

Personal Retreats: Joy in the Desert

Joy in the Desert

By Christine Taylor

God walks with us through the desert. It's where we meet Him and, having met Him, we know Him.

It's not always a good thing to meet someone in the wilderness. Even today it can give you quite a turn to be alone on a trail and see a stranger coming in the opposite direction! The Eskimos didn't like it; they thought that strangers they met in the wilderness were aliens. The ancient Norsemen (our friends the Vikings) thought so too. And Jesus Himself met Satan in the desert.

But the One we meet in the wilderness is God. Let's take as our model Israel's 40-year journey in the desert and just a few ways that God revealed Himself to them.

First, what is the desert in Biblical language? There were a number of words that our English Bibles translate as "desert." *Midhbar* is the most common word for "desert" in the Bible. This Hebrew word is not the Sahara-like desert as we think of it but wilderness: not just plains but also mountains and valleys. The definition essentially applied wherever the land could not support a permanent human settlement. However, some *midhbar* could support enough vegetation for nomadic tribes' wandering flocks and herds.

Some of it was even common pastureland where flocks and herds could graze. This is the type of "desert" – the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula – that the Israelites passed through in their wanderings. Since this wilderness could not support a large group of people, the Hebrews needed other sources of food and water. But their animals could successfully forage.

There were less welcoming forms of wilderness. The Hebrew *aribah* denotes an arid tract, and is often applied to the deep valley of the

Jordan which reaches Lake Tiberius to the Elanitic Gulf of the Red Sea. *Jeshimon* is the word that most closely means the true desert. It usually refers to the rough desert of the peninsula of Arabia.

Famous Desert Experiences

There were a number of desert experiences reported in the desert or wilderness in both the Old and New Testaments. A few of them include:

- **Israel wandered for 40 years in the desert.** They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. The original generation that came out of Egypt – the ones that worshipped the golden calf, who whined about the fleshpots of Egypt, and who were too scared to enter the Promised Land – these were the ones that died in the desert. Their children lived to take the Promised Land. This was no accident: their children had grown up away from Egyptian culture and false gods, were born free and not slaves, and were battle-hardened from years of conflict. These were the people that God led to take the Canaan in a series of tough battles.
- **Moses spent 40 years in Midian.** At 40 years old he fled Egypt for the wilderness (grazing land) of Midian. He joined a nomadic tribe where he married his wife Zipporah and had two sons.
- **John the Baptist preached in the desert.** John was located in the “desert of Judea,” west of the Jordan and the Dead Sea, near Jericho. This was the site where Jericho fell to the conquering Hebrews from out of the desert, and where David felled Goliath. It was an extremely auspicious place for Jesus to be baptized and start His earthly ministry.
- **Jesus spent 40 days in the desert.** (Mt. 4) It is possible that Jesus spent his desert time in the same desert of Judea as his cousin John did, although we cannot be certain of that.
- **Paul in the desert.** (Gal. 1:17). Paul ventured into the inhospitable desert of Arabia for a self-imposed learning period after his conversion and before the major part of his ministry.

There are many, many lessons we can learn from wandering in the wilderness. Some of them include knowing God, God’s guidance, God’s provision, and God’s salvation.

Knowing God in the Desert

When everything else has been stripped away from us, we see only death – or we see God.

It's our choice.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" (Heb. 3:7-11)

Israel's wanderings are both a warning and a testament to Christians. They are a warning because we cannot keep spurning and denying God without consequences. He loves us still, just like he loved them (and loves them still). But he will withdraw his blessing from your life. The wanderings are also a testament to God's love and care. Even when God was so angry with them that he would not let them enter the Promised Land, he still guided and fed them all the days of their lives.

Guidance of God in the Desert

God guided his people as a cloud by day and as a fiery pillar by night. Were these manifestations of God himself? They might have been, or they might have been an angel, or God might have pressed a natural phenomenon into service. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that they were a miracle from God!

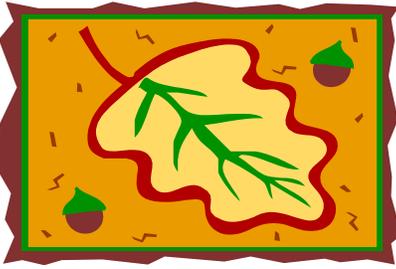
God also spoke directly to Moses... a lot. He spoke to and through others on a one-time basis, such as the 70 elders whom God assigned to help an overwhelmed Moses (Num. 11:16,17;25). And Moses' sister Miriam and brother Aaron also apparently heard from God. But Moses was by far God's closest communicant.

"With him I speak face to face-clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord." (Num. 12:8)

What an incredible gift from the Holy Spirit! Christians can and do hear directly from God every day! Can you imagine... people, fallible human beings, can actually *hear God*. Why? Because the Holy Spirit, who is God himself, dwells within us thanks to Jesus Christ.

Finally, we'll touch on the Good Shepherd. The wilderness in the sense of *midhbar* was a grazing land, and the nomadic and agrarian societies of the ancient world knew the symbol intimately.

Here is a truism for you: Sheep are Stupid. They'll jump off a cliff if the flock runs that way,



and it will. They'll run themselves into barbed wire, they'll panic and run straight for the predator, they'll convince themselves that the very sheep dog that protects them is out to eat them. Every day. Without fail. (Remember the movie *Babe*?) That's why the Good Shepherd has a full-time job! He protects the sheep, guides the sheep to food, water and safety, goes after the sheep when they've gotten themselves lost. God was the Hebrew's Shepherd in the wilderness, and Jesus Christ is still our Shepherd today (Psalm 23, John 10:14, Luke 15:1-7).

The Salvation of God in the Desert

The ultimately successful journey of the Hebrews through the desert only happened because God was with them. But there is also a specific event that speaks to God's utter power over the circumstances of our lives. A plague began in the Hebrew camp and hundreds of people died. Moses prayed to God, who instructed him to raise up a bronze staff with the image of a snake. Whoever looked at it would be immediately cured. (Note: I am not making this up. Go see for yourself in Num. 21:4-9.)

Does this remind you of anything? That's right – Jesus on the Cross, the One who is lifted up for our salvation.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:14-17)

God displayed his power to heal our bodies through the bronze serpent. And Jesus displays the power of God to heal our souls as well.

The Provision of God in the Desert

Let's not forget the manna! The many thousands of Hebrews moving across the wilderness needed a constant source of food without decimating their flocks. So God provided manna, a mysterious flaky form of nutritious food. The Hebrews were to gather 6 days a week but not on the Sabbath, and were not to store manna overnight. A few tried it of course, but by the next morning the manna was spoiled and filled with... well, you get the picture.

"Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'"

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:31-35)

Just as important as the manna from heaven are God's promises to turn the desert into a garden. The wilderness might grow enough forage for flocks, but rarely could it grow enough crops to sustain human life. There were some areas that received a little rain every year where farmers grew grain, but it was a dicey proposition. That's why the promises of God to water the desert were – and are – so radical.

"You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness." (Ps. 65:11,12)

Application Questions

- When in your life have you wandered in the desert?
- What did you need the most during that time?
- How did you experience God then?
- If you are in the desert now, what do you need from God?

Don't be afraid to ask. Our God is the God who saves!

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15:3-7)



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