

LESSONS FROM LIFE IN THE DESERT

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EQUIPPING THE NEXT GENERATION

“At certain times and places, God will build a mysterious wall around us. He will take away all the supports we customarily lean upon and will remove our ordinary ways of doing things. God will close us off to something divine, completely new and unexpected and that cannot be understood by examining our previous circumstances. We will be in a place where we do not know what is happening, where God is cutting the cloth of our lives by a new pattern and thus where He causes us to look to Him..... the souls that God leads into unpredictable and special situations are isolated by Him. All they know is that God is holding them and that He is dealing in their lives. Then their expectations come from Him alone”

Streams in the Desert 5 April

Little did I know that when God led me out of the pastoral ministry I had worked at for 15 years, the pathway to the next season in my life would take me through a season in the “desert”. It was quite unexpected.

However, as I began to read the Scriptures with a “desert paradigm”, I was surprised how many leaders spent time in the desert at critical times in their lives. I contrasted this to much of Western theology I had processed over many years and concluded that we have not been good at developing a theology of the desert. The culture in which we are called to live has not allowed us to see “life in the desert” as even a possibility, let alone an integral option on God’s sovereign agenda for us.

These notes represent a work in progress as I share some of the lessons I have been learning from life in the desert.

1. IT IS NORMAL FOR GOD TO PLAN SEASONS IN THE DESERT IN THE LIVES OF HIS SERVANTS

So important is the desert experience in God’s leadership emergence process that it is unlikely that the persons God uses will avoid a season in the desert at critical occasions in their lives. There are some lessons that can only be learnt in the desert. Besides, who has ever heard of a course in a Bible College called DESERT 101. It would be impossible to compose such a course and even if it

wasn't impossible, who would willingly apply for such a course anyhow? There are some things that can only be learnt in the desert.

We in the Western world, steeped in affluence and immersed in a culture that demands instant gratification of our material needs and desires, have no concept of life in the desert. We are so used to plenty. This concept has translated into our Christian walk.

2. THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS US INTO THE DESERT AND THEN OUT OF THE DESERT AT THE FATHER'S APPOINTED TIME.

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit in to the desert....." Matthew 4:1

Desert experiences do not take our sovereign God by surprise. Rather they are purposeful and serve as times of preparation for God's future purposes.

Sometimes it might even seem that it is a consequence of the sinfulness of other people that causes us to end up in the desert, but God's purposes can still be worked out in these circumstances, as Joseph would ultimately testify (Genesis 50:19-20) Joseph teaches us of the importance of attitude and focus as we make our way through times in the desert.

3. IN THE DESERT, GOD ALLOWS MANY OR ALL OF OUR 'PROPS' TO BE REMOVED FROM UNDER US.

Initially, the desert can be a lonely place. It was for Sue and me. However, we have grown to appreciate life in the desert as we have pressed in to God and found that we are indeed not alone. One of the early characteristic of life in the desert for us was the closing of familiar doors, (removing the props). In the process, God has been repositioning us to ensure that our identity is found in our relationship with Him and not in the things we have been doing for Him and the titles and roles that come with these responsibilities.

Essentially, it is any experience which seems to, on the face of it, contradict God's revealed purpose or promise for you. It is in these times, however, that we need to hold on fast to these promises and not allow despair and hopelessness to take hold.

In the desert God is taking us to a place of total dependence on Him that will be characterized by a new level of living by faith and trust in Him.

4. THE DESERT IS A PLACE OF TESTING TO PREPARE US FOR A NEW SEASON OF LIFE AND SERVICE

It is important that we understand these tests and pass these tests. The desert is not a place of punishment or banishment, but rather, a place of preparation and transition. Paul explains this process in his first letter to the Thessalonian church. “...we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.” “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts” 1 Thessalonians 1:4

There is a process that takes place in the desert: TESTING TO APPROVE TO ENTRUST new responsibilities.

5. THE DESERT IS AN INTENSIVE TIME OF PERSONAL CHARACTER GROWTH, WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT AREAS OF FOCUS BEING OUR FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

We read of John the Baptist in Luke 1:80, “And the child grew and became strong in spirit and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel”

The desert is a place where God focuses on growth in our character rather than growth in our competence. Growth in giftedness that outstrips growth in our character can be a recipe for some disaster that is waiting to happen.

The desert is a place of humbling and brokenness where we are stripped of our independence and (painfully) learn to become God dependent. “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 commandments.... He gave you manna to eat in the desert..... to humble and test you so that **in the end it might go well with you.**

Deuteronomy 8:2,16

The desert is a place where we learn to walk by faith and trust God for our needs, where we are totally dependent on Him. As we have been walking through this desert season, Sue and I would look at one another and comment that this has been the most stimulating time in our lives, but also the scariest as well.

6. THE DESERT IS A PLACE OF CHOICES

Continually, I have found that I have two options as life in the desert unfolds. I could take situations into my own hands, and have good reason to do so, or I could trust such situations to God and leave them in His hands. God kept saying that I had a choice. But if I took a situation into my own hands, then he would need to excuse Himself because there wasn't room for the two of us to address a particular situation.

I am now learning to trust God and wait on Him for His timing and His open doors and His resolution to difficult challenges and His provision of necessary resources.

The greatest choice that summarised all other choices was communicated to me by God at the time I entered the desert. He said,

“In the desert, Rod, you can give birth to an ‘Isaac’ or an ‘Ishmael’. Make sure you give birth to an Isaac.”

The contrasts between these two possibilities that faced Abram and Sarai in their desert experience were extreme.

ISAAC

Born of the Spirit

Belief

Wait on God

Humanly impossible

God’s glory

God closes and opens doors

ISHMAEL

Born of the flesh

Unbelief

Rush ahead

Humanly possible

Man’s glory

I close and open doors

7. THE DESERT IS A PLACE OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit in to the desert to be tempted by the devil”

Matthew 4:1

Satan realises the critical nature of the desert and the consequences of us passing the tests of the desert, perhaps even more than we do. In the desert our points of vulnerability become even more acute and Satan, who is aware of them, will press in to try and cause us to fail the tests of the desert.

The book of Psalms talks about “remembering” God’s works of the past. It also urges us to “give thanks” to God for his faithfulness and mercy. When we are weak and under spiritual attack, all we have to get us through will be our past experiences of God. We must, therefore, cultivate these times of intimacy with Him

in our daily walk, so when the tempter comes, he will have nothing to hold on to. We must also hide God's Word in our hearts. God's Word alerts us to when the battle is spiritual. It also teaches us how to respond. God has given us everything we need to get us through this season of warfare. (Eph 6:17)

8. THE DESERT IS A PLACE WHERE WE LEARN TO EXPERIENCE INTIMACY WITH GOD AT A DEEPER LEVEL AND SEE THINGS FROM HIS PERSPECTIVE

Life in the desert is less cluttered and more simplified. In the desert God strips us of the things of the world and frees us to go deeper with Him so that He might reveal Himself to us in a fresh way. The wells of necessity are deeper in the desert. More and more we will begin to see things the way God sees things. This is perspective, that quality which separates leaders from followers.

The desert is a place of revelation, as we see in the case of John the Baptist....
The word of God came to John....in the desert Luke 3:2

The desert is a time of preparation for the future and is a time where God teaches His chosen servants to learn how to follow His prompting and partner with Him in what He is doing. In the desert, we transition from knowing about God to knowing God, as we are weaned from the accumulation of things that have hindered us from hungering and thirsting for the Living Water.

"But when God who set me apart from birth and called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see these who were apostles before I was, but went immediately into Arabia (the desert) and later returned to Damascus" Galatians 1: 15-17

9. THE DESERT IS A PLACE WHERE WE RESTORE THE DISCIPLINES THAT FORM A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR OUR FUTURE LIVES AND MINISTRY

God has no shortcuts in His training program and the dropout rate can be high. The desert has a way of stripping life down to the basics and causing us to evaluate what is ultimately important and what is not. In the desert we are set free from the Western world's agenda to create a materialistic heaven on earth and we realise that it is in the establishment of disciplines that we can move beyond the superficiality of our culture and deepen our foundations .

10. THE DESERT IS A PLACE OF VICTORY THAT LEADS TO NEW BEGINNINGS
AND A NEW FUTURE IN THE FULLNESS OF GOD'S TIME

"Forget the former things;

Do not dwell on the past.

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.." Isaiah 43:18-19

"But He knows the way that I take;

When He has tested me, I will come

forth as gold" Job 23:10

..and the God of all grace, who called

you to His eternal glory in Christ, after

you have suffered a little while, will

Himself restore you and make you strong,

firm and steadfast. 1 Peter 5:10

There comes a time when life in the desert comes to an end. For life in the desert is a time of *preparation*, a time of *revelation* and *new perspective*, a time of learning how to walk in the *presence of God*, a time to pull all the *props* away and move on from the things of the *past* and a time to walk by faith and trust God to be our *provider*. Just as the Lord leads us into the desert, so it is that He leads us out of the desert, often with the promise that the best is yet to come.

SOME DESERT TRAVELLERS

Job	Job 23:10
Abraham	Genesis 12:6-7
Joseph	Genesis 37:36
Moses	Exodus 3:1
David	1 Samuel 16:11, 22:1 – 2
John the Baptist	Luke 3:2-3
Jesus	Luke 4:1-2
Paul	Galatians 1:16-17
John the Apostle	Revelation 1:9