

He never felt more caged in. Deadlines popping up on his computer screen like an annoying game of “whack a mole”, his boss seemingly circling his desk, texts and calls ringing and ringing, and he hadn’t even hit the busiest week of his year yet. As his hands gripped the cold leather of the steering wheel, his drive home from work was anything but an escape. Plans needed to be made, house guests would be arriving in a few short weeks, presents to be purchased, gifts to be wrapped. As he scanned through radio stations, whenever he hit a Christmas station, his stress level increased with each jingle bell, and sleighbell he heard. Is this really the “most wonderful time of the year?” If this season of stress wasn’t enough, this was his first holiday season without his wife. Every snowflake that fell brought tears of reminiscing falling down his cheeks. Every time his kids rattled off their requests, stuttering in excitement for the gifts they wanted, he wondered if he was enough. Was he enough for his boss? Enough for his family? Enough for God? Church began to feel like another arena where he needed to impress. He knew Advent was a time to prepare for Jesus, but such preparation felt like yet another obligation that he felt incapable to fulfill. Not to sound like a Christmas station, but does any of this ring a bell? How can I prepare myself for Jesus? I feel so boxed in. I feel so stressed, pressured, and stuck. If you are looking for relief, escape to the wilderness!

This wilderness is far different from the idyllic scenes of Jeep commercials and National Geographic magazines. It’s desolate. It’s dreary. It’s deserted. How can this be our escape? You look around you as the dust blows against your feet, and as the dust cloud clears for a brief moment you see an oasis. But as every particle of dust finally settles on the ground you see the natural barriers between you and that green and peaceful place. Treacherous valleys, impossible to climb mountains, how is it that you will be able to traverse such a terrain? How will you enter your escape?

You aren’t the first to stand in the sand of this wilderness, wondering if God will lead you to peace and relief. Your ancestors in the faith, the Israelites, spent four decades in that wilderness. God’s people after Malachi penned his final words, had been in a spiritual wilderness. No prophets, no more Scriptures written, no word from the mouth of God for centuries. But then, it happened. That word returned, the wilderness heard its Creator’s voice again. A moment so monumental that Luke painstakingly sets the historical scene here. This is the beginning of the greatest true story ever told. In the era of Caesar, a new king would come. In the era of Caiaphas, a new high priest would make the most far-reaching sacrifice ever made. But God needed his people to be ready. The way needed to be prepared. Are you prepared?

Maybe you’re wondering how this wilderness can really be your escape. As you hear John the Baptizer, willing to have his personhood disappear, so his cry can be the centerpiece of glory, **“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”** Sounds like another item on the to-do list that you and I just can’t do. As I look at my mountainous mass of sin, how can I make such a mountain disappear? You and I have a gut instinct by nature to think that we can make a Babel-like tower of our goodness. It’s that inviting illusion of independence. You and I as captives in the wilderness of sin, despite knowing the impossibility of preparing our own way to Jesus, we set out to do just that.

This mountainous mass of pride has its own gravitational pull. This mountain attracts us back within, back to self. Self pulls us to make everything about my needs, my wants, my feelings. In this wilderness of self, we find the dry and dusty signs of our spiritual deadness without Jesus. The more we pile on pride, the more we groan in our restless wilderness wandering.

It's in that wandering away from "Myself Mountain," that we fall headlong into our own personal valleys of despair. After tumbling down, landing in the cool, dank, dark bottom of "Vanity Valley," you and I wonder if an escape to Jesus will ever be possible for us. Will we ever have an escape from the dust of sin that covers everything of who we are?

Our questions are interrupted by a familiar voice, calling out in this wild region, where no rational person would ever want to be, but you hear it. This cry draws your attention away from all your stresses, your obligations, your pressures, and your worries. Can you hear it? **"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in."** Your own "Vanity Valley" will be filled in. The Lord climbs down into our descending despair, and brings us to level ground. Your heart, so humbled by the mere thought of your sin, so broken up over how sin has broken your relationship with God, that heart hears John's call for the Lord's way to be prepared. And you realize who has been tasked with preparing such a way, and by grace, it's not you.

Can you see earth literally moving through the air? Tons and tons of dirt filling valleys so deep, but now like they never existed? Yet, you look before you and that mountainous mass of pride, "Myself Mountain" still blocks you from that glistening oasis. But once again, the Baptizer's voice, Isaiah's prophecy reborn, speaks to you, **"Every mountain and hill made low."** Before your very eyes, a seismic swipe levels that mountain. It's rocky pieces incinerated, banished to the wind, forgiveness for pride sweeps you off your feet. This impenetrable disconnect between you and your Lord, gone! The stress of putting on yourself to come near to him flutters away. As you look before you, the oasis in plain view, you see the endless, windy road that leads there. That road overgrown, jagged with stones, seems impossible to pass through.

You look at yourself and all your personal rough edges, and such a path that mirrors you, certainly can't be one you can clear. But as your head slowly begins to drop to your chest, that voice comes right around again, **"The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth."** All your and my crookedness that has led us to keep our distance from God, all of our rough edges that keep us from coming closer to him, vanish like the steam of a steamroller. Your path to the Lord is straight and true. Your rough edges, smoothed and made holy through faith in the Way-maker, the Trailblazer, the Savior.

No more mountains, valleys filled to the brim, roads straighter than an arrow, the voice crying makes one final declaration, **"And all people will see God's salvation."** You see your escape to the wilderness. A wilderness you could've never seen coming. A wilderness you could only travel, if God humbled you to see it. That wilderness is your escape, because of the life of repentance you live!

It's that life of repentance we must live, it's only by approaching our mountain of sin, it's only by falling into the valley of regret, that we can truly see the Savior. While the world fears that such self-reflection, calling ourselves "sinners," can only cause psychological damage, you and I know it's the life of confession and forgiveness that is our escape. The real harm is done, as my dear friend and teacher Mark Paustian would say, "when guilt, unacknowledged and unresolved, is left to poison life." The escape to the wilderness is nothing other than the refreshment of the oasis of repentance. It's in those tears of confession, where we find Jesus coming near to us, wiping tears, preparing a way into our hearts, preparing our love to **"abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight."**

We run with joy-filled precision through the wilderness of life, humbly admitting our sins, and trusting wholeheartedly that everything needed to bring us close to God has already been done by him. Repentance is not another thing for us to do, it's God way-making into your heart and mine. And when you and I stop looking at self, trying to find it within us to keep our lives together, but instead start looking for Christ in this wilderness that we discover what C.S. Lewis did, that when we look for Jesus, "you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in."

It's in this soil of confession and forgiveness, that in the wilderness of our souls, life bursts forth. You and I no longer dwell on our inadequacies and failings, but we thank God for the fruits of faith he's given personally to each one of us! We thank the Lord that he has humbled us! We thank him for our own wilderness traveling. We praise his holy name and rejoice like Malachi did that the Lord **"do(es) not change"** and that he will never stop **"return(ing) to you."**

Escape to this wilderness as often as you can. As peoples' heaving stressful shoulders press up against you in grocery stores and at work, as flight plans are made, houses prepared, remember the way that the Lord has prepared you. Return to that oasis where mountains are flattened and valleys filled. Give yourself time for a "good cry." Pour out all you are to Jesus. He will come near to you. You will see God's salvation again, the ultimate escape, the oasis away from it all. Amen.