

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

Have you ever been in a jungle? If so, you know it is not a place you would wish to go for an afternoon picnic or for a stroll along a river. There may be paths or trails through a jungle, but you would want a guide before trying to traverse through a canopy of trees, bugs, wild animals, and harsh terrain.

An Israeli adventurer named Yossi Ghinsberg found this out when he became lost in the Amazon rainforest for three weeks. His episodes, along with some other men, form the basis for the movie "Jungle" and made him a rich man. There are numerous accounts of his exploits on Internet sites and in the books he wrote.

According to Wikipedia, the Amazon rainforest is home to about 2.5 million insect species, tens of thousands of plants, and some 2,000 birds and mammals. Its biodiversity is unparalleled in other jungle rainforest areas of the world. In other words, there would be plenty of company in the jungle, but probably not what you were looking for.

I have been in a jungle rainforest in the southern part of Mexico in the state of Chiapas and also in areas of Papua New Guinea. In 1957 we (new recruits for the Wycliffe Bible Translators) "trained" in the jungle area near the Guatemala border. We spent six weeks at a small camp site, living in huts and learning "survival" techniques. The second six weeks we went into the jungle to build our own "champa" (lean-to house), listen to lectures, and take river and jungle hikes. We learned to respect the jungle, as well as observing ancient Mayan ruins and visiting small Tzeltal Indian villages.

On one occasion I got lost (briefly) in the jungle. I had wondered too far from our operational base and became disoriented. Everything looks the same and before I knew it, I was going in circles. Fortunately, I remembered a fundamental principle from one of our lectures: "stop, sit down, and think!" I did and could then retrace my path with accuracy, but even for those several minutes, it was scary.

The word "jungle" is also used in idioms. You have probably heard of the "asphalt" or "concrete" jungle, which refers to an overcrowded and unsafe urban environment, with lots of large buildings and roads. On the other hand, a "jungle blackboard" can refer to a chaotic classroom and "jungle breath" is indeed "bad" breath. "Jungle juice" is a kind of drink that we, especially Baptists, should avoid at all costs.

The "King of the Jungle" is the lion, not George of the Jungle, a comedy figure who was raised by animals in the African jungle. He did not follow the "law of the jungle" where only those who are ruthless survive. Tarzan was, of course, the true King of the jungle and with an apparent identity crisis tries to find Jane. He swung effortlessly (most times) from vine to vine while yelling with loud bursts in jungle English, "Me Tarzan, you Jane."

But it is the phrase “it’s a jungle out there,” that I want us to think about. It maintains or infers that the world is a deadly place and that we need survival instincts and follow the “law of the jungle” to survive. The phrase apparently became popular from a book by Rudyard Kipling (*The Jungle Book*, 1874) but has been used in an opposite sense of Kipling’s. He wanted to put limits on violence to the animal kingdom, so formulated a “jungle law” to protect them. We want to claw and cut our way through our cultural jungle, with as few scrapes and bruises as possible.

The word “jungle” does not occur in the Bible, but there are 164 references (in the NIV) to “wilderness,” which can be just as unnerving as a jungle. Aside from John the Baptist, who could survive on honey and locusts, we don’t read of many people in the Bible who willingly went to the wilderness. The wilderness John lived in was wild and uninhabited because it consisted mainly of ravines and rocks. The children of Israel did “wander” in the wilderness, but they needed the special attention and food from God to survive.

The Western view of wilderness is less dangerous: state parks, with well-kept paths and signs to tell us where we are and rescue squads to find us if we get lost. And people do get lost—we read about it regularly in the paper or see accounts on TV. But the wilderness is generally a natural area that has not been messed up by machines and men. In America, the government has designated certain areas as a “wilderness.” For example, the Gila Wilderness was designated the world's first wilderness area on June 3, 1924 and is part of New Mexico's Gila National Forest. I don’t know where the name comes from, although there is a Gila river in the area and Gila monster lizards.

We wouldn’t generally say “it’s a wilderness out there,” because our perception of wilderness is different than that of the Bible. Jesus would not have been tempted by the devil in our version, such as in a State Park, where people camp and walk about on trails. I remember that in translating the idea of a wilderness into Kewa, a language of Papua New Guinea, I had to make it clear that no one lived in such areas.

There are ways that jungle and wilderness overlap: they are difficult places in which to live, they have difficult terrains, and some animals that live there that would like to sample us. In other words, we need to be prepared if we get off “the beaten path,” onto roads and trails that we are unfamiliar with and need a guide to help us.

The “road” for the Christian is difficult too: We are reminded in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* that Christian's journey to Heaven was not an easy one. However, the true Christian must be willing and prepared for the trip—no matter where the road or trail leads. We have a sure guide, Jesus.

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