“Lost In The Woods”

Preached at: WV Youth Camp, Ohio Youth Camp, MDDC Youth Convention, Freedom Church.

I read this story a few years ago in the NY Times of a Lady named Geraldine Largay who got lost in the woods while hiking and died a month later.

The article tells the story of her journey into the woods that began with a friend and had her husband meet them at predetermined checkpoints to provide fresh supplies, occasional hot meals, and hotel rooms for a quick shower.

Her friend was suddenly pulled away by a family emergency, and Geraldine decided to continue on her own. She was last seen at 6:30 a.m. that morning. According to her diary, by 11:00 a.m., she was lost.

Her husband said she was afraid of the dark and especially feared being alone, but this time she decided to push past those fears and continue alone. Her hiking companion would later tell investigators that Geraldine had a poor sense of direction and that she had taken a wrong turn more than once. But now, she was alone, with no one to help her find her way.

“You step off the trail 20 or 50 feet and turn around, it’s very difficult to see where the trail was,” said Douglas Dolan, 53, a volunteer who spent time last summer doing trail maintenance in the area. “If you didn’t know which way the trail was, you could easily walk in circles for hours.”

“Her remains were found on Oct. 14, 2015, more than two years after she went missing, inside her sleeping bag, in a campsite she had kept neat until the very end. Around her was the ample gear she had hauled — items like a blue and white bandanna, a rosary, birthday candles, lighters, dental floss, a sewing kit, and two water bottles, one still containing water.”

I saved the story after reading it in the Times that day, moved by how one decision to step a little deeper into the woods alone would result in her being lost and eventually dying in the woods.

I had almost forgotten about the story until I heard an old message Pastor Mooney preached where he read this text and used the title that I will borrow tonight.

2 Samuel 18:7-8 KJV

7 Where the people of Israel were slain before the servants of David, and there was there a great slaughter that day of twenty thousand men.

8 For the battle was there scattered over the face of all the country: **and the wood devoured more people that day than the sword devoured.**

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I was traveling through WV this past November, it happened to be hunting season. After church, we walked outside, and one of the men from the church was excitedly showing us the deer he had killed just before church. He threw it in the truck bed and hurried to church. I mean, when it’s deer season but you love God…. I can imagine his prayer now, “Lord, help me kill a deer in the next 15 minutes and I won’t dress it until after church…”

I remember as a kid I’d explore what felt like was a massive forest, but what was actually just a few acre wooded area behind my grandparents’ house for hours and hours, occasionally even setting up a tent with the intention of staying the night, only to change my mind as the sun began to set and all my food rations had been exhausted.

I’m not an outdoorsman. I don’t want to go camping. Someone said, “I already know what it’s like to be poor, I don’t need to know what it’s like to be homeless.” But it seems like people are drawn to the woods like never before.

The hiking and outdoor equipment industry is thriving, with over $8.4 billion in sales in 2019. Words like "wanderlust" are seen on bumper stickers of Priuses across the country. More people are drawn to the woods than ever before. And for those who would venture into the woods, popular areas have been carefully mapped out, signs have been placed in strategic spots, and foot traffic has worn down the grass into clear paths in those most frequently visited areas.

Perhaps you could say that it’s never been safer to go into the woods.

Yet despite the precautions taken, those of you who spend any time in the outdoors know that there is a danger always present in the woods - the danger of getting lost in the woods.

So it is in our text… here at the end of what was a civil war that began when King David’s son, Absalom, led a rebellion against the king. So Samuel records as an anointed historian of the war that unfolded, and it’s during this account that he records that on this bloody day of battle, 20,000 men would breathe their last breath.

But the writer doesn’t just tell of the men who died; no, so important was the means of death that it, too, just had to be mentioned.

**“and the woods devoured more people that day than the sword devoured.”**

He said more men were consumed by…more people were destroyed by the woods than by the sword.

And for some reason, scripture is silent as to what it was exactly that took each of their lives. We are left to wonder about the circumstances that warranted this cause of death – all we know for sure is that their deaths were the result of being devoured by the woods. Their lives were lost in the woods.

They showed up for a fight against an enemy that was known, an enemy with weapons they understood, yet they lost their lives, not to the enemy's sword, but to their surroundings.

I think that there is something here that we all need in our lives, something that will help us to live and walk in victory, and in God’s purpose for us.

And it begins by understanding and embracing this truth: **We are in a battle.** What I mean by that is that we have an enemy. There is an enemy of God, and he seeks to destroy God’s creation – especially His most prized creation – humanity. That means he is your enemy.

Now hear me, apostolic young person, there is a battle being waged all around us. We are in a spiritual fight, perhaps like never before. We’d better wake up to the reality of the fight we're in. Satan goes about like a roaring lion, seeking who he may devour. The devil is very real, his influence is vast, his attacks are visible as they unfold in our world today.

Ephesians 6:12 KJV

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

The devil is after your future. He is after your purity. He is after your worship. He wants your school. He wants your youth group, he wants to close your church. He seeks to steal, kill, and destroy.

And I say all of that so you will recognize where we are – this is a battlefield. But this recognition should not fuel fear, it should ignite passion and faith and determination… I know we preach often about this enemy and his sword. But I will say it one more time for good measure – It’s not God’s will that you fall victim to Satan’s sword. His sword is no match for our God.

It is the will of God that you be victorious. It’s the will of God that you put on the whole armor of God and STAND.

It’s the will of God that you be a worshipper. It’s the will of God that the enemy's attacks on your future would not prosper. You don’t have to be a victim of the battle. A casualty of the enemy's attack. No weapon formed against me shall prosper. The enemy is no match for someone who recognizes the battle and engages in it. There’s power in your prayer. There’s power in your worship. There’s power in your determination…

But I’ve got to preach to you and tell you that what the enemy's sword can not accomplish in your life… when he can’t devour you, there is a danger that what lies just outside of the battlefield can. **The danger isn’t just the sword, it’s the surroundings.**

Hear me, there are places where, without the right equipment, you can get turned around, even when the enemy isn’t around. There are some places where if you make a wrong decision or accidentally get separated or get isolated, you can get devoured by the woods – you can get lost in the woods.

As a matter of fact, I believe the enemy gets credit for a lot of casualties that weren’t even caused by his sword. People who walk away into the woods spiritually, not even under attack, perhaps, and something happens, and the next thing you know, they are LOST. Suddenly, they no longer know what they believe or who they are.

They’ve gotten lost in the woods. The wood devoured more people that day than the sword…

How do people get lost in the woods?

I read an article in National Geographic that listed the ways people get lost in the woods. Interestingly, the reasons you might think of, running out of daylight or due to some injury, were way down on the list. In fact, **the number one reason people get lost is that they accidentally get off trail**. They just get distracted. Something stole their attention for a moment, and the next thing you know, they are lost.

Can I tell you that perhaps our greatest threat in the church today isn’t sin, it’s distraction. More people are going to end up lost, not because they got hurt or because of some darkness or spiritual attack, but because they got distracted in their walk with God.

They got too busy to pray – distracted. There was too much homework to read their bible – distracted. The new Netflix series came out – distracted. What a dangerous thing it is to be lost because you got distracted.

Distracted by the culture. Distracted by the politics. Distracted by the debates. I preach to you that we must keep our eyes on Jesus and off of this culture. Before Samson ever had a problem with Delilah, he had a problem with his eyes. He got distracted!

I’m preaching to someone today - you need to push away the distractions like never before. I refuse to be lost because I got distracted. I’m not going to be lost in the woods because of distraction!!

The second greatest reason people get lost in the woods is they get separated. As long as Geraldine had her hiking companion, she had someone who could tell her when she had gotten off trail.

[Ecc 4:9-12 NKJV] 9 Two [are] better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him [who is] alone when he falls, For [he has] no one to help him up. 11 Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm [alone]? 12 Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Hear me young person, we live in a day where division is rampant. Politics divide us like never before. Viruses are dividing us like never before. Culture’s push against authority is dividing us like never before. But you’ve got to make up your mind – I’m not going to get separated from my church, from my pastor, from my youth group. I need the church. I need my youth group.

You’d better thank God every time somebody is willing to pull you aside and tell you you’ve gotten off track. I don’t want to be lost in the woods!

Pastor, preach to me what I’ve got to do to be saved. Preach to me what I have to do to stay on the trail.

When you see somebody in your youth group get off the trail, don’t talk about them, don’t marginalize them, LOVE AND PRAY FOR THEM. I don’t want to get lost because I got separated. I'm not going to let the surroundings separate me from the people God has put me around – because I can’t fight this fight alone. We are better together than we are alone. The first time God ever said something wasn’t good in His creation was when he saw Adam was ALONE. You need the church. You need one another.

Why don’t you pray for your youth group right now?

One of the articles I read quoted a man who serves as a survival instructor, [search and rescue team](https://teambusar.org/) leader, and wildlife ranger in the Smokies. He said that getting lost in the woods happens to alert, experienced hikers too, most often at what he calls a decision point on the trail. Just made a bad turn. A bad decision. They get lost because of bad decisions.

How many people have we seen wander into the wilderness? They made a mistake, made a wrong turn, but they never intended to be out for long. Never intended to get lost, just went a little deeper into the woods than they had planned. Guilt & shame have pushed more people away from the fight than Satan’s sword ever could. When Adam & Eve sinned, the bible says they hid among the trees. Went deeper in the woods.

Hear me, being lost is more than a destination… we think of being spiritually lost as an eternal destination… but before it’s a destination, it's a condition. Even those who are experienced, those who have been around the church for a while, and those who know what is right and what is wrong can still be lost due to poor decisions.

But when Adam and Eve hid among the trees, pushed away by guilt and shame, God started searching. And I preach to you today that if you have let bad decisions get you off trail, JESUS IS LOOKING!

In Luke 19:10 –the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.

When you are lost, Jesus starts looking. Being lost in the woods does not have to be a permanent condition.

If you feel like you’ve gotten lost in the woods, Jesus is looking. If you feel like you’ve gotten distracted, if you feel like there’s distance between you and the church, or you’ve made some mistakes that have gotten you further into the woods than you thoughts you could go, it isn’t too late. The lost can be found.

One of the details that shocked me the most was that the people most likely to get lost are day hikers. The people who didn’t plan to be out for long. I’ve just got to tell you, I’ve lived long enough to see this is true in the church. No one walks into the woods planning to be gone long. You find someone who walks away from God and the church, and the common refrain is that it took them so much longer and cost them so much more than they ever expected.

It is a matter of greatest importance in my life… If I gain the whole world but LOSE my soul… I refuse to be lost.

Close:

I have a good friend who loves the outdoors. He’s a real man’s man. He was in the forest in Alaska with friends, and they were hunting. He told me that he left his friends to grab something he had left behind, and when he was making his way back, he suddenly realized that he was lost. But his friends realized it too because it had been too long since he left. So he said his friends took their guns and began shooting in the air, and Jason was able to follow the sound.

Hear me, if you are lost today, you can make your way to the sounds of the church. You can make your way back. You don’t have to be lost in the woods!