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Exodus 19:1-8

Twenty-eighth Message

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ON EAGLES' WINGS

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

Last Sunday, our family spent the day at Stanford University's graduation. The speaker chosen to address the two thousand graduates was Steve Jobs, a college dropout. Everyone wondered what this imaginative genius would have to say to the prestigious gathering. His opening words immediately caught my attention: "Today I want to tell you three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories." All three stories focused on the value of being broken. First, Jobs related the story about his adoption and being rejected by a lawyer and his wife because they had their hearts set on a girl. The second story concerned his being fired by Apple, the company he founded. The third was about his facing death from pancreatic cancer. He said, "No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there." And then, as if quoting a verse right out Israel's wilderness experience, he said, "Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new." As everyone sat riveted through this man's entire speech, it was obvious that the real degrees in life don't come from universities but from time spent in the wilderness.

Today we come to Exodus 19, a climactic moment in Israel's journey in the wilderness. After weeks of rigorous basic training and survival skills in a desolate desert, they have finally reached their first destination, Mount Sinai. Exodus 19-24 becomes the pivotal point in Israel's journey, and the theological center of the book of Exodus.

The Literary Outline of Exodus 19-24¹

- a Theophany: The covenant is initiated (19)
 - b Law: The 10 Words (20:1-17)
 - X Moses as mediator of the covenant (20:18-21)
 - b' Law: The book of the Covenant (21:22- 23:33)
- a' Theophany: The covenant is sealed (24)

Here we discover that the purpose of Israel's education in the wilderness was to prepare her for one thing: to be able to hear the voice of God—and not just the content of his words, but also the tone of his voice. *How* you hear is as important as *what* you hear. Listening to the Ten Commandments, most people view God as a judge. They regard him as aloof and angry, strict and stern, thundering his crisp commands from heaven upon his people. The problem is that most have never read Exodus 19, which sets the stage for Exodus 20. The scene is not that of a courtroom but a wedding, and God is not depicted as an angry judge but an eager groom, on his knees, proposing to his bride. God wants Israel to hear his voice in such a way that she will fall in love with him and commit her life to him. Have you heard that voice of God wooing you like a lovesick groom, or has it all been legal negotiations?

As the couple exchange their initial vows we will learn the very essence of what commitment to God is all about.

I. The Setting of the Ceremony (19:1-2)

In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain. (Exod 19:1-2 NASB)

The narrator gives the setting of this great event by marking the time and place of the holy encounter. The precise time indication of "in the third month" (or "on the third new moon"²), followed by "this very day," emphatically marks the date of their arrival at Mount Sinai as the beginning of Israel's seventh week after their "going out"³ from Egypt, and designates Moses' ascent up the mountain to receive God's words as fifty days after Passover. This is why the Jews celebrate the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai with the feast of Pentecost. This unique divine encounter will become the pivotal moment in Exodus and the whole Pentateuch. After arriving at the foot of the mountain, Israel will remain there for eleven months, and it is here that the rest of the accounts of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers 1-10 will take place.

The geographical setting is also noted with emphasis, as the narrator repeats the term "wilderness" three times, and further focuses the location as "the wilderness of Sinai...in front of the mountain." This indicates that the momentous experiences that are to follow take place within the context of Israel's wilderness journeys, more importantly, at the exact location where Moses was commissioned before the burning bush (3:1-12), and the place where God promised he would return with God's redeemed people. Returning to Sinai would be the sign of faithfulness to his word:

"Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." (3:12)

The divine encounter that jolted Moses' world and catapulted the trajectory of his life into new horizons will now be experienced by the entire nation. This is no ordinary mountain. This is the divine habitat, symbolic of a New Eden, the very contact point between heaven and earth, "where the human realm makes contact with the abode of God. The place thus is laden with holy presence."⁴ Whenever humans come into contact with the holy, so earth-shattering and transforming is the experience that one never remains the same again. This mountain provokes Moses' memory to such an extent that we can almost visualize him, like a soldier returning home from battle, enraptured with the thought of this long awaited reunion.

II. God's Covenantal Vows (19:3-6)

A. Moses Runs Into An Impatient Groom (19:3)

Moses went up⁵ to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, (19:3a)

While the weary nation settles down to unpack and set up camp, Moses is off like a gazelle, scampering up the mountain to speak with his Creator and Covenant partner. His boldness, which is striking, leaves us riveted with anticipation. We expect another familial reunion, like the one he had with Jethro, complete with the sharing of stories and giving of thanks. But before he is able to reach the summit, “God, as if impatient to get on with the urgent matters at hand, does not wait for Moses to reach the top, but calls down from the mountain toward his ascending servant:”⁶

“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” (19:3b-6)

Solemn words thunder down from the summit. God’s “lofty and strongly cadenced speech” (Alter) transforms the atmosphere from a casual familial reunion to a sacred wedding. The scene closely resembles that crucial moment in the wedding ceremony when, after the bride makes her way down the aisle, emotions rise to their peak as the minister asks the bride and groom those initial questions regarding their commitment, prior to the actual recital of their vows. Those simple questions introduced by “*Do you . . . take . . . to be your lawful wedded husband/wife?*” followed by that all embracing “I do,” never seem to lose their force or sanctity. This is where Moses strangely finds himself. God is like a lovesick groom so overcome with emotion that he can’t even take time to welcome his servant home before launching into his vows for a bride he dearly loves. Nor does he take time to plan an elaborate “church” wedding; he insists on taking his vows right then, there in the wilderness.

We should be struck with amazement that God is willing to fully commit himself to this people, despite their immature faith and a far less than perfect record in the wilderness. In fact, without Moses’ persistent intercession and constant hands-on supervision, Israel would have failed every test in her basic training.

God’s outrageous commitment ought to speak volumes to the current “Gen X” generation. Averse to pain and driven by security, many appear terrified by risk, so much so that some demand complete perfection in a relationship before they are able to galvanize enough courage to risk an ounce of commitment. I often think with sadness of the dangerous and messy thrills, of the wild adventures and mysterious ports of call they miss out on because of their quest for security at all costs. If you want a safe life, you will never know the dangerous and thrilling adventure of love.

How different is our God. With eyes fully open, and knowing Israel has what we might call serious issues, he doesn’t hesitate to throw himself headlong into this relationship. I can imagine if this engagement was being entered into at PBCC, God would find himself in either Gary Vanderet’s or John Hanneman’s office, getting the bottom line on Israel! After a careful study of their personality profiles, Gary would be quick to point out all the baggage of Israel’s childhood wounds, saying that her deep-seated feeling of abandonment would be bound to surface in infidelity. His counsel would be direct and to the point. If God were wise, he would walk away. John, on the other hand, after hearing their respective life stories and Israel’s abusive family dynamics, would feel to his bones every tension of

their volatile courtship. Like Gary, he would envision a tragic, stress-laden future. But he would take a more subtle approach. He would advise the couple to wait, hoping that in time, one of them might come to their senses. Like Moses and Joshua, both men would foresee that this marriage was doomed from the start (Deut 30:1; Josh 24:14-27), for Israel was “stiff-necked and by nature unfaithful, and so unable to keep their resolve.”⁷ But God, being neither impulsive nor naïve, refuses to listen to the pain for which he is signing up. The wedding date remains fixed. Not only is he willing to continue with Israel, as flawed as she is, he will now offer her an exclusive, lasting relationship like no other on earth.

So the invitations are sent out and preparations are set in motion, both in heaven and on earth, for what will be Israel’s wedding day. Once again, Moses will play a vital role. He is commissioned to serve as mediator to bring the words of the King from the heavenly court to the people on earth. Yahweh’s vow consists of three aspects that shape the essence of holy relationships: motivation, responsibility, and purpose (or privilege).

B. What Motivates Our Commitment? (19:4)

What will God put before his bride as a motive to make a commitment to him? How does God motivate us to enter into a lifelong commitment? The answer in a word is “love,” demonstrated not by feelings but by the facts of history.

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself.” (19:4)

Verse 4 summarizes the entire narrative of Israel’s liberation. Before God asks for a commitment, he documents his faithful history with a people who had no future. God does not want a commitment that is not well founded or carefully thought through. So his appeal is to the witness of Israel’s “eye.” She did not receive the knowledge of God’s decisive acts in history secondhand or by hearsay; like Jethro, she was an eyewitness. God’s sacrificial love documented in Israel’s memory is to serve as her motive for commitment. It was a time in human history when Israel had known nothing but savage slavery for four hundred years. In the imaginative language of Eugene Peterson, “Egypt had developed and perfected one of the most impressive god-games of all, dominating the landscape, dominating the imaginations of people far and near, a totalitarian society ruled by a dictator whom everyone believed was also a god. The splendor surrounding the dictator-god made it believable: breathtaking architecture, dazzling art, everything magnificent in gold. But the splendor was all external: inside the place was crawling with maggot—abuse, cruelty, superstition, degradation.”⁸

Into that oppressive, tyrannical world, the Creator God arrives with no invitation. With wrecking ball in hand, he delivers ten successive blows that totally dismember Pharaoh’s demonic universe, idol by idol, “until there was nothing left but a pile of rubble, garbage, and corpses. The demolition drama, in ten scenes, played to a packed house for a little over eight months.”⁹ The entire cataclysmic drama is summed up “in the colorless phrase *what I did to the Egyptians*. Israel is not encouraged to gloat over its fallen oppressors. By contrast, the salvation of Israel is formulated in a sparkling and unsurpassable metaphor: *how I bore you on eagles’ wings*.”¹⁰

The metaphor of the eagle is compelling, with its majestic beauty and surpassing power that snatches its young from danger and then safely carries, feeds and nurtures them riding “on the high places of the earth.”

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
That hovers over its young,
He spread His wings and caught them,
He carried them on His pinions. (Deut 32:11)

On a trip to Alaska last summer, my wife and I spied a bald eagle's nest. Our guide told us that to help her young learn to fly, the mother eagle first makes the nest uncomfortable by removing all the moss that provides a protective cushion from the sharp branches. Then, to test their wings, she nudges her young out of the safety of the nest for their first free fall. If they flounder, she swoops down under them and bears them up on her own strong wings.¹¹

This majestic eagle that snatched Israel out of bondage had a supreme goal and destination. God's purpose was not to get Israel to some "place," but to someone, namely himself. With the clarity of a church bell he exclaims, "I brought you to myself!" It is this powerful relational hunger for intimacy that motivated God to save us. If we do not understand this foundational truth in our hearts, all of our spiritual motivations will be out of step. This is the supreme feeling that every bride experiences at her wedding. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," rings out in her heart as she walks down the aisle to meet her groom.

This is the grand motivation for Israel to give her heart to God: gratitude and appreciation for his amazing love. The motivation to embrace the New Covenant is similar to the Old. Both appeal to our gratitude for the sacrificial love of God. But in the New, God's love reaches new, unfathomable heights. We are rescued not through the blood of a lamb and the death of Egypt's firstborn, but by the blood of God's precious Son. And Christ's blood not only broke the power of the oppressive world, but also the power of sin and the demonic forces that lie behind the tyrannical world forces (Col 2:14-15). Before anyone takes his vows to follow Christ, God asks him to take a long, long look at the cross to "see" what he did to break the powers of hell and rescue us from this present evil age. Gratitude and appreciation are to be the foundations for our commitment.

C. What Are the Responsibilities of Our Commitment? (19:5a)

"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant," (19:5a)

Now that God has demonstrated an impeccable record of outrageous love and resolute faithfulness, he asks Israel to reciprocate with the same singular devotion. The conditional "if" clause places Israel at the crossroads of her history, confronting her with the massive responsibility that this covenant relationship brings. It is an absolute either/or; there is no third way. Love and trust form the fabric of all relationships. They are the free responses of the human heart that cannot be coerced. They will remain intact if compromised. Israel is solemnly summoned to freely give her heart, without reserve, to her bridegroom by being especially attentive to "listen" and to "obey" his voice fully (both ideas are contained in the Hebrew root *shama*, "hear").¹² Such radical obedience, however, is not defined by rigorous rules, but in fidelity to a relationship. As Bruce Waltke carefully observes, "'To keep covenant' denotes fidelity and devotion, not perfection (cf. Gen 17:9-12; 1 Kgs 11:11; Pss 78:10; 103:18; 132:12; Ezek 17:14)."¹³ If Israel forsakes her vows, she will forfeit communion with this "eagle God," and thereby forgo all the protection, nurture and life that he affords. On the other hand, by diligently obeying the covenant, Israel will enter into a privileged role, an unparalleled vocation, given to no other people on earth.

D. What Are the Privileges of the Covenant? (19:5b-6)

"then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." (19:5b-6)

Obedience will transform Israel from an ordinary people into a sacred nation with unique privileges which God has reserved for no one else. She will become God's *segullab*. The term, which is found eight times in the Old Testament,¹⁴ "denotes a private royal fortune to be used according to the king's own discretion and interests in contradistinction to the general reserves needed for governing his realm (Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). In other words, Israel will be the King's 'private property,' personally owned for his personal use. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the word is found in covenant contexts, where it describes the worth of Israel as an object of divine choice."¹⁵ As sovereign over all creation, the Lord reserves the right to elect whom-ever he chooses for this unprecedented privilege. And for no apparent reason he chose to set his love on Israel. As Moses would later remind the nation:

"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His loyal-love to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments." (Deut 7:7-9)

What worth and dignity this communicates! You will never be able to function as God designed you until first you understand your worth to him. It is as if the whole world were the wedding band, but Israel became the diamond. This privileged role to which God has elected his people is twofold. First, they will become a kingdom of priests. As a priest is uniquely set apart to God to mediate God's life among the people, so Israel is set aside to mediate God's life and blessings to all the nations. This is the fulfillment of what God promised Abraham when he said, "in you all families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3). Secondly, obedience to the covenant would transform an ordinary nation into a holy nation, "mirroring his character by their deeds and thereby sanctifying the world."¹⁶ Could there ever be a higher calling or purpose? While the rest of the nations build kingdoms based on raw power and oppressive control, Israel is designed to bring heaven to earth.

How will Israel respond to such an offer?

III. Israel's Covenantal Vows (19:7-8)

So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD. (19:7-8)

Moses, having heard God's sacred vows, shuttles back down the mountain to deliver the message to the waiting bride. The narrator, as impatient as the groom, doesn't repeat Moses' words to Israel, but immediately presses forward so we can hear Israel's enthusiastic response. With a resounding shout they exclaim in one accord, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" It is hard to imagine the

emotional force conveyed in those words. Having endured four hundred years of tyrannical oppression, and a six-week trek in a desolate wilderness, Israel finds a husband at the doorway of heaven. With free consent and total abandon she pledges her heart to her Creator Redeemer.

With the hindsight of history we know the painful naiveté of those words. Before the marriage documents are notarized and the honeymoon even begins, Israel will be playing the part of a whore to a golden calf. Even with the best intentions, proper motivation, focus and purpose, the best of human vows will fail. But the love of our Groom remains tenacious. In the New Covenant, Christ took on the role of the bride. He obeyed the voice of God fully and faithfully kept covenant. Because of that, the apostle Peter says that this same privileged role is offered to us in the church. But the wonderful difference is that the “if” clause has been removed! Peter boldly exclaims, “you *are* a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession (*segullah*), so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

How can you resist such love?

On this Father’s Day I have invited one of our fathers, Bill Vinicombe, to share the story of how his daughter heard the voice of God in a wilderness, and how it has led the entire family into new depths of God’s love [see insert].

1. The outline is adapted from Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:831.

2. “Month” is a later usage of the Hebrew *hodesh*, “new moon”; in this earlier context it might better be translated more precisely as “on the third new moon.”

3. “The Septuagint translates the expression *had gone out* by a noun, *outgoing* (Greek: *exodou*, of going out, from *exodos*). This is the source of our name ‘Exodus’ for this biblical book (cf. Ps 105:38 = 104:38, LXX; Luke 9:31, Greek).” Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2000), 236.

4. Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 1:834.

5. “*And Moses had gone up to God*. The Hebrew, as in this translation, has an indication of pluperfect tense, suggesting that even as the people were pitching their tents opposite the mountain, Moses, who after his epiphany at the burning bush knew this place as ‘the mountain of God,’ had made his way to the heights to speak with God.” Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), 422.

6. Janzen, *Exodus*, 237.

7. Bruce K. Waltke, “Gift of the Old Covenant,” *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

8. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 161.

9. Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places*, 161.

10. Janzen, *Exodus*, 238.

11. This image of the eagle’s “wings” providing refuge becomes a common symbol in the Psalms (Ps 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4).

12. “indeed obey”—In Hebrew, an intensification of verbal force can be expressed through a doubling of the verbal root, using the infinitive absolute coupled with the imperfect tense “*hearing* you shall *hear*” = “if you obey (*shama*’ = hear) me *fully*.” See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 584.

13. Waltke, *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology*.

14. For other references to *segullah* see Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Mal 3:17; Ps 135:4; Eccl 2:8; 1 Chr 29:3.

15. Waltke, *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology*.

16. Waltke, *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology*.

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Healing In the Wilderness: A Father's Perspective

Bill Vinnicombe – Father's Day, June 19, 2005

Over the past several weeks, Brian has been teaching from Exodus the story of how the Lord allowed Israel to be molded and shaped in the wilderness. The wilderness also shaped the life of David and the Lord's ministry on earth.

Two weeks ago, Mark Bucko taught us from Exodus 18:1-12. In this passage, Moses recounts for his father-in-law, Jethro, the salvation story of God's great works in rescuing Israel from Egypt and nurturing her in the wilderness. Mark encouraged us to share our salvation stories with others, not just to praise the Lord but also to encourage ourselves and others. Today, I am here to share with you my story, as a father on Fathers Day, of our family's journey in the wilderness. In between abandonment and self sufficiency, our family found God's love in a very personal way. The wilderness has had a profound impact on us.

To set the stage for our wilderness experience I will tell you briefly about my family. Brenda and I met during our freshman year in college. We were classmates with Steve and Betsy DePanger. Gary Vanderet married us 25 years ago this month. We are the proud parents of three children, Laura, Christine, and Peter.

In March 2004, Brenda and I had to make an incredibly difficult decision to send our daughter Laura to the wilderness in Utah. Our story is filled with paradoxes. I would not voluntarily wish what we have gone through over the past 15 months on ourselves or anyone else. However, at the same time, it has brought our family closer to the Lord and his unconditional love for us. The wilderness, a place normally associated with suffering and death, has been the very place we found life.

Events leading up to March 2004

The way Laura came into our family was a miracle. Her birth mother walked out of an abortion clinic and bumped into a local lay minister in the parking lot. Through a series of events, we were brought into contact with the minister and the birth mother. A huge event in our spiritual growth as a couple was our decision to support the birth mother emotionally and financially, even if she ultimately made the decision to keep Laura as her own.

Laura has always been a sensitive, yet highly energetic girl. Early on, Brenda and I nicknamed her our "thrill-seeking missile." If there was a snake to be caught and loved or a lizard that needed a home, you could always count on Laura to take care of these important tasks. Periodically, throughout her pre-adolescent childhood, Laura would sob uncontrollably about missing her birth mother. We would comfort her the best we could while both sharing and acknowledging her loss. As we now realize, Laura was suffering the emotional pain of being rejected and having been given up by the very person who was supposed to have loved her – her birth mother. The emotions of being rejected and abandoned impacted Laura at a very deep, subconscious level, and this led her to believe that she was unloved and unlovable.

As Laura moved into the teenage years she went through many of the normal adolescent things in her growth towards increasing independence. Laura had the ability to try on different personas and looks, and in the process, lost touch with who she really was as a person. As she became older, her emotional pain became more acute, and she found new ways to protect herself from the pain of abandonment and being unlovable.

Discovery/decisions in March 2004

For reasons unknown to us at the time, between January and early March 2004 Laura did things which were becoming increasingly dangerous, culminating in her running away twice in late February/early March. When she and I talked about the second running away, she looked at me with her deep brown eyes and said that she felt invincible, and that the adrenalin and excitement were incredible. Brenda and I knew at that time that we had to take immediate action, but we did not know where to turn. We were brought to our knees and turned to the Lord for guidance.

We are blessed as a family to have close relationships with other believers. By tapping into this community we were able to get their insights and wisdom. This led us to a secular psychologist, who interviewed Laura, Brenda, and me. When she told us that Laura was suffering from abandonment, we were in disbelief. How could this be, since we had Laura from birth and had never abandoned her?

The psychologist further shared that things can become topsy-turvy when dealing with abandonment issues in adolescents. The very thing they fear at a subconscious level is being abandoned again, yet many will reject intimacy, sabotage healthy relationships, and abandon others in an attempt to get control over their primal wound and deaden the deep, deep emotional pain.

The psychologist recommended a 2-3 month wilderness experience followed by a 15-18 month stay at a therapeutic boarding high school which would build on the wilderness experience. As Brenda and I were dealing with all of this, including the financial impact, one of our closest friends asked us a very penetrating question: If your child had cancer, what would you do? We answered: Of course, we would do everything we could. She continued by saying that our daughter has emotional cancer. This brought everything into clear focus.

The Wilderness

Our decision to send Laura to the wilderness was the toughest we have ever had to make as parents. Brenda and I did not talk to Laura for nearly the entire 2-3 months that she was there. However, we did have weekly letters which we sent to each other. There was a welcome rhythm and pattern to these letters. On Sunday nights, we would email our letter to the Wilderness program field office. The letter was printed out and taken out to the field, typically a 1-2 hour drive into central Utah, and delivered to Laura. In turn they would bring back a letter from Laura which was faxed to us on Wednesday nights.

Our inability to have instant communication with Laura was a very good thing. It allowed all of us to create space and time to ponder things, share ideas, and be very thoughtful in our communication. Over the past 15 months we have probably written, on a collective basis, over 500 pages to each other. The intimacy and honesty has been an unbelievable, and unexpected, blessing. *The wilderness gave us the gift of time*, and with the gift of time to reflect and ponder things, came increased intimacy.

Abandonment comes to the surface

Laura never struggled with the physical demands of the wilderness experience. Her struggles were emotional. One night, as part of the program, she had a solo camping experience. This rattled her to her core and, for the first time, brought her deep feeling of abandonment to the surface. Laura was unable to be alone for the entire evening, really, for any part of the evening after sunset. She told us that as the sun was setting, an incredibly strong feeling, a feeling that the leaders were not coming back for her, began to come out of the pit of her stomach. The "old" Laura would have looked for a way to get away

from this feeling, even if it was really, really dangerous. This time Laura was able to understand this feeling and call the leaders back to her. This experience also made her realize that she had more to do after the wilderness experience was over.

Observations about the wilderness experience

Releasing Laura to the wilderness meant *releasing our "control."* It required increased faith and trust that God is in control and is Laura's perfect "Abba" Father. We learned we are stewards of our children, not owners.

The impact of Laura going to the wilderness was profound on the *rest of the family*. It was an inflection point for each of us – either we would grow individually through this experience, or become a victim of the experience. Without the love of the Lord, I do not know how this could have been as positive an experience for each one of us as it has turned out to be.

Remembering God's faithfulness and grace to Laura and the rest of our family while she was in the wilderness *helps us cope with the little things of life*.

Finally, Laura began a journey of finding her own personal and spiritual identity in the wilderness. Without the worldly distractions, and stripped of her comforts, she could focus on her true self and begin to hear God's voice for her. The wilderness became a place of life versus death.

Transition to Boarding School

The next level of discovery for Laura came last fall. I decided to host a barbeque for the girls and their families at the school. As the date approached, Laura sent us a letter saying: "Something that has been coming up for me lately is feeling worthless. Dad, since you are coming on the 25th, I have been sad because I do not feel worth that plane ticket and the money you and Mr. T are providing. My head knows I am worth it, but my heart says different. I've been struggling with having my head and heart work together..." A week later Laura sent us another letter and stated, in part, "I am worthy of a barbeque, I am worthy of my dad's time, I am worthy of my parents' money, and I am worthy of a new pair of socks..."

Laura came to the realization that she did not have to carry all her burdens alone, and that the Lord was more than willing and able to do this for her. This took away her fear of being overwhelmed and not being able to cope. Laura and some other girls started Bible studies at the school. She rededicated herself to the Lord, and others became believers as well.

In December, Laura sent me a letter asking me, as her father, for advice on things I have learned in my life. This request touched me at a very deep level. I think it is every father's desire to have their child ask for their advice. Over the past six months we have been studying Proverbs together.

Our journey continues as we are reminded that God is never finished with us. But we will be forever thankful that our Laura heard the voice of the Father's love in the wilderness.

This story, my story, is my Father's Day gift to Laura, Christine, Peter, and my loving wife Brenda.