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Episode transcript

Week 3 | “Elijah and Hagar”

“Last week, we were with Elijah and Hagar, two people who sought desert wildernesses in their fear and despair, and found that God not only sustained them, but also repurposed their lives. A new task of prophetic anointing for Elijah, and a new family and dynasty for Hagar.

This week, we reflect on two very different people, who in material terms were wealthy, but whose lives of opulence were not able to save them from feeling powerless, and from entering the wildernesses of self-doubt and uncertainty.

Esther lived in the king's palace. She had been chosen for a life of unimaginable luxury, fed with the finest delicacies, massaged and perfumed with scented oil and admired by all who saw her. She lived in a palace with couches of gold and silver on beautiful mosaic pavements, where people drank from golden goblets surrounded by marble pillars and rich wall hangings. Yet for all these riches, all this luxury, she was alone. Her wellbeing depended on the whim of a man who was used to having absolute power. She had had to leave behind not only the uncle who had brought her up, but also the people who shared her faith. And more than this, she had to keep those origins secret.

Living in the palace, we are told, she had not revealed her kindred or her people. On the surface, her life was prosperous and well ordered. In reality, life for Esther was precarious. She was isolated and uncertain, just as we are in wilderness. And when disaster strikes her people, her isolation really hits home.

She is trapped by her position. She cannot join them in their religious observances. She cannot dress in sackcloth and cover herself in ashes. She cannot pray with them. Even her uncle can no longer visit her, since those wearing sackcloth cannot enter the palace. And she cannot leave. She must hear at third hand, through others, the calamity that has befallen her people.

And she can do nothing. Anyone who approaches the king without permission will be put to death. Her life may seem filled with all the comforts of wealth. But she is trapped and feels powerless in its gilded cage. We don't hear directly about Esther's encounter with God. This luxury that surrounds her prevents even us from witnessing at first hand her distress and God's response.

Hers is a wilderness that even the authors of scripture cannot penetrate. But we know that though she cannot join her people in reality, she joins them in her fasting. And we know that her voice and her lament to God is heard from those enclosed and suffocating spaces of the woman's palace. Because we know that her petition is successful.

Her people are saved, her uncle is vindicated and exalted. God has heard her and responded. Her gilded cage is not one from which God is excluded. And so Esther is not completely isolated in her wilderness, because God is with her and can act through her and in her to bring life and salvation.

Another person in scripture who appears to have it all, or at least to have plenty of material wealth, is Jacob. After travelling with virtually nothing to Mesopotamia, he builds a new life for himself and eventually for his two wives and their twelve children.

When he decides to return home, he takes with him oxen, donkeys, flocks and male and female slaves. He is no prodigal, returning home with nothing. He is rich enough that he can be prodigiously generous, sending to Esau a propitiatory gift of over 500 animals, cows, goats, camels, donkeys, and their young. But he is not secure in his wealth.

Whether rightly or not, he is afraid of his brother, doubtful of his reception, and doubtful of his own worth. In his distress, he says to God, I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness you have shown to your servant. Like Esther, he's not in the traditional wilderness of the parched desert, but he is alone in the wilderness of self-doubt, regret, and fear. And it is in this inner wilderness that he encounters God. Perhaps this encounter takes place in a dream, perhaps in reality, we don't know. But as he prepares to meet his brother Esau, none of his riches or his wives or his children can console him in this dark moment.

His wealth is useless. His hands are empty as he enters this wilderness of self-doubt and fear. But he is not alone. He shares his isolation with another who seizes him and holds him

close as they wrestle together, each struggling for purchase. This is no cheering encounter, no voice of comfort from an angel.

This is not the gifting of water or of bread. Jacob and his fellow sojourner in this wilderness cling together, and in their wrestling, it is hard for an outside observer to distinguish which is which. They are locked in embrace. But it is an embrace of struggle, not of comfort. And Jacob is changed by it.

He becomes a person who has seen God and lived. He has a new identity in which self-doubt and fear no longer hold the upper hand. And he can now meet his brother with love and generosity. But alongside this blessing, he bears the wound of his encounter, the limp that marks him out as one who has known God in the wilderness, and as a result has reentered life, transformed.

Two very different stories, and two very different encounters with God, but both show that wilderness is not always about material lack or physical deprivation. There are times in our lives when however much we have, we still feel lost or adrift. Times when we feel cut off from our loved ones. Times when we are wracked with self-doubt.

Times when we feel powerless. Sometimes we go through times when, like in the story of Esther, God encounters us unseen and it's only looking back from the outside, as it were, that we can see from what has happened that God's hand has been at work. Sometimes we go through times when we, like Jacob, need to struggle every step of the way, knowing that the one who holds us in the mystery will not let us go, and risking both the blessing and the wounding in our encounter. Because it is in our openness to both of these, that we will find our way out of the wilderness.

Can the stories of Esther and Jacob speak to us when our inner wilderness is unperceived by those around us? When on the surface all is going well, but inside we are in turmoil?

For these wildernesses do not go unnoticed by God, and in them too God is present, and will meet us to bring transformation and new life.”