

Introduction



In the year 2000, something miraculous happened—my predominantly black church in the city merged with a predominantly white church in the suburbs. Then all hell broke loose in my life.

I knew God was doing a powerful work in the church. What I didn't know was how powerful His work would be in my own life. After surrendering my church to God, He led me straight into the wilderness. It was the last place I wanted—or expected—to go. But it became clear that if I wanted to follow God, I had to go through a desert of testing.

I should not have been surprised. After all, Jesus himself had to go through the wilderness before being released into His public ministry. And even though you won't hear this in many places, you need to know that God will lead you into the wilderness at some point as well.

This journey is not for the faint of heart—it's for those who are ready for more of God. I speak from experience. I've been to the wilderness and it's tough—but necessary.

God takes us there because it's the place where we see Him most clearly. It's the place where His life takes root in us most

deeply. And it's the place where the desert heat burns away the junk in our lives so we're ready for the new work God has planned for us.

The good news is that the wilderness is not some random event happening in our lives. It's not a result of the devil grabbing the steering wheel of our lives and taking control. God is at work and He has a purpose for each of us in the wilderness. And if God is behind our wilderness experience, we need to cooperate with Him, not resist Him. We need to pass the test so we'll have a testimony. We need to allow God to turn our scars into stars.

So allow me to serve as your wilderness guide. Let me help you uncover the meaning in your struggle and point out the incredible things God is doing in your life. As you read on, know that God has placed this book in your hands at this particular moment because He loves you, and has a purpose for you. You're not alone on this wilderness journey. God and I will be right here encouraging you along the way.

Chapter One

Stuck on the Bench



*“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD,
‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.’”*

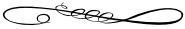
Jeremiah 29:11

“I’ve been a starter my whole life,” he grumbled, “so why am I sitting on the bench?” Hurt and anger flashed in his eyes, but I had no easy answer for him. I just listened as he gained steam and exploded, “I’ve started all through high school and college, and my entire NBA career. I started every game of the NBA Finals. But now, I’m sitting on the bench and I don’t know why!”


As chaplain for the Sacramento Kings, I’ve walked through many tough times with players. On this particular night, Nick Anderson was in a bad place. Nick was a former first-round draft choice and a proven veteran, but in his second season with the Kings not only was he not starting, he wasn’t even playing.

Frustrated

As I listened to Nick, I understood his frustration. For the past year I'd felt like God—*my* coach—had taken me out of the game and put me on the bench, and I didn't know why. We were both frustrated. He was frustrated with his coach, and I was frustrated with God.


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I wondered why God had led me to merge my predominantly black church with a predominantly white church and then taken me out of ministry. I wondered why God had given me the gifts and calling of a pastor only to tell me to sit down and be quiet. I even wondered if God was through with me. Was this the end of my story?


Nick and I were both experiencing dry times in our lives. We were both in a place that the Bible often refers to as a wilderness. Nick had been benched from the game, and I had been “benched” from preaching. We were both struggling to make sense of our situations, and we both needed to make a choice.

In Danger

As Nick talked with me that night I realized that he was in danger—more danger than he knew. There was more at stake than playing time. There was even more at stake than his career. With every game spent on the bench, I could see Nick's attitude plummet. His very character was on the line, and how he chose to respond to this dry time would determine who he was as a man and who he would be in the future.

Then it hit me—God was using Nick to show me that I was in

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danger as well. There was more at stake than my ministry career. Who I was and who I would be in the future, in fact, my very character, would be determined by how I responded to God in this wilderness time.

For Grown Folks

In my church, when we talk about serious things we say, “This is for grown folks.” That’s what this book is—a book for grown folks, because talking about the wilderness is tough.

Everybody goes through wilderness times. Things go wrong and you don’t know why. Sometimes it’s a tragedy that puts you in a bad place, or it’s a crisis, or a bad decision. Other times, as far as you know, you did everything right. Your motives were pure, your actions were selfless, your decisions seemed to have been led by God—yet you’re struggling. Your money has run out, your health has failed, people are standing against you, or all these things and worse are happening to you.

When you experience these times it can feel like your life no longer counts for anything. Things just don’t make sense. You begin to despair. Your attitude plummets. And you’re in danger—more danger than you know.

God Is Not Finished With You

Have you ever been there? Are you there right now? If not, I guarantee you will be at some point. But before you get discouraged and close this book, listen up. I’m writing this book for you. God is not finished with you yet. He has a purpose for you in this wilderness.

Amen All By Myself

You may not see what God's up to yet. As you start this book, you might not be sharing my excitement about what can happen in the wilderness. For right now, I might have to say, "Amen, all by myself," but don't give up on me. I want to help you see that this wilderness is a good thing and that God is using it to do a good work in your life. When you discover God's purpose for you in this dry place, you'll choose to say "amen" too. You'll be able to embrace all that He has for you, and you'll come to know that He is a good God who has good plans for you.

You're Not Alone

Has it ever occurred to you that there isn't a major player in the Bible who didn't go through a wilderness time? Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Naomi, David, Jonah (actually, Jonah went through a wet time), Mary, Jesus—you name the major players, and they went through hard times. It's important to realize that they didn't go through these wilderness experiences *in spite of* being great. No, the truth is that before they could do great things, they had to learn God's wilderness lessons.

God taught me some life-changing lessons in the wilderness—lessons I needed to learn before He could do great things in my life. God wants to do great things in your life, too. But first there are lessons God must teach you.

It's Your Choice

You have a choice to make. You need to decide how you will respond when you find yourself in the wilderness. Will you embrace the experience, or will you take a short cut and run away? Will

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you learn the lessons God has for you, or will you miss out? God is waiting for you in the wilderness, and He wants to know—will you follow Him? Your decision will determine who you are and who you will become.

For one NBA player, on one specific night, God had me in the right place at the right time. I was able to help Nick that night because I was experiencing the same thing myself. I knew exactly what he was going through. So after listening to his frustrations, I told him what I'm about to tell you. I said, "Nick, let me tell you a story..."