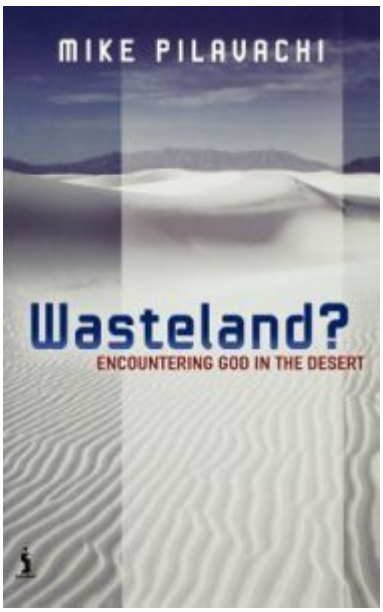
# Review: Wasteland? – Encountering God in the Desert




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)*
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> *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).*
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> *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 sthat 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.