

Trek Discussion 4

'The Desert'

"Only in the emptiness of the desert is the eye subordinate to the ear. Only in the silence of the desert can the sound beneath sound be heard." - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

You are halfway through. Remember that hospitality is part of following Christ! So perhaps it is time to start planning to get together after Easter for a meal? If your group will miss the final study due to Holy Week then now might be a good time to plan. Use one or more of these questions to start...

- *Can you think of a movie or story with a desert in it?*
- *Have you ever been to a desert or a really dry place? When? What did you make of it?*
- *How are you travelling at the moment? (See what I did there with a 'journey' question?)*

A STORY AND REFLECTION

TRIGGER WARNING:

THIS STORY MENTIONS SOMEONE TAKING THEIR OWN LIFE. ASK IF PEOPLE FEEL SAFE TO EXPLORE THIS BEFORE READING OR DISCUSSING. THERE IS NO HARM IN SKIPPING IT. YOU MIGHT INSTEAD JUST MOVE ON OR REFLECT ON THE 'STORY OF THE THREE MEN' IN THE SERMON.

The death of my close friend and mentor Cal is with me always. He was an elder of the first church I served. I was a young new pastor, and he was an incredibly generous and wise man. I would drop over to his farm on the way home from one of our outlying church services and he would give me a cuppa and teach the culture of the new place in which I lived. Over my first few years as a pastor, he was a 'rock' for me: accepting, open, and encouraging. He was a man of the land, he understood the

weather, he knew how to grow things, he had dirt under his fingernails and a smile on his face. His family gave hospitality to those around them and took many forlorn people in. I shared good times with him, but Cal also turned to me for support through some hard times and we grew to be 'brothers' who had been through the battles of life together.

Sometime before he died Cal suffered a serious trauma to the head. This resulted in complications including catatonia (trance-like unresponsiveness) and severe depression. From that time on when I visited Cal, I would come away worried. I felt totally helpless to change anything for him. Then, one day, in a disturbed state, my faithful friend took his own life. I arrived to be with him - too late. It was one of the worst days of my life. However, I was able to be of comfort for the family and speak for Cal at his funeral. I assured the crowd of his integrity, kindness and love and spoke openly of mental illness and its toll. I reminded them that the way Cal died did not change who he was in life; they must not doubt the good he gave. Most importantly I was able to say that God's love is stronger even than this.

Afterwards I went into a time of self-doubt and questioning. If only I had noticed the signs. If only I had been a better friend. If only I had been a more skilled pastor. If only I had visited more. If only I had got there earlier. I felt a mountain of grief and guilt. (Don't worry, it has mostly subsided!) This loss of a dear mentor made me question so much. It left me in a time which I describe as an 'emotional and spiritual desert.' But it also taught me about the presence of Jesus. Christ was there the whole time and I have no doubt he has Cal now. - Matt.

- *What did you hear in this story?*
- *What does it make you wonder about?*
- *When have you felt like your life journey in a desert?*

MIDBAR: THE DESERTED PLACE IN SCRIPTURE

The ancient Hebrew word in the Old Testament for desert is MIDBAR. But this word doesn't only mean desert: it can mean wilderness, desolate place, lonely region, or land unsuitable for cultivation. All of its uses have a common idea: A DESERTED PLACE. The MIDBAR is somewhere people don't permanently live. In the Bible we find that God's people often find themselves in the MIDBAR. And for some reason God led and met people, time and time again, to the deserted place.

Reflect on each of the following Bible passages. For each passage answer the following:

- *What can we learn in the desert?*
- *What does God do for us in the desert?*

Deuteronomy 1:31

...in the desert there you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went.

Deuteronomy 2:7

The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert.

Deuteronomy 29:5

Yet the Lord says, "During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet."

Deuteronomy 32:10

In a desert the Lord found Israel, in a barren and howling waste.

Psalm 107:4-8

Some wandered in the desert, lost and homeless. Hungry and thirsty, they nearly died.

"Lord, help!" they cried in their trouble, and he rescued them from their distress. He led them straight to safety, to a city where they could live. Let them praise the Lord for his great love...

Isaiah 43:18-19

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.

JESUS IN THE DESERTED PLACE

Mark 1:10-13

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." The Spirit immediately drove him out into the desert. And he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

The experience of Jesus in the deserted place is recorded in Matthew 4:4-11, Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13. Mark's version above is the shortest by far but includes some details the others miss.

- *How did Jesus end up in the deserted place? What does that mean for us?*
- *What was the purpose of this time in the deserted place?*
- *What is the significance of Jesus being 'with the wild animals? How do you see it?*
- *What did Jesus achieve for us in the deserted place?*

WHAT TO DO IN THE DESERTED PLACE?

In this week's sermon we heard five things to do in the desert place:

1. Don't confused the desert place with punishment or loss of faith. (Matt 4:1)
2. Remember that MIDBAR is an in-between (liminal) space: it is not permanent. (Deut 32:10)
3. Don't panic if you can't hear God; let the desert teach you to listen. (Psalm 63:1-4)
4. Don't rush or regret - trust that God has a purpose in this. (Ex 16:3)
5. Know that God is in the desert. (Isaiah 43:18-19)

- *What would you say to someone who is experiencing the desert in their life?*
- *Which of the above five is most helpful to you now?*

CLOSING PSALM AND PRAYER

Pray in whatever way suits your group best!

You might finish with the Psalm below and/or the blessing...

Psalm 63:1-8

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.*

A Closing Blessing

*You are God's child, you are Beloved, God delights in you!
May God lead you to the desert,
May God lead you in the desert,
May God lead you through the desert,
May God lead you out of the desert,
To the promised land,
Home,
With Jesus Christ forever.
Amen!*