

# In SPIRIT and TRUTH

## Embracing the New Year with “the New Norm”

A lifestyle of face masks, sanitizing, social-distancing, quarantines, and virtual meetings... Could this actually be “the new norm”?

As I reflect upon the events that have transpired since about two years ago, spring 2020, I am amazed at how the COVID-19 Pandemic has altered the lifestyles of humanity worldwide! I am also reminded of “a word” that I sent out to family and friends several months into the Pandemic, where I spoke of “the new norm”... a lifestyle involving face masks, sanitizing, social-distancing, quarantines, and virtual meetings. Yes, it all started almost two years ago, and yet, as we welcome in the New Year, 2022, it seems that very little has changed... perhaps an indication that this very well may be *the new norm*.



## Coming Out of the Wilderness in 2022

“Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” Isaiah 41:10 NKJV

“While social isolation and loneliness were prevalent in the population prior to COVID-19, efforts to reduce the virus’ spread via stay-at-home orders, quarantine, and social distancing recommendations have exacerbated an already serious problem” (Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Health Affairs). It now seems that (for many) prolonged periods of isolation has resulted in a type of *wilderness experience*.

Typically, the wilderness would be described as an uncultivated, uninhabited region of desert. ***In the Bible, the wilderness was often a place ordained by God, and chosen for trials, temptation, and testing of the people of God.*** Biblical examples of some who were *tried* in the wilderness are the Israelites (Exodus, chapters 7-34), Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-19), Paul (Galatians 1:15-19), and even Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11); all these were tested in the wilderness to prove their faith in the true and living God.

## The Heart Is Revealed In the Wilderness

“And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.” Deuteronomy 8:2

Perhaps there are a few lessons to be learned from those who spent time in the wilderness for God’s divine purpose. One of our greatest Bible examples would be that experienced by the children of Israel. History records that God led them through the wilderness for 40 years, to try their hearts, and to see if they would keep His commandments or not (Deuteronomy 8:2). From their trials, we can learn a lot in comparison to our times of solitude and separation during the Pandemic.

In the book of Exodus, we are told that the Israelites were led out of Egypt into the wilderness as a way to escape the plagues suffered by the Egyptians. Likewise, mandates for isolation, quarantine, and social-distancing during the Pandemic, were all efforts put forth to protect the public from the dangers of the various viruses plaguing the world.

Although the vast majority of the people were in agreement that separation was of crucial importance during the Pandemic, no one anticipated that such an extended period of isolation would be warranted. And as time would soon tell (and human nature would also reveal) society’s present-day responses were not unlike those of God’s people, the Israelites, who failed their tests repeatedly.



In the beginning of the Pandemic, “Preliminary surveys suggested that within the first month of COVID-19... emotional distress **tripled**”, as people feared, not knowing when things would return to normal (Time Magazine, May 7, 2020). Even believers who found themselves struggling to survive, experienced emotional stress due to financial worries, job losses, sickness, and prolonged social isolation. Many who stopped attending worship services, have experienced the added stress of trying to maintain their faith in God, while separated from their church congregations.

In the Bible, the children of Israel were often rebuked because of their “unbelief” in God (Hebrews 3:7-19). Their ongoing emotional distresses caused them to constantly murmur and complain about Moses (their leader), thus provoking God and consequently prolonging their stay in the wilderness. With an understanding of what God was *trying* to teach His people through their time of separation, perhaps our perception of the ongoing Pandemic crisis will change.

# Understanding the Wilderness Experience

1. **God is with us in the wilderness;** though sometimes lonely, we are never alone. If we seek Him, He will lead us, night and day (Exodus 13:21). "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." Proverbs 3:5-6
2. **God will meet our natural and spiritual needs.** When the children of Israel hungered and thirsted in a barren desert, God preformed miracles to supply their needs. He provided daily bread from heaven (manna), quail in abundance for meat, and water from rocks to quench their thirst (Exodus 16:11-36, 17:1-7, 15:22-25). We must never forget that even in our times of troubles, He remains faithful as *Jehovah Jireh*, the Lord our provider.
3. **God will protect His people from sickness, disease and pestilence.** God's promises given to Israel applies to those in covenant with Him today... "If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that HEALS thee." Exodus 15:26
4. **God will take us through our trials and battles, for His glory.** God knew that if Israel had a choice, they would have taken the easier way out. We are told that they were led through the wilderness so they would not be tempted to flee back to Egypt in the time of war. God used the wilderness experience to show His power to deliver them from their enemies (Exodus 13:17, 14:1-31, 17:8-16).
5. **God blesses us with spiritual insight in the wilderness.** The times of testing will bring forth revelations from God, if we seek His face. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days, Jesus rebuked him with the Word (Matthew 4:1-11). Also, in Exodus chapters 19-23, God spoke plainly to Moses and the Israelites, giving them the Law... explicit commandments with explanations for the consequences of sin.
6. **God will make a way when there seems to be no way.** The Israelites experienced one of the greatest miracles performed by God when He parted the Red Sea, allowing them to cross over on dry land (Exodus 14). And we know that He is still performing miracles today! "With men (some things are) impossible, but with God ALL things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).
7. **God teaches lessons of humility in the wilderness.** Corruption in the hearts of the children of Israel was revealed in the wilderness. While Moses communed on the mount with God, they immediately resorted back to their idolatrous ways, creating a golden calf for worship (Exodus 32). Their disobedience kindled the wrath of God; and they were humbled as they awaited His judgement upon them (Exodus 33:1-10)... "And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and WORSHIPPED, every man in his tent door." Exodus 33:10