

A FRIEND IN THE WILDERNESS

A SERMON

Preached on Sunday Morning July 12th, 1863

By Mister JAMES WELLS

At the Surrey Tabernacle, Borough Road

Volume 5 Number 238

“And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.” Mark 1:13

THERE is no doubt that there is something exceedingly significant in all that is said concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, seeing that all he did was for the eternal salvation and welfare of his people; and we must view all he did as bearing upon that. We hardly ever have a providential interposition on our behalf but there is some drawback, or another connected with it. And we are hardly ever favored with the enjoyment of eternal things but there is generally something as a kind of opposition to it. Satan seems allowed to throw a bitter into every cup of sweetness that we have while travelling through this vale of tears. So, I say it is a great thing to be able to make up our minds to it that this is not our rest. But then there remains a rest; and the last part of my discourse, if I can get so far within the compass allowed me, will show that there is something very inviting in that world to which we are hastening. Let us, then, see if we can glean out the meaning of the circumstances of our text, that Jesus “was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.” It is rather a long text; but I will notice, first, *the place*, the wilderness; second, *the period*; and third, *the ministration*.

I notice, then, first, *the place*; that he was in the wilderness, and tempted of Satan, and with the wild beasts; these are the three things included in the place. Now this wilderness is expressive, as you know, of where we all are by nature, and there we must be kept. There is a fourfold sense in which all of us by nature are as in a wilderness. First, the wilderness of sin; all of us by nature are in that; and what Pharaoh supposed of the Israelites is an awful truth concerning us as sinners, when he says, “The wilderness has shut them in.” And I am sure the wilderness of sin has shut us in; there is no way, by anything the creature can do, out of this wilderness of sin; he must abide in it, and that forever. And then the wilderness of Sinai also, where there is God’s law, and that law has nothing for us but indignation; no, it has nothing else. You may try, and try, and try, and try, and be sincere withal, but it is law sincerity; and that sincerity is of no use. And so, it is, the law sets bounds, and you will find nothing there but condemnation; there is nothing else. It is a wilderness, shuts you in on every side, there is no way out. And then, third, there is the wilderness of tribulation; and that also may be well called a wilderness, tribulations of various kinds. And

then there is the gloomy wilderness of death. Now in all these senses we are in the wilderness. And as we progress, and then, when we get into hell all these wildernesses will, as it were, make up the one eternal desolation, eternal distress, privation, and wretchedness, into which sin has brought us. Now, then, I think the Lord Jesus Christ coming into the wilderness is a figure of his death, a figure of his coming by his atonement to where our sin was, and putting that sin away; his coming to where the law was, and fulfilling that law; his coming to where our troubles were, and terminating all those troubles, turning them into light afflictions, that shall work for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; coming to where death was, and swallowing up that death in victory. The longer I live, the more I see and feel the necessity of Jesus Christ being everything. As I observed the other evening, (I repeat that remark this morning), it is no use for you to be mourning and longing to be better, I hope tomorrow I shall be better, and next day I shall be better, and next week I shall be better; and I am determined to be better, and I will try and be better; and I will be good, and try and be better. Just as well may the Ethiopian be determined next week, or the week after, to change the color of his skin; just as well may the leopard be determined very soon to eradicate all his spots. And therefore, you might as well be content to remain just as you are. What! as bad as I am? Yes, as bad as you are. Well, what am I to do, then? Why, all you can do, and you can't do that unless the Lord enable you, is to look to the Lord Jesus Christ, and see what he has done. And then, when you see that sin is done with by what he has done, why, then you will see there is no condemnation; and that the law and its curse are done with by what he has done, then you will get peace; and when you see that tribulation is entirely done with by what he has done, then you will get a little rest, "In me you shall have peace." And when you see by him that death is done with, swallowed up in victory, it is true the saying is not yet actually brought to pass in relation to the resurrection of the body, but then it is as good as brought to pass. So, then, instead of your trying to be better, your better plan would be to confess that there is no hope whatever of it; and so, you may as well give it up. But there is something else you can hope for better, and that is what the apostle had in view; when the Lord answered his prayer in relation to the thorn in the flesh, he did not say, Most gladly, therefore, will I glory in the thought that my heart won't be so bad tomorrow, my nature won't be so bad next week; I shall get on better now, I shall be better, I shall begin to think something of myself now, not a syllable about it; the apostle knew better, and therefore said nothing of the kind, longed for nothing of the kind, hoped for nothing of the kind; but summed up all he hoped for in these beautiful words, "That the power of Christ may rest upon me." Can anything be more encouraging than this? What if your heart be a cage of unclean birds? The more, then, you need Jesus Christ. What if you are compassed with infirmity? Then the more you need Jesus Christ. And what if your heart be as hard as the nether millstone, and what if you have not prayer at your command, and what if you cannot get at the promises of the gospel? Then you need all the more the Holy Spirit to enable you, and you need all the more the Lord Jesus Christ, and you need all the more the mercy of God. Oh, it is a wonderful secret to be raised out of self, to live out of self, to live away from self, to live above self; for when we are thus above self we are spiritually, as it were, absent from the body, and then we are present with the Lord. But when we are wrapped up in the body and determined to turn the old man into a new one if we can, then we are absent from the Lord. And you may work long enough; so that I have let off that work for a long, long time, and I find my present life a very much easier one than that I used to live. The life I now live is by a divine persuasion of the all-sufficiency of Christ; a divine persuasion of the certainty of the promise of God; a divine persuasion of the infallibility of his grace and of his mercy. And if conscience and the devil both together could throw at me ten million times more sins than they can, even that, when I am in my right mind, would not frighten me; for they would

be molehills when set beside the mediatorial perfection and achievement of an incarnate God. I should see them all sink to a plain; I should see them all lost in his eternal perfection; and, leaning upon my beloved, I should come up out of the wilderness, realize the distant promised land, and glory in the presence of Jesus, that while the wilderness has, in ten thousand ways, overcome me, it has never overcome him. This is one thing I understand, then, that is figured forth by Jesus coming into the wilderness. And he was here alone; he overcame the wilderness. The wilderness in olden times turned a great many professors into unbelievers; turned them into apostates, and they were for going back to Egypt again. And the wilderness trials made many even of the Lord's people rebel. Even Moses, we see his patience was worn out. "Must *I* bring water?" great *I*. Moses forgot himself then, "out of this rook for you rebels?" Well, Moses, if they are rebels, you are one too now, at any rate; you have just begun; you have been faithful all along; you are calling them now by your own name; why, you are the rebel. "Must *I* bring water." *I*. Why, Moses, how came you to set that great *I* up? Well, I really was so out of temper that I could not preach, comfortably, and so I preached myself instead of preaching the Lord. And, a pretty self you have preached, and called them rebels, when you are a rebel all the time. And so, it is, you will generally find, whenever a man takes so much notice of other people's faults, that he himself has either the same, or else some a great deal worse, or a great deal more. So, the best way is, after all, to look to Jesus Christ. Now this wilderness turned many into apostates, the same as tribulations will drive empty professors away from the truth, and made the real people of God, in many cases, rebel, the same as it made Job rebel when he cursed the day of his birth; the same as it made Elijah rebel when he said, "Take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers;" the same as it made Jonah, rebel when he said, "It is good for me to die;" the same as it often makes us rebel. Well, then, what is the remedy under these circumstances? Why, the remedy is that the wilderness never could make Jesus rebel; that is my comfort. It is not my comfort that I am such a good creature that I do not rebel, but that Jesus Christ never rebelled. The wilderness could not make him murmur; the wilderness could not make him rebel; the wilderness could not turn him back; the wilderness could not destroy him. He came out of the wilderness as pure and as free as he went into it, with this difference, he had overcome the same. And, therefore, my comfort is not that I am so good, but my comfort is that Jesus Christ was perfect. Let the dear Savior's name stand in the place of my name; let his life stand in the place of my life; let his perfection stand in the place of my poor broken doings, and then I have complete victory. Here, then, the wilderness, if I unite Jesus Christ with it, cannot overcome me. Rebel I may but turn me away from Christ it certainly cannot. I think, then, this is one thing intended by the Savior thus being in the wilderness. And I do pray that I, and you, and all the Lord's people, may live more and more in the knowledge of Christ; I mean, of course, a heartfelt knowledge of his mediation; for none but those that know it know how it endears the blessed God, and how it endears his ways, and just in proportion as you apprehend the love of God, so you love him. Hence the apostle prayed that the Ephesians might, in common with other saints, be able to comprehend what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of the love of Christ, which passes understanding; that is, not to comprehend abstractedly, because that, of course, no creature can do; but to comprehend with all saints, that is, all the saints that have gone before you; they have seen that this love is broad, broader than the law; they have seen that this love is long, long as eternity; they have seen that this love is deeper than hell, that it is high as heaven; and we wish you, with all saints, to live in these endearments by faith in Christ Jesus the Lord. But again, now the Savior was in danger then. Shall I use the term danger? it is a pure anthropomorphism when I do so, a mode of speech after the manner of men; that he ate nothing there, nothing to eat all this time; from this state of privation he was in danger of his life, in danger

of being made to rebel; he was in danger of being made to call in question the faithfulness of God. Not that there was any real danger with him, because it was not possible. I do not hold the doctrine of peccability, as applied to Christ; I do not believe it was possible for him to sin; I do not believe the thing was possible, because he was God as well as man; and what was not possible for him as God was not possible for him as man, because his Godhead was the strength of his manhood; and his manhood could not by possibility fail until his Godhead shall first fail. Nevertheless, I speak after the manner of man. Now, then, that danger could not affect him; could not touch his life, nor tarnish his holiness, nor impede his march, nor have any detrimental effect upon him whatever. Oh! how different with us; at least with me, how different with me! Alas! I feel sometimes as though God Almighty is the greatest enemy, the cruelest foe, that I have. I sometimes, in the very height of rebellion, ask why he suffered me to exist at all; and many, many times have I cursed my existence, and longed for annihilation. Sometimes I have been sunk so low that I have felt as though I would give a thousand worlds if I could go out of existence and know no more, for there seems nothing but misery and wretchedness, left hand and right, every way. So low have I been sunk sometimes; such unbelief, such rebellion against God; enough to sink my soul into hell. But what is the remedy? Jesus is my remedy; he bears all. When he came to the solemn matter signified by the wilderness, led as a lamb to the slaughter; and as a sheep before her shearers was dumb, opened not his mouth; submitted to it all in a sinless way. Ah, blest Redeemer, to save a rebellious wretch like me. Almighty mercy, to magnify itself in the eternal salvation of a rebellious worm like me. Talk of human merit or human goodness! Why, when we thus know experimentally our own hearts, we may well loathe ourselves in our own sight, and rejoice in the footsteps of the blest Redeemer, and shall see in every step he took something significant, bearing upon our needs, illustrative of the love, the grace, the mercy of a covenant God. When I have a better nature, and am better, I will preach another gospel; but till then my language must be, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Ah, say some, what have you to make you rebel so? The same that makes you do the same sometimes. Ah, says one, but I never do; I know the truth, and love Jesus Christ, and am not so rebellious as that. Well, I hope you may never have to drink out of such a bitter cup; but if you live long enough I think it is very likely you will; the devil will bring in the floods of his Satanic powers in a way you have never yet experienced, and then you will say, I used to think how wrong it was for our minister to tell out the things he did; I thought he ought to have kept them to himself; but now, if he had not, I should have sunk into despair. The man that is taught of God will never despair of the salvation of any man that God is pleased to take in hand: let him be as black and as vile as he may, it is infinite mercy, and the Savior has an almighty arm to save, to save unto the uttermost all that come to God by him. So then here is our comfort. Ah, say some, then you may go on rebelling, I suppose. Well, I have nothing to do with your inferences, nothing whatever; I have to do with my testimony. I have not said so; you can say so if you like, those of you that hate the truth; but I have nothing whatever to do with your inferences. They drew all sorts of inferences from the ministry of the prophets, and from the ministry of the Savior, and from the ministry of the apostles, and roundly asserted that the apostle declared that we should do evil that good may come. That was their inference; but the apostle did not say so, and the apostle was not responsible for their inferences, but only for his own doctrine. And so, I shall not only not be responsible for your inferences, some of you Pharisees, but I will not even stop to notice them; they are beneath contempt. They come out of your wicked heart, out of your fool's head, and you are as blind as bats, and your inferences are even beneath contempt. Mustn't talk like that? I must love and hate; can't mix it. Maudlin,

mawkish love I hate, and it's no use to hate unless you do hate. And therefore, I say, let us love the truth, and hate with all our souls everything that stands opposed to it, let it be what it may.

But again; he was tempted of Satan forty days. There is not a word said about this forty days' temptation; therefore, in what the temptation consisted, it is not possible for me to know, nor for any man, for it is not revealed. We know that Satan does resist every sinner that is beginning to place his hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, the angel of the everlasting covenant; and we read of one that Satan had bowed down for eighteen years, and we read of Satan blinding the minds of the people against the gospel, and we read of him as an accuser of the brethren. But in what way he tempted the Savior here is not recorded, and therefore I cannot say. I have my opinion about it, and that opinion, perhaps, is as well-kept to myself; and yet I don't know that there would be any harm to give it, either. There are some exceedingly good things, too good to be named, and so good men were forbidden to name them; and there are some things too bad to be named. And I am disposed to think that the scum and dregs of hell that Satan threw at the Savior here are too bad to be named, and therefore the Holy Spirit conceals the whole. And yet, while Satan for forty days mustered up all the powers of hell, could he defile the Savior? No. Could he find a vulnerable part? No. The serpent turned and twisted upon the rock; as Solomon says, "I know not the way of a serpent on a rock;" but could he find a vulnerable part? No. And so, after that tremendous scene, for no doubt tremendous it was, too bad for language to describe, and therefore left with God, and God alone. So, my hearer, here is our victory. Again, Satan will sometimes throw some dreadful insinuations into the mind, and there are elements in our nature, as the old divines used to say, human nature is the devil's tinder-box, and if he can put a spark within, light it up, burn the house down if he can. It is a quaint sort of observation, but there is a great deal of awful truth in it. So then in Jesus there was no corresponding element; there was infinite purity, there was perfect holiness. Why, says Satan, I spoilt the holiness of the first Adam, can't I spoil the holiness of this last one? I spoilt the righteousness of the first Adam can I not spoil the righteousness of the last Adam? I severed the first Adam from his Creator, and substituted my law into the place of that law; Adam followed me, the first Adam; why should not the last Adam? Ah, the last Adam is God as well as man. Here, then, Satan again was entirely defeated, and this is our victory. My victory is not that Satan never overcomes me; no, that is not my victory. "God shall tread Satan down under your feet shortly." Well, but why not now, Lord? Because some of them are thinking they can do it themselves; and then, when they have found they cannot do it themselves, and they have felt their own helplessness in the matter, and that the devil cares not a straw for them, then the Lord will come in and put Satan under their feet, when they have been trying to do it themselves; for they can resist the devil only as the Eternal Spirit enables them to lay hold of a Savior's name, and that by the presence of the blessed God. No doubt Satan aimed at the Savior's life, but he could not touch it. Then again, from the wild beasts, he was, speaking after the manner of men, in great danger from the wild beasts. A wilderness of wild beasts of all sorts; fiery serpents, scorpions, lions, tigers, wolves, I know not what wild beasts. And as the devil made use of a serpent to beguile Eve, he perhaps was allowed to stir up these wild beasts and try by their agency to destroy Jesus Christ. But no, that could not destroy him; he gained the victory over them. Well, say you, I don't see anything in that. There are a great many things in it. I don't know that these wild beasts don't represent his people in their state by nature; but I will not stop to notice that now. I know very well that every child of God has his enemies within and his enemies without, and we know not what injury, if they can have their way, they may do us. But then, faith in Jesus Christ gives us the victory; it is faith in him that shuts the mouths of lions; it is faith in him that draws the dragon, the

tyrant of Egypt, into the Red Sea with all his host; it is faith in him that exalts Mordecai, and brings Haman to his just and well-merited end. So, this is the view I take of this matter. Am I in the wilderness? Jesus Christ is my security against all the dangers of that wilderness. And is the devil setting in upon me in a variety of ways? Jesus Christ, faith in him, not anything in me, not any goodness of mine; no, no, no, away with the whole of it; faith in Christ is my remedy against Satan. "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb." And am I surrounded with wild beasts, look and stare upon, me? There stands the promise, and that promise is fulfilled in Christ, and his people by faith in him, "You shall tread upon the lion and adder; the young lion and the dragon shall you trample under feet. Because he has set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known my name." Thus, then, under these three circumstances, first, the wilderness; second, the enemy; third, enemies, compared to wild beasts, Jesus Christ is our victory. Ah, precious faith in him brings us to where God is on our side. I know not any scripture that has lain more upon my mind in relation to prayer than that of the dear Savior's advice. And we may well take his advice, you know, for he knew all about the counsels of heaven; he never spoke an idle word. He says, "Pray to your Father, which is in secret." Ah, if there are no words whatever, never mind; there are the sighs. As the hymn you have been singing this morning says,

"He knows how deep their groanings are,
And what their secret sighs declare."

Though there is not a word uttered, yet there is the sighing before the Lord. That is praying to your Father in secret; "and your Father which sees in secret will reward you openly." He will appear, he will make the wilderness blossom as the rose, he will put Satan under your feet, he will shut the lions' mouths, give you the victory; you shall see the wonders of the Lord, and declare his works, and glory in his holy name. Now, having thus glanced at the place, and is there anything fanciful in this? Is it not a positive fact that we are in this awful wilderness state? Is it not a solemn truth that none but Jesus can be the way out of it? Is it not a solemn truth that Satan is the deadly enemy of our souls, and that Jesus alone can be our victory over him? Is it not a solemn truth that our sins, like wild beasts, would roar upon us, sink us into despair, and destroy our very souls, but that Jesus has trampled them under foot, and put them eternally away by his all-atoning blood? The dear Savior might well say, when the disciples said, "Master, behold, the tree which you cursed is withered away;" why, he said, "Have faith in God;" let your faith be there: is anything too hard for the Lord? And if there is not anything too hard for him, there can be nothing too hard for you. Why, even at death itself you would smile, and say,

"Come, welcome death, I gladly go with you,"

when you can thus see the Lord on your side.

But second, *the period*. He was there forty days. There are two ways of viewing this; one I think to be not the true way; the other, I think, is the true way. That which I think is not the true way is this, that the Israelites were forty years in the wilderness and you find in Ezekiel 4 that Ezekiel was to bear the sins of Judah forty days, a day for a year. That is an instance wherein a day is turned into a year; so that these forty years are supposed to be the average of the pilgrimage life of the saints here below; and that Christ being there forty days denotes that he has consecrated a path for them through the wilderness; so that they go, by his having come into the wilderness, from

strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appearing before God, and that the manna will never leave them, that the rock will never leave them, that the cloud will never leave them, that the mercy-seat will never leave them, that the ark of the everlasting covenant will never leave them, that the presence of the Lord will never leave them, until they are entered into that eternal rest that remains for the people of God. Now I will not despise this view of it; I think it is a very good view myself, and I think a great deal of comfort may be gathered from it. We should be like busy bees in this, gathering honey from every opening flower: spiders turn everything into poison; but the spiritual mind, the busy bee, why, it gathers honey and sweetness from various parts of the Lord's word, and brings in a revenue of love, affection, and praise, and blessing, to the God of all mercy. But I should rather think that the proper view to take of it is this, that his being there forty days denotes the limitation of his own troubles. Jesus Christ's sorrows were not to last forever; they were limited and so he went on and went on, until he said, "It is finished." He never sorrowed after that, he never sighed after that, he never groaned or cried after that. I think, therefore, that is the idea intended, that there was a limitation to his sorrows. And his sorrows were our sorrows, our sorrows were his sorrows, and he has therefore put an end to our troubles; they are limited. Not so the wicked man; his troubles are not limited. The man that is not born of God, that is not one with Christ, his troubles never end; his troubles thicken as they go on. First, there are his common worldly troubles; presently comes old age, with its attendant infirmities, and those infirmities with drunkards and smokers are always very numerous. You always find men that give way to these habits, when they get about fifty, they begin to be very old; and if they should reach seventy, they will be mere heaps of animation. They have been sinning against the laws of nature all their days. Some that have been great smokers, when they are opened after they are dead, are black all-round the chest, to show what smoking has done. So that the very steps they take to augment the comforts of life are the very means of destroying them; hastening old age: and there they are, blind, ignorant of everything spiritual, until the soul, deprived of all hope of comfort, lifts up its eyes in hell, to await a heavier judgment, until soul and body shall be reunited, and the whole person thrown into privation, tribulation, anguish, and woe, and that forever. The troubles of the wicked will never end. Happy the man, then, who is made sensible of this, and is brought to look to the only way in which his troubles can terminate. Limited! So, you will find the word of God beautifully limits the troubles of the people of God; limits them as to the nature of them, and as to the duration of them. First, as to the nature of them. "You shall have tribulation ten days" does not say condemnation, no; there is no condemnation, no. If there is anything very much the matter in a family, Ah, it is the Lord's hand. Don't you be too eager; don't you be too fast. You don't know what you will have yet. Oh, it is some judgment. Then where ought you to be? Pray, sir, where ought you to be? If that calamity that man has in his family with one of his sons or daughters, if that be a judgment against that man, now just come home to your own heart; do you think that you yourself deserve such judgments as that man has? Well, I do. How is it you have not them then? Ah, but then, if you were innocent, all your family, Job, would not have been swept away like this. Yes, they would. "You shall have tribulation ten days;" there is no condemnation, it is not condemnation. Let the calamity be what it may, let the affliction or the loss be what it may, if I am a believer in Jesus Christ it is a tribulation, it is not a judgment, it is not a condemnation; "there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." Now you shall have tribulation, and that tribulation is limited to ten days; of course, not ten days literally, but a period of time that shall just answer the Lord's gracious purpose concerning you. Then, when he sees that your sorrows are as intense as he intends them to be, then comes Moses with the tidings of deliverance; then comes mercy; then your captivity is terminated, your ten days or forty days are ended. So, you will find

farther on in the Book of Revelation, the holy city is to be trodden under foot forty and two months; there it ends. The adversary is to reign his 1,260 days, a fixed period, and there it terminates. The tribulations of the saints are, as it were, but for a moment, working for them a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

But, lastly, “the angels ministered unto him.” The three temptations of the Savior here recorded were after he returned from the wilderness, and after the forty days; so that no doubt the angels brought some food to him, that is what I understand by it, as the angel brought cake to Elijah when he was lying under the juniper tree. It is said of the first angel, Matthew’s angel, that his countenance was as lightning, and for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men; while the disciples looked into the sepulcher, and realized the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. But look at the angel, what a glorious person he must be! Then, Mark, when he presents his, they are two young men. Young, Mark? Why, they are 5,000 years old; you don’t call them young now! Yes, I do; 5,000 years old, and yet young men. No growing old there; no infirmity, no sign of anything unpleasant, no decay. What would some of the young folks that think themselves pretty, though, if they live long enough, they will find out that “handsome is that handsome does,” not handsome is as handsome *looks*, but as handsome *does*; but what would some young folks that think themselves pretty give if they could retain their good looks? Dear me, I hope I shall never look old. You must, though, if you live long enough. “Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised.” Now, then, these angels appeared young men, no sign of age, no symptom of decay. Then you come to Luke, there they appear in shining garments; various appearances, you see, all to show the blessedness of that state. Here is the luminous countenance; here is the vigorous youth; here are the shining garments; and then, again, in white apparel: and all these appearances indicate the purity, the perfection, the incorruptibility, the happiness, the blessedness of that world.

May the Lord, then, lend us more and more into these mysteries; while on the one hand we see our necessities, on the other hand we see by Christ Jesus how they are all supplied.