

THE DESERT EXPERIENCE - GENERAL



This is to look at the desert experience for people, in particular Christians. This experience was as crucial for the Children of Israel, in the Exodus, as it was for the Lord Jesus prior to the start of His ministry.

Desert Experiences

How do people cope with 'desert' experiences? Most images of 'desert' experiences are built around 'something is wrong/bad'; these images usually generate fear.

1. The desert **can** be a place of punishment, and it **is** the word that describes Judaism when the people had forsaken God (Isa 40:3).
 - Nations destitute of the knowledge of God are called a 'wilderness' (Heb 'midbar') (Num 32:15, where the word refers to a land without settled inhabitants or water – i.e. unfruitful).
 - It's a symbol of temptation, solitude and persecution (Isa 27:10; 33:9).
2. It can be a place of safety, to escape from our enemies.
3. It can also be a chosen place for you to withdraw from the 'rat race' to 'find yourself'; it's a place of reflection.
4. In many instances, God uses the desert as the means to test and change those He calls to his service. This is so important for Christians to understand.
5. It can be a surprising place of encounter through God's careful planning.
6. It will be the place of change, renewal and revival of God's people.

1. A PLACE OF PUNISHMENT

Num 14:29 *In this desert your bodies will fall - every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me.*

Num 32:15 *If you turn away from following him, he will again leave all this people in the desert, and you will be the cause of their destruction.*

Prov 29:18 *Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law.*

Rebellion caused God to keep the Children of Israel in the wilderness of the desert for 40 years, until all the rebellious people had perished. Rebellion against God is a terminal disease for individuals or societies. With rebellion, there is no way out of the desert, except through true repentance that allows the blood of Jesus to remove rebellion from the heart. This and this alone

allows mankind to come up out of the desert. Then we will be moved to a place of testing.

2. A PLACE OF SAFETY, TO ESCAPE OUR ENEMIES

The desert can be a place of safety, where we can escape our enemies.

Sam 23:14-15 David stayed in the desert strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands. 15 While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life.

Psa 55:7-8 I would flee far away and stay in the desert; Selah 8 I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.

We see how David was kept safe from King Saul, his father-in-law. Elijah, too, was also kept safe, when Queen Jezebel had threatened him after he'd destroyed Baal worship.

1 Kings 19:1-8 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." 3 And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!" 5 Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." 6 Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you." 8 So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.

3. A PLACE FOR TEMPORARY, VOLUNTARY SECLUSION

The desert can be a place for temporary, voluntary seclusion in times of grief, sorrow or uncertainty. It can be a place to escape Man, a place to find God and a place to prepare you for His service. We often call these events/places 'retreats'.

Mat 14:12-13 John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. 13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

Mark 6:31-32 Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." 32 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

Paul, spent around 10 years in a kind of 'desert' experience until Barnabus went for him. It was a great time of preparation/reflection probably when he developed much of the theology that set the course of the Church

Acts 9:30 When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off

to Tarsus. Acts 11:25 *Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,*

4. A PLACE OF TESTING

It is often in the desert that God tests, changes and refines us in order to know if our hearts are truly His. It's a place where God can refine us in preparation for our service to Him.

Deut 8:2-5 Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. 3 He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. 4 Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. 5 Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.

Mat 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

We can feel lost, that there's no way out, "*the end is near.*" This is when God reaches into our desert and feeds us manna - He provides us with 'just enough' to allow us to continue our refining walk to His promised land, which could be a ministry, a new job, a major decision ... but we'll make it if we purpose to continue (*'beyond our ability to withstand'*).

Jesus, our example, had just been filled with the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:13-17) but He wasn't allowed to start His ministry until He'd been through the refining of fasting and a confrontation with Satan in the desert. He is our example that testing or refining is necessary, in order to know that we can accomplish what God requires of us.

5. A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER

Surprisingly, it can be a place of encounter with God, with man, or with both. Philip was told to leave an nationwide revival, and literally go into the desert. It may have seemed crazy, but Philip obeyed, and from it one of the oldest Christian nations was established - Ethiopia.

Acts 8:26-29,39 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

6. A COMING PLACE OF CHANGE, RENEWAL AND REVIVAL

Why would God take Christians to the desert, if He loves them so much? Often because we're not seeking Him willingly, and as He doesn't want any of us to be lost, He'll remove all the distractions of this life, so we can:

- Meet with Him

- See what He is doing, **and**
- Hear his voice clearly and so know our purpose for this life.

We have only one shot at life before we meet eternity. I don't know about you, but I don't want to get it wrong.

Much of the Church, certainly in the West, has little to give the world at this moment. But, it wasn't always this way. We have to focus on the Church rediscovering Christianity and abandoning Christian Religion ... or rather Religious Christianity. Religious Christianity is no different from Judaism, Islam or Hinduism.

Religious Christianity has no focus and no baseline. Nothing is an absolute anymore, at a time when we have a generation who are desperate for clear-cut guidelines and a purpose for life. The wishy, washy religion they see in the newspapers and on TV shows nothing of value and is a disgrace to the name of Jesus.

The Bible has been so mistaught that's it's now seen as irrelevant to the majority of people in our nations. These people don't know how real, Holy Spirit inspired Christianity impacted this world, especially over the last 3 centuries.

- John Wesley – the UK faced revolution like France, but it entered a Christian revival and became a global sending force for the Gospel message, through one man's dedication to God's call.
- William Wilberforce – **who, in a single generation, removed 7,000 years of recorded history of slavery**
- John Newton – an ex-slave ship captain who joined with Wilberforce
- Dr Bernardo – established the first orphanage system
- Elizabeth Fry – who led prison reform that has impacted the Western world
- Co-op society founders
- Building societies (e.g. Abbey National founded by a Baptist church)
- Welfare reform, education care for the poor came, initially from committed Christians and Churches, well before governments got involved

So, with all this knowledge, if God takes us to the desert to be tested and refined, to have an encounter that can change the world, **what must we do?** It starts with complete trust and obedience in the Lord Jesus and the Word of God.

In Isaiah we see His response in the prophetic outworking of His will.

Isa 35:1-10 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God. 3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 4 say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." 5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. 7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. 8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on

it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. 9 No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, 10 and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

- The desert and the parched land will be: *glad, rejoice, blossom, burst into bloom, rejoice gladly, shout for joy* (vv 1,2).
- This comes as we obey and strengthen feeble hands, steady knees that give way, speak faith to fearful hearts. This will enable the lost people to see the glory and splendour of God (v 2b). God, Himself, will come to save (v 4b).
- At this point, those Believers who have been blind will see, those deaf will hear, those lame - those injured - will leap, those mute, who have been unable to praise God shall praise Him (vv 5,6). How do we know this word is for Believers, and not for the lost? In v 9b-10a, the word tells us that the **redeemed** will walk there, and the **ransomed** of the LORD will return.

Note: This is not specifically about physical healing, but it addresses the great emotional and spiritual healing that God's people need to experience.

- In v 6b water will gush forth in the desert itself, and (v 7) the burning sand will become a pool. No matter what has been afflicting God's people will be overcome by the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. Nothing can stand in the way when God sends refreshing and final revival.

Isa 40:3-5 A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD ; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

- Isa 40:3 in the AV says '*... prepare ye the way for the Lord*' ... make a highway, with all obstacles being eliminated. Notice the word 'ye', which is 'you' plural. This means there are no exceptions, we are all to be involved in making straight the highway for our God – together, we do the '*making straight in the wilderness*'. What, though, is this road? It's our life and walk with Jesus. When we respond, God always gets involved – see His response in v4?
- But the result is that the glory of God will be revealed and all mankind will see it (v5).

Isa 43:18,19 "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. 19 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland."

- In Isa 43:18,19 we receive a warning to guard against living in the past, and we're called to look for the new thing God has already started to do. The implication is that we're not seeing what He's already doing - but it **is** springing up in my life.

Consider your past, are there hurts, problems, fears that have entered your life through your job, your family, your church, your own actions? We can be bound up by, "*This happened to me before, therefore it will be the same here.*" or, "*I don't have the ability, I can't do ...*" Hurt and

fear rule our lives through this ungodly attack. It's the major cause of the **80:20 'rule'** that applies in many churches today [*80% of the ministry/work is done by only 20% of the people*].

Listen! Jesus says, “Come¹ to Me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take² My yoke upon you and learn³ from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and [then] **you will find rest for your souls.**” ... **when you do.**¹⁻³.

This isn't necessarily a physical thing. Its answer lies in a spiritual dimension:

- Eph 6:13,18 *Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*
- 2 Cor 10:3-5 *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*
- Isa 43:19 tells us that God, Himself, is also making ‘a way’, i.e. **He** coming **to us**. As we make straight **our** way, He comes to meet us with blessings. As these two roads join (Isa 40:3 & 43:19), He brings refreshing springs, streams, water, drink to His chosen people - those formed for himself **so that** His people proclaim His praise (vv 20,21), so let's pursue righteousness and seek the Lord (Isa 51:1). God will look with compassion and make the deserts like Eden, the wastelands like the garden of the Lord (Isa 51:3).
- Isa 51:1,3 *“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; 3 The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.”*

(Download a zipped version in Word 6 and RTF formats: [Desert1.zip](#))

[Top of this page](#)

[Return to the 'Word Today' page](#)