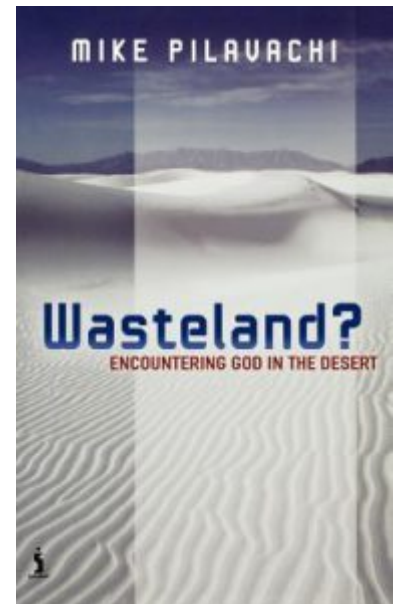


# Review: Wasteland? – Encountering God in the Desert

I'd never really heard of Mike Pilavachi before coming to the UK. I'd vaguely heard of Soul Survivor and, to be honest, was a little sceptical, suspecting just another super-spiritual-guru-man-caricature hyping it up. Instead, I have found in my experiences over the last couple of years that there is depth to the Soul Survivor movement, and Pilavachi himself has come to intrigue me. At the front he is part bumbling oaf, part lovable uncle, sometimes authoritatively prophetic and eloquent, other times lurching from anecdote to anecdote, self-effacing and yet stepping out in naturally supernatural words of knowledge and a ministry of restoration. In some ways it seems preposterous that God could work through him a successful and influential movement that reaches 1000's of youth each year, and sustains works of justice and care across the globe.



Now here's something I've learned over the years: you can't trust leaders who aren't dead yet. The more they are full of themselves, either in inferiority or superiority, the more they will injure, harm, or neglect. I include myself in that cohort. But those who have been through fire, who have been stripped away, who have been through wilderness and desert, and have learned to die and surrender all to God... well, I can trust them more. **They look more like Jesus and Jesus is trustworthy.**

Here's the same lesson: church leadership and the work of ministry can be either an act of self-focussed performance, or

it can be an act of God-honouring worship. In his grace, God often uses both, but there is a difference. That difference comes with brokenness, suffering, and wilderness. While we ask God to bless *our* ministry, we are performing, relying on our strengths. When we are stripped away, broken, we find ourselves operating out of *weakness and dependence* in ministry shaped less by our own (sometimes impressive) capability, but by the power and purpose and presence of the Spirit of God.

I think that's what I see in Pilavachi: He's a big man, and I see a bigger God.

All of this to introduce a book I picked up at a stall while attending Soul Survivor this year. Written in 2003, this is a somewhat autobiographical insight into where Pilavachi is coming from. And it's called **Wasteland? – Encountering God in the desert.**

Here's the dynamic I'm talking about:

*The great need today is for deep and authentic people... In our attempts to be 'culturally relevant' we could, if we are not careful, become as shallow as the surrounding culture... Jesus came to usher in another way. He called it the Kingdom of God... Why do we prefer to stay in the Christian ghetto where it is safe?... Yet if we are to go further into the world and make a difference instead of being yet another voice that adds to the noise, we have to listen to the call to go on another journey, a journey into God himself. If we are to offer life instead of platitudes we need to catch more than a glimpse of glory... Specifically, if we want to move in the power of the Spirit, to live the life of the Spirit and to carry a depth of spirituality that alone can change a world, he invites us on a journey into the desert. It is sometimes a very painful journey... but it is, I believe, a necessary journey. This adventure is only for those who are committed to being a voice to and not merely another echo of society... It is only for those who are sick of superficiality both in*

*themselves and in the church. (Pages 13-16)*

*The desert is a dry place. Nobody goes to the desert in search of refreshment. The desert is an inhospitable place; it is not comfortable. The desert is an incredibly silent place; there are no background noises, no distractions to lessen the pain. The desert is the place where you have to come to terms with your humanity, with your weakness and fallibility. The desert is a lonely place; there is not usually many people there. Above all, the desert is God's place; it is the place where he takes us in order to heal us. (Page 20)*

This book simply unpacks this common, but often undescribed, dynamic. It is in the autobiographical content ("I wondered if God had forgotten me?", p19; **"More than anything else, when I came to the end of myself, I came to the beginning of God."**, p20 emphasis mine). And it is a common thread in his exposition of the biblical narrative ("In the desert Moses came to the end of himself. In so doing he came to the beginning of God." p29). At all times it both excites and dreads, and is therefore compelling.

I found *Wasteland?* to be personally challenging. Ministry life is not easy, and can often feel like a desert. Pilavachi has helped me in my own reflection and crying out. For instance, he writes that "dependence and intimacy are the two major lessons we learn in the desert" (p22). Over the last few years I've learned a lot about dependence, but I know I need to learn more about *intimacy* with the Lord who is near to me, even if I can't tell that he is there, even if he is setting my heart on fire. Pilavachi speaks of being determined to "seek God for himself whether I had ministry or not" (p21) and I know I need this example. He gives the forthright truth, "life's a bitch, but God is good" (p79) and I must face my resentment, and the pain of knowing that that truth applies to church life just as much as any other domain. I am encouraged

to continue “plodding” (p86).

The book certainly makes for insightful reflection. I do have a slight question as to whether it would always be helpful to someone who might be in the midst of their wilderness. After all, it's very easy to slip into the despondency of (unfair) comparison: “It's easy for him to write, he's come through it, he's a successful famous Christian!”. And sometimes the descriptions don't totally match what someone might be experiencing: for instance, the wilderness is not always a “place where he slows us down” (p43), I have found it can also be something that feels like a dangerous jungle, a place of anxiety and fear. These concerns are only minor though.

The aspect I most appreciate is how the book has a prophetic character, speaking truth to the church, the church of the West in particular. Consider this provocative truth:

*When we turn from the spring of living water, we try to satisfy ourselves from any contaminated pool. We then become contaminated and diseased. Instead of seeking healing, we live in denial that there is anything wrong. The desert is a place of healing. Before that, however, it has to be the place where we discover that we are sick. When all the props are taken away we come face to face with our bankruptcy. **The gospel has to be bad news before it can be good news.** In the desert we find that we are ‘wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Revelation 3:17). Only then can we truly receive the Saviour. It is very dry and arid in the desert. Only when we truly thirst can we begin to drink the living water. (Page 43, emphasis mine).*

*This is the antidote to a faith that owes more to Western consumerism than to the word of God. **It is out of suffering and death that life comes.** If we have not learned that from the cross of Jesus, what have we learned? (Page 83, emphasis mine).*

The lessons he draws from the Song of Songs are profound as he speaks of the longing of the Beloved seeking her Lover. If we resist being moved by the presence of God (which we do), how much more do we resist being moved by a sense of his absence? We would often rather numb out and muddle along in our own strength.

*Sadly, for some Christians, for those who have never known themselves as the 'beloved', his presence is not missed. It is business as usual. I heard someone ask once, 'If the Holy Spirit left your church, would anyone notice?' The desert sorts out the spiritual men from the boys. [Like the Beloved in the Song of Songs], will we walk the streets until we find him in a deeper way, will we choose to sit in the desert until we hear him speaking tenderly to us? Or will we take the easy option?... God is not interested in a 'satisfactory working relationship' with his people. The passionate God wants a love affair with his church. A love so strong that we know we could never live without him. The desert is God's means of taking us to that place. (Page 52)*

This is an "if only" book. "If only" I could get the spirit of this book into the heart of the church at large. We are so formulaic, pulling programs off the shelf, often to avoid our wasteland by busyness or some self-made productivity. Yet in the wilderness, we can be made into a "voice, not an echo" (p57), a people that can speak the gospel from depth to depth. This is what changes lives. This is what changes the world.

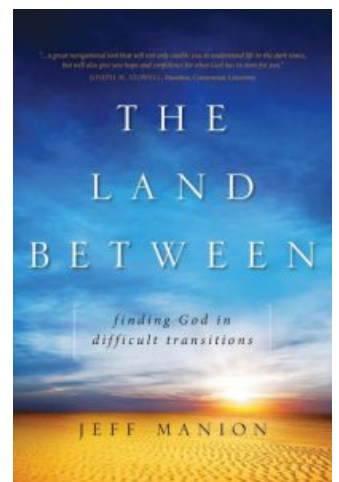
I have learned to consider prospective church leaders with the question "How dead are they?" I have regretted it when I have gone past that question too quickly. I have regretted it when I haven't asked that question of myself. Pilavachi puts it this way: "I am wary of trusting any leader who does not walk with a limp" (p87). In many ways he is a Christian superstar, with big lights, big tents, and big band... but his limp is obvious. In this book it becomes a provocation, exhortation,

and encouragement for all of us. I have come to really appreciate the whole Mike Pilavachi, Soul Survivor thing, with all its chaotic, messy, haphazard, space where God is so often manifestly present. It is that blessing, because of a limp.

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## Review: The Land Between – Finding God in Difficult Transitions

I'm writing this seated under a large sycamore tree in an English country churchyard, surrounded by lush green fields, waving crops, and comfortable houses. In my time I have had quiet times in many places like this, under random trees, at cafe tables, on picturesque Tasmanian beaches, or buffeted on a mountain by cloud-bearing winds.



Each place is a different context, each season is a different time, but I have found that each place has often been, spiritually speaking, a place of *wilderness*, a *deserted place* where (as I wrote to our then church many years ago) we are “laid bare before God... It is there that we are convicted of sin, assured of forgiveness, comforted, guided, and can consider the wisdom of God at work. It is there that we are matured, helped, strengthened...”

Wilderness is integral to the Christian journey. As we grow to be more like Jesus (what theologians call “sanctification”) we find that we must necessarily pass through a desert

experience. These are seasons that are never easy, often protracted, and invariably marked by encounters with hurt, grief, and mortification.

I've recently come across *The Land Between: Finding God in Difficult Transitions*, by Jeff Manion, and found it to be not only a decent description of this phenomenon, but also a companion, a textual spiritual director, for those who are plodding such paths at the moment. He understands that wildernesses are *crucial* times, the crux of things in life.

*I firmly believe that the Land Between – that space where we feel lost or lonely or deeply hurt – is fertile ground for our spiritual transformation and for God's grace to be revealed in magnificent ways. But while the Land Between is prime real estate for faith transformation, it is also the space where we can grow resentful, bitter, and caustic if our responses are unguarded. The wilderness where faith can thrive is the very desert where it can dry up and die" (Page 19)*

Manion has us reflect on the Israelite's wilderness in the time of Moses and, in particular, focuses in on the *complaints* that are voiced.

One form of complaint is the **bitter complaint**. We all complain when the going gets tough, and the going was tough for the multitude in the Sinai desert. Even as they became recipients of daily divine manna they complained. And we can identify with their frustration: "I'm sick of this! I'm sick of this season!" It is not abstract, as Manion demonstrates, and is manifest in our own situations. It's certainly a refrain that's been on my lips:

*"I'm sick of living in my in-laws' basement."*

*"I'm sick of being asked what line of work I'm in and fumbling for an answer."*

*"I'm sick of enduring wave after wave of medical tests"*

*without a clear diagnosis."*

*"I'm sick of waiting for this depression to lift."*

*"I'm sick of visiting a mother in a nursing home who repeatedly asks who I am."*

*"I'm sick of this manna"*

*(Page 36)*

To illustrate the second form of complaint, Manion turns to the "exhausted rant" of Moses in *Numbers 11:11-15* where he hurls forth questions like "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms?... If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now." Despite the volatility of it, this is **faithful complaint**.

*This sounds more like an exasperated meltdown than a prayer. You might say it sounds a little like the complaining Israelites in some respects – the despair, the frustration, the giving up, Moses' dismissal of his calling, the reference to death. But there is a key difference: Moses' attitude toward God. The Israelites are complaining about God. Moses is praying to God, and this is a huge distinction... He is not spiraling into spiteful complaint but is candidly pouring his heart out to God. He has maxed out and is in over his head. He is running on fumes. (Page 65)*

Every admirable person I know has been in that place. They are emotionally honest with God (page 70, page 86). Every person I know who has not yet fully entered into their calling, those who exercise leadership with a degree of immaturity, have not had this wilderness experience, they lack "experiential knowledge" (page 120) and have no words. They are unstripped, still full of themselves, unemptied, proto-kenotic, with faith soft and untested.

In response to faithful complaint, Manion paraphrases God's



heart:

*“See you’re not alone. Some of my choice servants have felt intense failure and frustration. This is how they prayed when they felt empty and exhausted, and this is how I Invite you to pray. My shoulds are strong enough to absorb rants like this. **But please speak! Cry out! Face me and give voice to your fatigue, your pain, your betrayal, your vast disappointment. Turn toward me and begin the conversation, even if it’s raw and ugly.**” (Page 74, emphasis mine)*

Wilderness brings us to the crux and puts before us the question that clarifies faith (page 55): Who will we trust?

Who will we trust with our past? Who will we trust with our future (page 52)? Will we attempt to take over and control? Or will we learn to bring ourselves to the presence and leadership of God? The wilderness doesn’t just *teach* faith, it *grows* it. In the wilderness, “God demonstrates that he is a capable provider for his people. What is he attempting to teach them as he leads them into dire hardship? ‘I am worthy of your trust. You need to learn to depend on me’” (Page 44).

The complacent avoid it. The bitter resent it. They turn from God: “We were better off without you as our rescuer, we were better off without your presence, we were better off as slaves... This is serious.” (Page 138). And it is real. I have seen people echo this sentiment in their lives, in their churches!

But in his leading Moses and his people through the valley of death, God isn’t capricious or attempting to build a co-dependency. He is growing them, making them ready. He is *maturing them, strengthening them*. “Once they enter the Promised Land, they are going to have to resist looking to the likes of the god Baal for water, food, and survival” (Page 45). The wilderness is necessary for them to *be* the people of God, distinct and reflecting his life-giving ways.

The fruit of faith is life's vocation: As the power of self-centredness dies in the desert, the power of sin, the ways of the world in maintaining and holding on to power and self-security, loose their grip. We learn to "cast our cares on the Lord" (page 83), where their hold and power on the soul is extinguished. We cast our cares as we learn to ask "How long, oh Lord?" (Page 84).

I only have one issue with Manion's exposition and application: At times we get a whiff of a positive thinking gospel:

*"A heart of bitter complaint is anchored in the suspicion that God is stingy – that he will hold out on you. But a heart of trust is anchored in the belief that God is good and will provide for you out of an inexhaustible reservoir of generosity. Your expectation of God's provision will prove a determining factor in whether the Land Between results in spiritual life or spiritual death. Your trust in his future goodness keeps hope alive as you journey through the desert" (Page 99).*

There is truth in this statement: Yes, faith holds to the goodness of God's character. However, we cannot make that faith contingent on having needs (or even wants) met according to expectation. Yes, we can hold to the eventual generous provision of the Promised Land of eternal life. But the heart of faith is not, "I will trust in God because he will eventually give me what I cry out for", rather as with *Job*, "Even though he slay me, yet will I hope in him." His ways are perfect, even if they are beyond understanding, or have only the rich and healthy received the fruit of their faith?

Gill and I spoke with a wise, older, vicar recently. He was describing his breakdown, the wilderness that he had experienced in a season in his life. And he said words to this effect: "I've learned to turn towards the pain. I don't like

it, I don't want to. But only there is life, when God works in my weakness, and there is fruit in the labour." For better or for worse, Gill and I have glimpsed what he means. Our resolve is to not waste the pain. To turn towards it and to trust God even when all appears as despair and abandonment. To do otherwise is to slip into bitterness, or to reach again for the numbness of worldly torpor.

Manion quotes Yancey, "Life is difficult. God is merciful. Heaven is sure." (Page 175). I would add to that the words of the incomparable John Schlitt who looks to the cross and sings, "I know who I am, I know where I've been, I know sometimes love takes the hard way... For now, forever, I take my stand, I place my whole life in Your hands..."

I know who He is, I know where He's been, I know that love takes the hard way.