he successfully resisted (Lk 4:1–13). This period is recalled during Lent.

Interest in the desert or wilderness was developed in two different manners within third-century eastern Christianity. Some chose to take the image *literally*. Thus Anthony of Egypt (c. 251–356), increasingly alarmed at the growing wealth and corruption of city life, withdrew into the desert with his followers to establish a new community, uncontaminated by the sins of the city. By withdrawing from human society into the desert, Anthony believed that he would be able to address his

own spiritual state with a degree of concentration which would be impossible elsewhere.

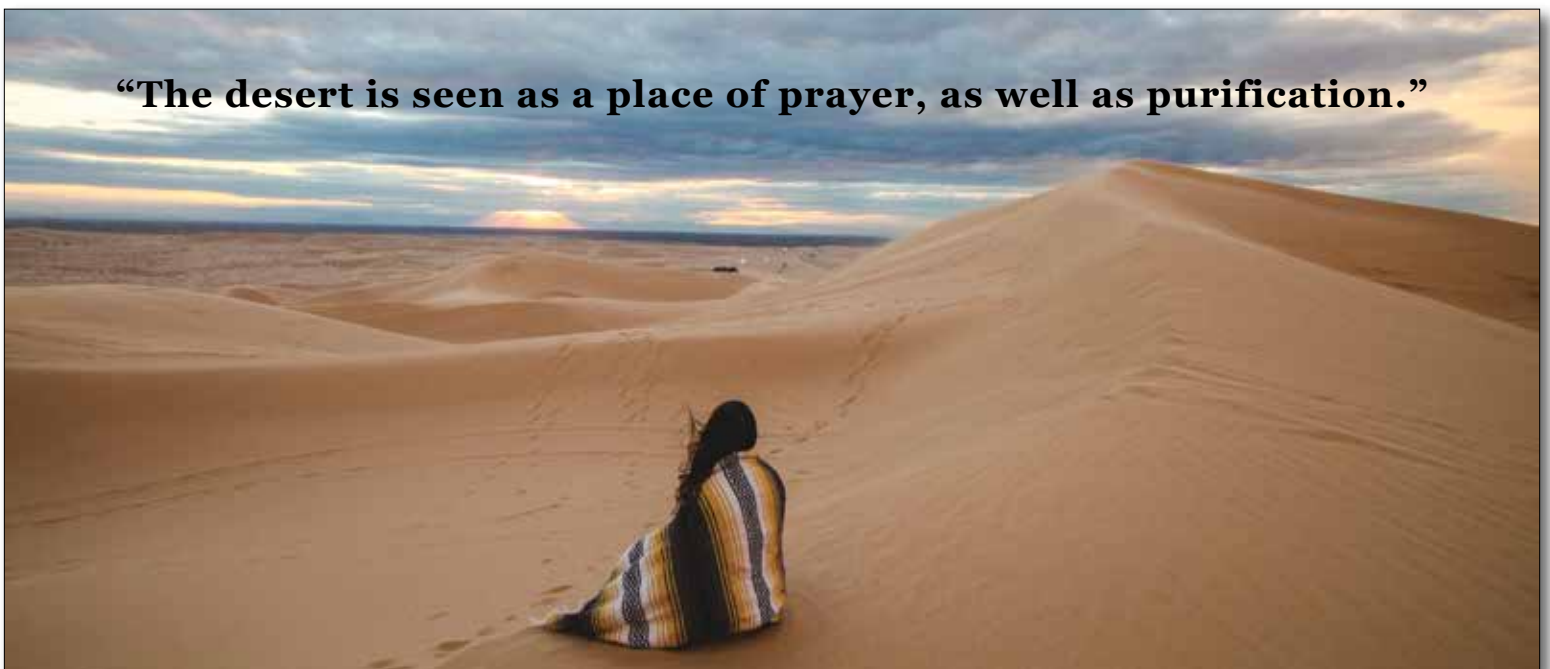
This theme of “retreat into the desert” was developed in slightly different ways subsequently. For example, Cassian (360–435) in Egypt, taught that the desert was a place in which individuals could confront and deal with their sins. Under Albert of Jerusalem (thirteenth century), the Carmelites established an order of life appropriate to a desert location. When the order later expanded into Europe, the idea of the “desert” was retained in an emphasis on regular retreats to isolated locations.

A more recent example of one who found spirituality to be enhanced by the desert is provided by Charles de Foucault (1858–1916). During his time as a French cavalry officer serving in North Africa, he came to develop a love for the Sahara. He eventually settled in this region, living in remote desert regions, and exulting in the solitude and insecurity which this brought.

A second approach was to interpret the desert *allegorically*, meaning the spiritual journey of increasing faith and holiness. Origen regarded the desert wanderings of Israel as an allegory of the Christian life, not simply a description of a particularly important moment in the history of Israel. The Christian must expect to wander in the wilderness and finally enter over the Jordan into the Promised Land.

A variant on this approach drew upon God’s gracious provision of manna to Israel during their period of wandering in the wilderness. Many writers argued that this could be interpreted allegorically, in terms of God graciously providing spiritual nourishment (for example, through the preaching of the Word or through the sacraments) to Christians as they journeyed through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Just as Israel no longer needed manna when it finally settled in the land flowing with milk and honey, so Christians will no longer need the ministries of Word and sacrament when they see God face to face. For what they foreshadowed is now to be seen in all its fulness. ✠

**“The desert is seen as a place of prayer, as well as purification.”**



# He Meant What He Said

By C. S. Lewis



Commenting on the command to “Be perfect” (Mt 5:48), C. S. Lewis reminds us that Jesus meant what he said! The way may be rough and the process long and painful, but he intends to finish the work. The following article is a slightly edited abridgment taken from the chapter entitled “Counting the Cost” in *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2001: 201–06).

I find a good many people have been bothered by our Lord’s words, “Be ye perfect.” Some people seem to think this means, “Unless you are perfect, I will not help you”; and as we cannot be perfect, then if he meant that, our position is hopeless. But I do not think he did mean that. I think he meant “The only help I will give is help to become perfect. You may want something less: but I will give you nothing less.”

Let me explain. When I was a child, I often had a toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something which would deaden the pain for that night and let me get to sleep. But I did not go to my mother—at least, not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this. I did not doubt she would give me the aspirin, but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist next morning. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain, but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists: I knew they started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth which had not yet begun to ache. They would not let sleeping dogs lie; if you gave them an inch, they took an ell.<sup>†</sup>

Now, if I may put it that way, our Lord is like the dentists. If you give him an inch, he will take an ell.

Dozens of people go to him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of or which is obviously spoiling daily life. Well, he will cure it all right, but he will not stop there. That may be all you asked, but if once you call him in, he will give you the full treatment.

That is why he warned people to “count the cost” before becoming Christians. “Make no mistake,” he says, “if you let me, I will make you perfect. I am going to see this job through; whatever it costs me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect.”

<sup>†</sup> Old English measure of length; roughly 45 inches.

This is what you are in for. And it is very important to realize that. If we do not, then we are very likely to start pulling back and resisting him after a certain point. I think that many of us, when Christ has enabled us to overcome one or two sins that were an obvious nuisance, are inclined to feel that we are now good enough. He has done all we wanted him to do, and we should be obliged if he would now leave us alone. As we say, “I never expected to be a saint; I only wanted to be a decent ordinary chap.”

But this is a fatal mistake. Of course, we never wanted, and never asked, to be made into the sort of creatures he is going to make us into. But the question is not what we intended

ourselves to be, but what he intended us to be when he made us. He is the inventor; we are only the machine. He is the painter; we are only the picture.

That is why we must not be surprised if we are in for a rough time. I find I must borrow a parable from George MacDonald. Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

The command *be ye perfect* is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said that we were “gods” (see Ps 82:6 and Jn 10:34) and he is going to make good his words. If we let him—for we can prevent him, if we choose—he will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a small scale) his own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said. ✠

**“Our Lord is like the dentists...  
if once you call him in, he will  
give you the full treatment.”**



# The Wilderness State

By John Wesley



Included in Wesley's "standard sermons" is a message alerting believers to the dangers of "the wilderness state." Focusing on the wasted years of spiritual mediocrity and fruitless wandering that characterized the latter part of Israel's desert journey, Wesley exhorts his listeners to press on to their inheritance of victorious living in Canaan. The following article is a modern English adaptation prepared for *The High Calling* (abridged and edited) of Sermon 46, "The Wilderness State."

After God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt, the people did not immediately enter the land of promise but rather wandered out of the way in the wilderness. In like manner, when people today are justified freely by God's grace, most do not enter immediately into the rest that remains for the people of God. Many of them wander astray and come into a howling desert, where they are tempted and tormented. We can call this "the wilderness state."

First, let us consider the nature of this wilderness state, this diseased condition into which so many fall. What are the symptoms of this frightful disease? First, it consists of the loss of faith. Those who wander in the wilderness no longer have the evidence of things not seen which they once enjoyed. The Spirit no longer witnesses to their spirit that they are children of God. A second symptom is a loss of love. They can no longer say,

"Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you." They no longer feel love for their neighbor and have lost their zeal for others to come to know the Lord. Thirdly, they have lost their joy in the Holy Spirit. The water of life has been dammed up and their thirst is no longer quenched. Fourthly, they have lost that peace that passes understanding. That sweet tranquility of mind is gone, and painful doubts have returned. As before their conversion, they once again fear the coming wrath of God. Finally, the wilderness state is characterized by loss of power. Such a person no longer has dominion over sin. His crown has fallen from his head. The glory has departed from his soul.

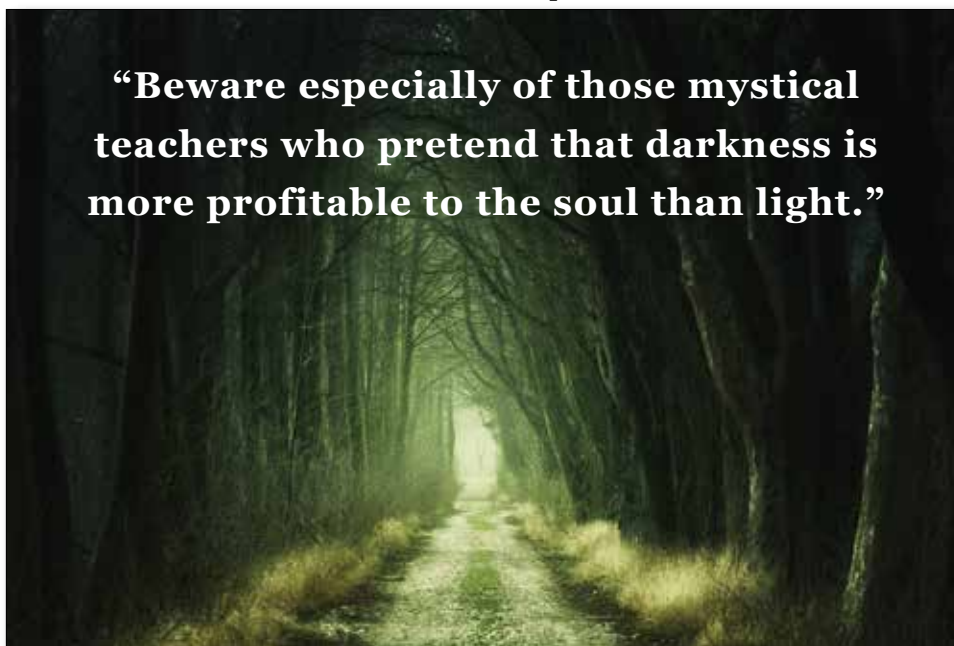
Second, let us consider the causes of such a dreadful condition. We must not say that the wilderness state is caused by God, that it is his will. No. He rejoices in the wellbeing of his children. His unchanging will is our sanctification, attended with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. God never abandons us. We may desert *him*, but he never deserts *us*.

The most common cause of someone being in the wilderness state is sin. It may be brought on by some sin of commission.

But more frequently, it is caused by some sin of omission; neglect of private prayer, for example. Or perhaps some inward sin (pride, anger, lust, etc.) is responsible for turning the person out of the good way and into the wilderness.

A second cause is ignorance. Tragically, some people imagine the Bible teaches that all believers *must* sometimes walk in darkness, that is, the wilderness state is God's will for us. While Roman Catholic mystics have taught such falsehood for centuries, many in our own tradition now also teach that the wilderness state is something all believers should expect; in other words, God leads us into a state of darkness and dryness. Indeed, such a condition is considered a higher form of spirituality! These misguided souls believe that this is the only way to be purified from pride, love of the world, and inordinate self-love.

A third cause of someone being in the wilderness state is temptation. The evil which remains in our heart comes alive



again. Satan attacks with his fiery darts. The soul finds itself wrestling not only with the world and the flesh but also with principalities and powers. With so many assaults coming at the same time is it any wonder that such a person finds himself in a wilderness condition?

Finally, let us consider the question: What is the cure? To imagine there is one single way to bring a remedy to everyone

wandering in the wilderness is a great and fatal mistake. Unfortunately, some who are reputed to be teachers know of only one medicine. Whatever the cause of someone lost in the wilderness, these would-be physicians of the soul have only one remedy. They begin immediately to apply the promises; to "preach the gospel," as they call it. Their single purpose is to bring comfort. Alas, this is quackery indeed, and that of the worst sort. One cannot speak strongly enough against such promise-mongers! In effect, they prostitute the promises of God, applying them to all people without distinction.

The cure for spiritual disease, as for bodily disease, must be suited to the various causes that may make a person sick. The first thing, then, is to find out the cause; and this will naturally point to the cure. For instance: Is it sin which causes the person to walk in darkness? Which sin? It is important to be specific. Then, let the wicked forsake his way so that the Lord will return and abundantly pardon. In a similar manner, if the cause of being in the wilderness is occasioned by a sin of omission or

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# The Theology of the Cross

By Timothy Keller



Timothy Keller is a pastor who preaches theologically. He is also a theologian who thinks pastorally. Nowhere does the blending of theology and pastoral care become more pronounced than in Keller's treatment of suffering (aka, "the desert experiences" of life). In his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin, 2013), Keller provides pastoral care for his flock by introducing them to Luther's theology of the cross. This article is a slightly edited abridgment taken from Chapter Two, "The Victory of Christianity" (48–53).

After the time of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), a gradual but significant shift occurred within the church toward the belief that the appropriate response to suffering was to endure it patiently and thus, with the help of divine grace, to merit heaven. In other words, suffering became a way to work off your sins. If you accept suffering with patience, it eliminates some of your sin debt and helps you earn God's favor and admission into eternal bliss.

But the coming of the European Reformation, and particularly Martin Luther's biblical theology, brought not only a renewal of the Church in general but also a deepening of the Christian understanding of suffering in particular. Luther rejected the medieval view of salvation as a gradual process of growth in virtue that eventually merited eternal life. Instead, he saw salvation as coming through faith in the promise of God; taking hold of salvation as a free gift through Christ's saving work, not our own. This had revolutionary implications for the Christian view of suffering.

In Luther's view, suffering plays a dual role. First, it empties us of our pride. Suffering dispels the illusion that we have the strength and competence to rule our own lives and save ourselves. People "become nothing through suffering," wrote Luther, "It is God's nature to make something out of nothing; hence one who is not yet nothing, out of him God cannot make anything."

*God accepts only the forsaken, cures only the sick, gives sight only to the blind, restores life only to the dead, sanctifies only the sinners, gives wisdom only to the unwise. In short, he has mercy only on those who are wretched.*

But suffering was much more than some preparatory spiritual process for Luther. He was the one who coined the phrase "theology of the cross" in contrast with a "theology of glory." The world expects a God who is strong and whose followers are blessed and successful only if they follow his laws without fail. That was the view of Job's friends, of the Pharisees in Jesus' day, and according to Luther, the mindset of most of the leaders

of the medieval church in his day. It was a "theology of glory," but it was not the theology of the Bible.

The Scripture's startling message is rather that the deepest revelation of the character of God is in the weakness, suffering, and death of the cross. This is the exact opposite of where humanity expected to find God. Thus, Job's friends were sure that if things are going well for you, this means you are living rightly and God is pleased with you. But if things are going badly for you, you are living wrongly, and God has abandoned you. They thought it was easy to discern God's purposes and plans.

In the same way, the religious leaders of Jesus' day expected a nice, easy-to-understand Messiah who would defeat the Roman power and lead Israel to political independence. A weak, suffering, and crucified Messiah made no sense to them. Looking at Jesus as he was dying on the cross, they had no idea that they were looking at the greatest act of salvation in history. They saw only darkness and pain and were sure that God could not be working in and through *that*. So, they called Jesus to

"come down now from the cross," sneering, "He saved others... but he can't save himself" (Mt 27:42 NIV). But they did not realize he could save others only because he did *not* save himself.

Luther regarded Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God—why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46) as "the greatest words in all of Scripture." Luther saw that in Christ, the God-forsaken sinner has a Savior who has taken on himself the full

depths of human estrangement from God—and overcome it.

Why should we be surprised, then, asked Luther, that our lives are often filled with darkness and pain? Even God himself in Christ did not avoid that. But though God's purposes are often every bit as hidden and obscure as they were to Job and to the observers at the foot of the cross, we—who have grasped the message of the Bible—know that the way up is down. The way to power, freedom, and joy is through suffering, loss, and sorrow.

Not that these bad things produce these good things automatically, or in some neat *quid quo pro* way. Suffering produces growth in us only when we understand Christ's suffering on our behalf. Luther had known in his own experience how much suffering tears us apart if we are uncertain of God's love for us. We must rest in the sufficiency of Christ's sufferings for us before we can even begin to suffer like him. If we know he loves us unconditionally, despite our flaws, then we know he is present with us and working in our lives in times of pain and sorrow. And we can know that he is not merely close to us, but he is indwelling, and that since we are members of his body, he senses our sufferings as his own (cf. Acts 9:4; Col 1:24). ✠



**"Job's friends were sure that if things are going well for you... God is pleased with you."**

# The Wasteland of COVID-19

By Chad Crouch



President of the Cre8tive Group, Chad Crouch has been a friend of FAS for many years. Afflicted with the coronavirus this past April, Chad fought for his life for several weeks. At our invitation, he shares his story.

On Good Friday, April 10, 2020, I was admitted to Central Baptist Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, having been diagnosed with the COVID-19 virus. As I lay in my bed, I reflected on the fact that I was born in that same hospital some five decades earlier. “How ironic would it be,” I thought, “to come into this world and leave this world from the exact same place?”

Fourteen days earlier, I was at home with my wife, 19-year-old son, and 18-year-old daughter. They all had COVID-19 but were each nearly recovered. Their battles with fever, cough, and other symptoms were significant but not much worse than a bad case of the flu. I rejoiced that I had been unaffected. But then, my fever started. The steady downward spiral of my health felt like descending a staircase into unknown darkness. Each day the symptoms grew worse. My fever, while never above 101, was constant. I became lethargic and had a constant headache. I could find no relief. Finally, I called my doctor.

Though I was not at-risk because of my age or preexisting conditions, my breathing had become an issue. It felt as if a belt were tightening around my upper chest. The pain was constant. The doctor told me to monitor it another day, and if no relief came, to go to the Emergency Room. The next day, I showed up at the hospital at 5:30 a.m. I hadn’t been able to sleep, and my breathing was getting worse. As I left home that morning, I remember thinking, “This might be the last time I see my family.”

My arrival at the ER produced a flurry of activity. A chest scan and nose swab confirmed that I had both the coronavirus and pneumonia. I was admitted to the hospital and immediately quarantined. I never saw the face of anyone helping me as they were all hidden behind masks, goggles, and face shields. I never received the same information twice and, many times, I got conflicting descriptions for what should be done. I realized that everyone was just guessing; no one knew a proven protocol to help me. I became suddenly aware of my own mortality. I was in a “desert place.” Afraid and very alone, I became painfully aware that I had become “the problem.” It was as if the elementary playground game of “Cooties” had suddenly become very, very real. I was to be avoided at all costs.

During the darkest hours of my experience, I could do nothing but try to sleep. When I was able, I tried to read. Before I got sick, I had been reading Stan Key’s book *Journey to Spiritual Wholeness* and so it was my companion during these days. What a source of comfort and peace it was to be reminded of the importance of trusting God when you find yourself in a “desert place.” As Stan says in his book:

*When we find ourselves in a “desert place,” we should not immediately assume that we took the wrong road or that God is punishing us. In his great love and faithfulness, God has brought us to the University of the Desert, and he wants to give us the greatest education that grace can provide. He wants us to learn that salvation is about more than getting us out of “Egypt.” It is also about getting “Egypt” out of us!*

The symbolism of being admitted to the hospital on Good Friday was powerful. And, as if I was on a biblical schedule,

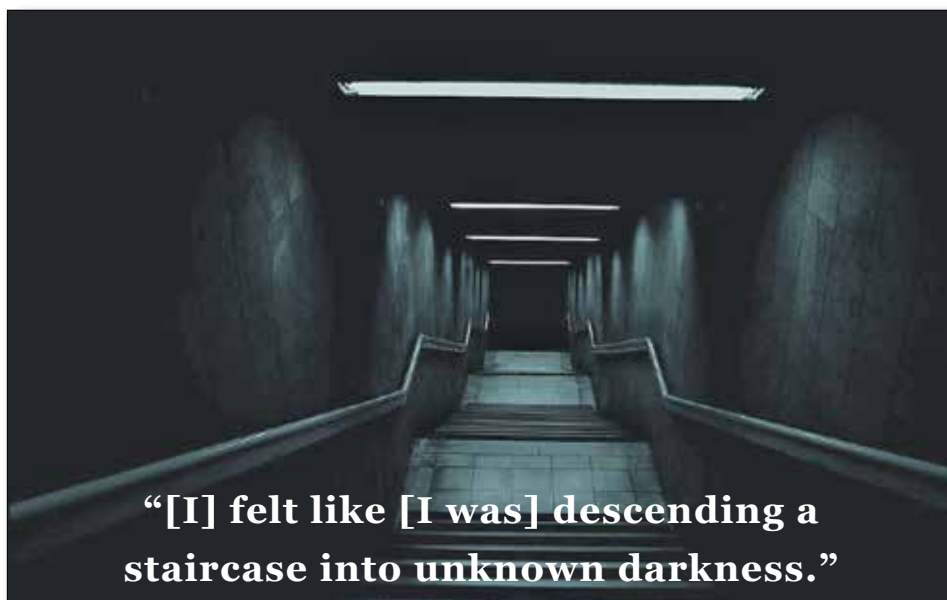
I was discharged on Easter Sunday! As a medical technician pushed my wheelchair out to the car, we rode alone in the elevator down to the backdoor exit. He asked if I was feeling better. “No, not better at all,” I said. His response surprised me: “Well, God must have great plans for you because you are going home on Easter!”

For two days after coming home, I felt worse than I had

before going to the hospital. But then, slowly, like fog lifting in the early morning, my symptoms began to lessen. My breathing became less painful and my fever dissipated.

During this time, I received emails, texts, and letters from friends I hadn’t talked to in years. Many assured me of their love and prayers. What an encouragement it was to be surrounded by the love of God expressed through the body of Christ! When I was finally released from my at-home quarantine, I took a drive in the country. It was the first time I had been out of my house in over thirty days. It felt like I had been given a new life and was living in a new world!

Life is a journey. Jesus Christ invites us to follow him, wherever he leads. Spiritual wholeness becomes possible only when we recognize we aren’t home yet; there are many “viruses” that threaten our wellbeing and detract us from the journey God has mapped out for us. As we trust in the Lord, we can operate from a place of rest, victory over sin, and fruitfulness. He is faithful and will enable us to endure to the end. ✨



† Stan Key, *Journey to Spiritual Wholeness* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 2019), 66.

# The Land Between

By Jeff Manion



Senior teaching pastor of Ada Bible Church in Grand Rapids, MI, Jeff Manion writes about the pain involved in transitions. Using the story of the “desert experience” of the people of Israel told in Numbers 11 as a foundation, Manion writes to encourage believers in their journey from “here” to “there.” The following article is taken from Manion’s book *The Land Between* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010: 26–28, 178, 192–193). It has been abridged and slightly edited.

After generations of slavery in Egypt, the sons and daughters of Abraham will make their way toward Canaan, the land promised to their ancestors. God has said, “I will bring them out of Egypt and into a good and spacious land.” But while “out of” the land of slavery and “into” the Land of Promise sounds like a short trip, nothing is mentioned about the amount of time the people will spend in the desert, the wilderness—the Land Between.

A barren wilderness separates Egypt from Canaan, and here the Israelites will spend considerable time before moving to their new home. The desert is where they will receive the Ten Commandments—the core of their covenant with God. It is also where a portable worship tent, the tabernacle, will be built. The desert is not intended to be their final destination but rather a necessary middle space where they will be formed as a people and established in their connection to God.

But a desert, of course, is a hard place. Though Egypt was the land of slavery, suffering, and agony, it was also brimming with lush vegetation. The rich waters of the Nile caused Egypt to flourish agriculturally. Canaan, too, the people’s future home, was notable for its prosperity; it was, as God described it, “the land flowing with milk and honey.” But as the Israelites move from the lush, fertile home of their past to the lush, fertile home of their future, they pass through the wilderness. They are stuck in the middle, the desert, the undesired space between more desirable spaces. This middle space, the Land Between, will serve as a metaphor for the undesired transitions we, too, experience in life.

For the Israelites, their experience in the wasteland was not meant to be a waste. The Land Between was to be pivotal in their formation as a people—it was where they were to be transformed from the people of slavery into the people of God. And they needed transformation. Let us consider that as they exit Egypt, the Israelites are more fully acclimated to the world of Egyptian idolatry than they are formed by the character and presence of the God of Abraham. As we watch them exit Egypt and enter the desert, we should not imagine a neatly ordered multitude of mature followers. The Israelites are an unruly mob of recently released slaves who are prone to complaining, frequently resentful of Moses’ leadership, and longing to return to Egypt with every conceivable hardship. The Israelites desperately need the spiritual formation of the desert to become the people of God. In their current condition, they do not yet know their God and are unprepared to enter the Land of Promise.

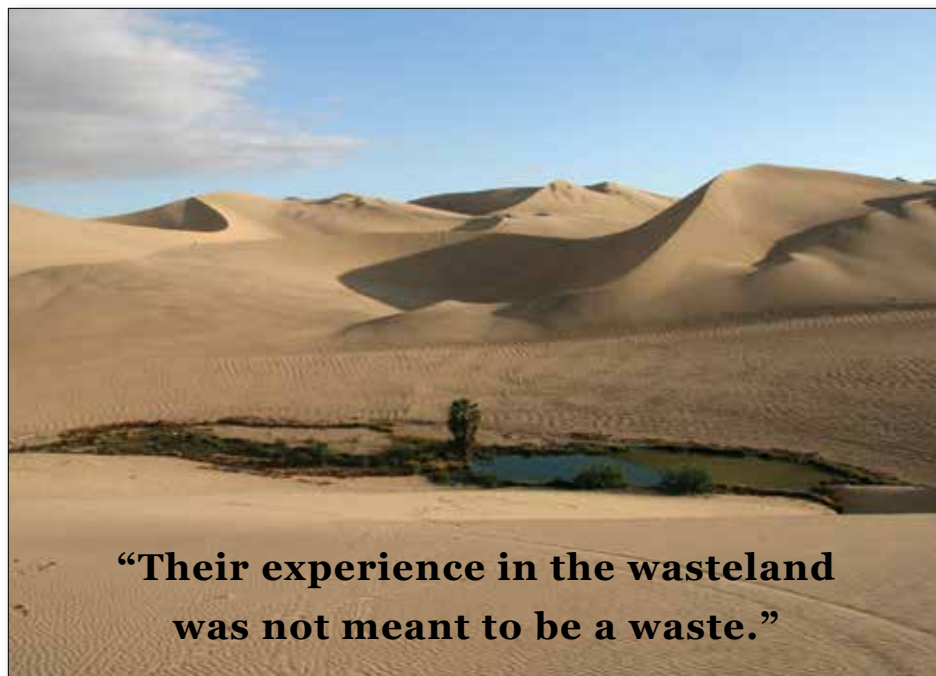
The desert experience is intended to shape, mold, and refine them into a community of trust. Unfortunately, it will not be their finest hour.

The Land Between is what provides the climate for transformational growth. When stripped of financial security, when adrift in suffocating grief, when our bodies weaken, or when key relationships evaporate, we have entered a land where the soil is perfect for deep, lasting transformation. The Land Between is fertile ground for transformational growth.

But be warned: the Land Between is also the place where faith goes to die. Remember the Israelites. Transformational growth is not automatic. We can just as well emerge from the wilderness with an embittered heart, a resentful spirit, and badly eroded trust as we can having experienced transformational growth. We get to decide.

The climate of the Land Between can be so harsh that neutrality is not an option. The conditions have a way of either drawing us toward God or driving us away from him. While the desert is the ideal climate for transformational growth, it is also the place where faith can shrivel and die. A spirit of complaint is lethal to the truth that God intends to grow. As you journey through the Land Between, remember that God desires your trust more than anything else. The question he will ask repeatedly is the same question he asked Abraham, Joseph, and Moses: Will you trust me? In the barren landscape of wilderness God desires to forge a relationship of trust.

In the Land Between, a remarkable phenomenon occurs. We come to possess a vital faith that allows us to be at our best when life is at its worst. We emerge from a season of profound disappointment, unnerving chaos, or debilitating pain with a faith worth having. We learn that the Land Between is about a journey of trust and that something flourishes there that could not be produced in any other soil. We discover that the place we most want to escape has produced the fruit we most desperately crave. The Land Between is fertile ground. Welcome to the Land Between. ✦



**“Their experience in the wasteland was not meant to be a waste.”**



# Reigning Training

By Paul E. Billheimer (1897–1984)



Radio pastor, Bible college president and author, Paul Billheimer believed that suffering in the believer's life (aka, "the desert") was an indispensable part of God's program of preparation for ultimate participation in rulership as members of the bride of Christ; what he called "reigning training." The following article is a slightly edited abridgement taken from his book *Don't*

*Waste Your Sorrows* (Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1977: 43–53).

God is calling and preparing an Eternal Companion called the Bride, who is to sit with his Son on his throne as his co-regent in the ages to come (Rv 3:21). In order to qualify for this exalted position, the members of the Bridehood *must* be as nearly like the Son as it is possible for the finite to be like the infinite. If they are to qualify for their lofty duties, they *must* share the character of God himself which is agape love. *This is the norm of the universe*, the ideal toward which God is working for the eternal social order. But that quality of character cannot be developed in fallen humanity without suffering.

This explains Paul's inspired revelation: "If we endure hardship, we will reign with him" (2 Tm 2:12 NLT). According to Romans 5:3–5, suffering produces character (agape love), and character is a prerequisite to rulership. Because there is no character development without suffering, suffering is a necessary preparation for rulership.

God pronounced unfallen Adam "very good," but the Fall brought massive damage to Adam and all of his progeny. It left the race self-centered. Self-centeredness is the very essence of all sin and misery and results in self-destruction. It is the core of hostility, and hostility is the core of hell, the *hallmark* and essence of hell. Self-centeredness is the antithesis of holiness or agape love, the hallmark and essence of heaven.

In bringing an individual into the likeness of his Son, God must decentralize him. Decentralization begins in the crisis of justification and the new birth and continues in the crisis of sanctification or the filling with the Holy Spirit. Of necessity it does not end there. These are only beginning experiences similar to a vestibule which is a good place to enter but a poor

place to stay. The work of sanctification by which the self is decentralized is both instantaneous and progressive. It is both a crisis and a process which continues throughout life.

If God's net purpose in saving an individual is just to get him to heaven, he would probably take him to glory immediately. But God wants to prepare him for rulership in an infinite universe that demands character. Progress in sanctification, in the development of Godlike character and agape love, is impossible without tribulation and chastisement.

*My child, don't make light of the Lord's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child. As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all.... For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. (Hebrews 12:5–11 NLT)*

It is clear that sorrow, suffering, tribulation, and pain which come to the believer are not primarily for punishment but for child training. They are not purposeless. Earthly parents may make mistakes in their chastisement—and often do. But not God. He is preparing the believer for rulership in a universe so vast that it appears infinite. It seems that God cannot fully decentralize fallen man, even though born again, sanctified or filled with the Holy Spirit, without suffering. Watchman Nee says that we never learn anything new about God except through adversity.

There is no way that Christlike character can be formed in man without suffering because he cannot be decentralized otherwise. If he will not suffer, if he determines to evade it, if he refuses to allow the life of nature and of self to go to the cross, to that extent he will remain hard, self-centered, unbroken, and therefore unChristlike.

There can be no spiritual progress, therefore, except through the progressive death of the self-life. Maclaren has said that every step on the pathway of spiritual progress will be marked by the bloody footprints of wounded self-love. All along the course of spiritual advancement one will have to set up altars upon which even the legitimate self-life will have to be sacrificed.

How meaningful are the words of Jesus in John 15:1, "My Father is the husbandman"—not Satan, but *My Father*. Not understanding God's benevolent purpose, when sorrow and suffering come, it is easy to fall into a spirit of resentment and self-pity which produces frustration and



Continued on page 10

perhaps by an inward sin, then do all you can to determine the cause and deal with it as the case may demand.

A different approach will be needed if the wilderness state is caused by ignorance. Is the ignorance related to the meaning of Scripture, perhaps caused by ignorant teachers? Such matters must be addressed point by point as the need may require.

Beware especially of those mystical teachers who pretend that darkness is more profitable to the soul than light. The Scripture nowhere says that the absence of God works perfection in the human heart. No! Rather, a clear sense of God's light-giving presence will do more in an hour than his absence in an age. Joy in the Holy Spirit will do more to purify the soul than the lack of joy will ever accomplish.

Finally, if the wilderness state is caused by heavy and unexpected temptations, the best cure will be to teach believers always to expect temptation. Convince them that the whole work of sanctification is not, as they had imagined, accomplished in a moment. Remind them that when they first believe they are as newborn babes, who gradually need to grow up. Thus, they can expect many storms before they come to the full stature of Christ. ✠

depression. When this occurs, one is defeated in his spiritual life, and character deteriorates. *He has wasted his sorrow.* In order to grow in character, it is necessary to understand that nothing that God permits to come to his child, whether "good" or "ill," is accidental or without design. Everything is intended to drive him out of himself into God. All is for the purpose of character training. *There are no exceptions.* ✠

## The Disciplines of Life

Author Unknown

*When God wants to drill a man,  
And thrill a man,  
And skill a man  
To play the noblest part;  
When he yearns with all his heart  
To create so great and bold a man  
That all the world will be amazed,  
Watch his methods, watch his ways!  
How he ruthlessly perfects  
Whom he royally elects!  
How he hammers him and hurts him,  
And with mighty blows converts him  
Into trial shapes of clay which  
Only God understands;  
While his tortured heart is crying  
And he lifts beseeching hands!  
How he bends but never breaks  
When his good he undertakes;  
How he uses whom he chooses,  
And with every purpose fuses him;  
By every act induces him  
To try his splendor out—  
God knows what he's about.*



## Supporting Ministry with Monthly Giving

By Charlie Fiskeaux, Special Assistant to the President for Development

Regular, monthly, and recurring: simple words, widely applicable and somewhat comforting, too, since many aspects of life occur with regularity. For example, most family budgets cycle on a monthly basis, primarily because many household expenses occur monthly. The Francis Asbury Society is similar in that many expenses occur on a regular, monthly basis. Further, income is measured against expense on a monthly basis.

An important part of FAS financial operation is the General Fund. While the term "general" may sound non-specific, in fact, it is the General Fund that enables the Ministry Center to operate and support all of the various ministries such as speakers, discipleship and publishing, along with providing for most administrative operations. In good accounting fashion, these financial operations are assessed monthly. It is, then, the regularity of these expenses that can create a funding gap when income does not match expenses on a monthly basis. The ideal is to match, as much as possible, income with expenses, which gives rise to the desire to have a regular,

monthly, and recurring income for the General Fund as well as for the various Ministry Funds.

To this end, your regular, monthly and recurring gifts are important. We are seeking persons who will commit to a "Leadership 100" level of giving, which is \$100 per month supporting the General Fund. However, if your family budget will not accommodate that level, then we are grateful for your gifts of any amount, as the Lord leads you. However, if you prefer to send gifts other than monthly, we also will be most grateful for your participation with us. If you are already a Leadership 100 donor, we express our appreciation and thankfulness for you and your monthly support. Your regular support enhances our efficiency and enables more consistent ministry—all for the cause of proclaiming the gospel message that we can be "wholly devoted to God" with an undivided heart.

Details for various methods of giving to the ministries of the Francis Asbury Society are available on our website [www.francisasburysociety.com/support](http://www.francisasburysociety.com/support). ✠

After their miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea, the people of God soon discovered that the Promised Land (Canaan) was not contiguous with Egypt. The Sinai desert separated them from their destination. God did not lead them to Canaan by the short and easy path, one which would have avoided the desert. He led them right into the middle of one of the most desolate wastelands on planet Earth (see Ex 13:17–18 NIV). Welcome to the University of the Desert! God knew that before they faced the challenges awaiting them in Canaan, his children needed an education. His pedagogical purposes are clear:

*And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.... Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. (Deuteronomy 8:2–5)*

Yes, getting a solid education at Desert U is mandatory for those embarked on the journey to spiritual wholeness. The courses offered are not electives. In the desert, God humbles his people, disciplines them, and tests them to know what is really in their hearts. He teaches them to nourish their souls daily on the Word of God. The training may be painful and will certainly require lots of hard work. But people who complete their studies at U of D are ready for the joys and challenges of kingdom building that await them on the other side of the Jordan River.

God's original plan was that his children would spend roughly two years in the desert and then enter Canaan from the south, at Kadesh-Barnea. However, when his children rebelled in unbelief and refused to move forward, God caused them to spend an additional 38 years working on their education!

This issue of *The High Calling* is devoted to the desert; that place in the journey to spiritual wholeness that lies between Egypt and Canaan, barrenness and fruitfulness, fatigue and rest, aimless wandering and purpose-filled living, justification and sanctification. The desert is not a geographical anomaly; it is a spiritual necessity. If you find yourself spiritually dry, bearing no fruit, and walking in circles, these articles are for you! Our prayer is that this little magazine will be a source of great encouragement as you receive the best education that grace can provide. ✨

## The Hill of Difficulty

By John Bunyan

*This hill, though high, I covet to ascend,*

*The Difficulty will not me offend.*

*For I perceive the Way to Life lies here:*

*Come pluck up, Heart; let's neither faint nor fear;*

*Better, though difficult, the Right Way to go,*

*Than Wrong, though easy, where the end is woe.*

## Oh, God, We Need More Rattlesnakes!

Author Unknown

God uses pain and suffering to draw people to himself. This poem reminds us of the “fiery serpents” God used in the desert to motivate his people to repent (see Num 21:4–9). Commonly known as “The Rattlesnake Poem,” it is also entitled “The Dutchman’s Prayer.”

*Up in the hills of Ole’ Kentuck,  
The meanest place that e’er was struck,  
There lived a man named Jacob Jobe,  
The meanest man on this ole’ globe.  
He feared not God nor cared for man,  
Except his wild and wicked clan.*

*He had six boys, all big and bad,  
Who followed right behind their dad.  
They drank that Wildcat Whiskey down,  
And painted red their country town.*

*He had six gals, big husky gals,  
Who danced and frolicked with their pals.  
They danced and pranced upon the hills  
And, sometimes, tippled at the stills.*

*Then, one day an awful rattlesnake  
Bit the oldest boy, big wicked Jake.  
Through his veins the venom flew;  
“He’s bound to die, what shall we do?”*

*In haste they sent a runner down  
To fetch the parson from the town  
A Dutchman of John Wesley’s band,  
As good as any in the land.*

*He prayed a wondrous, curious prayer,  
In words of faith both rich and rare.  
And if to heaven it reached or not,  
On earth it surely hit the spot.*

*Oh God, we thank Thee for this snake.  
That Thou has sent to bite ole’ Jake.  
To fetch him down from his high hoss,  
and lead him to the Savior’s cross.*

*And now O God the great I AM.  
Please send another to bite old Sam  
And Jack and John, the worst of rakes,  
Oh, God we need more rattlesnakes!*

*Send chicken snakes to bite the gals  
And all their wicked dancing pals.  
And mama Jobe she needs one too;  
Perhaps a copperhead will do.*

*And now, Oh God before too late,  
Please hurry up these gospel snakes,  
And save this ole’ Kentucky State,  
I ask it all for Jesus sake.*

Amen!



# *The* High Calling

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## Pilgrim's Problem

*By C. S. Lewis*

*By now I should be entering on the supreme stage  
Of the whole walk, reserved for the late afternoon.  
The heat was to be over now; the anxious mountains,  
The airless valleys and the sun-baked rocks, behind me.*

*Now, or soon now, if all is well, come the majestic  
Rivers of foamless charity that glide beneath  
Forests of contemplations...*

*I can see nothing like all this. Was the map wrong?  
Maps can be wrong. But the experienced walker knows  
That the other explanation is more often true.*

### ***The High Calling—July–August 2020***

*The High Calling* is a bimonthly publication of The Francis Asbury Society to serve as a link between FAS and its constituents, building loyalty and awareness so that the teaching and experience of Christian holiness may continue to be lived and proclaimed throughout the world.

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