

Life in the desert

Welcome to session 13 of “Walking with Christ”.

Let me tell you a story of a father and son, excitedly heading out for their first hunting trip. The dad, David, had anticipated this weekend for months, where he would initiate his son, Juan, to his favorite sport. This was to begin a new phase in Juan’s life, and be one more step towards him becoming a man. They had built a fire together that morning, fried some bacon and eggs, and were finally setting off to see what meat they could bring home to mom to cook like only she could. As they were walking, talking and noticing the beauty of God’s creation, they heard a blast and a rushing sound overhead. “What IS that, Son?” “I don’t know dad!” Juan said. But before he had time to heed his dad’s cries to “Get down!”...Juan fell down, dead...never to rise again. In a tragic moment, David’s idyllic dreams and beautiful day had landed him in the desert.



Fellowship

1. What has been the driest desert experience so far in *your* life?
2. How did you cope?



Discipleship

Now, you may not live in a desert or even seen one up close...but we’ve all had desert experiences: times when life leaves us thirsty, dry, empty, scared and all alone.

But the Bible tells us that the desert is a great place to meet God. It is where we are stripped of everything that has ever given us a false sense of security, and we are forced to realize that He *alone* is our shade, fortress, friend and the Living Water.

Jesus obediently chose -- He sought out -- a desert experience to go through with His Father! Turn with me to Luke chapter 4 as we read verses 1-14.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

"'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

I think it's so important to look at Jesus' desert experience, because we need to know He understands what we are going through. Let me tell you a bit about fasting. The first few days differ in difficulty for different people, depending on how much sugar is stored in the liver, how poor their eating habits were prior to the fast, and other factors. But no matter how hard or easy the initial phase is, usually hunger will eventually subside after a few days, energy increases, many people report a renewed sense of vitality, clarity of thought and general well-being. However, God has so wisely designed our sense of hunger, that when the fast is no longer "healthy", hunger returns...in a big way! It's at this point that the body will begin eating itself in a dangerous way, actually cannibalizing itself and destroying organs in order to provide nourishment, if food is not immediately taken in. Jesus was at that point! He didn't just have a craving for a good steak or wish for a cookie...His body was ready to eat and needed food! Satan waited with his testing until Jesus was physically weak! I don't know about you, but when I have hunger (and it's nothing compared to what Jesus experienced), my physical pain results in spiritual, mental and even moral weakness! I've struggled with my conscience over not completing a 24 hour fast because I wanted to eat so badly!

But how can we define a "desert" experience we might experience today? Literally, a desert means "a place of without." It's when we are in a situation without the things that normally comfort us. Maybe, like in the case of David, you find yourself deprived of an only child. Maybe you are single after 20 years of marriage, or have recently lost an unborn baby and your arms still feel empty. Things like support – a job that you thought you would have until you retired, has now been filled by someone younger...and you are left wondering how to pay the bills. Or the health you always counted on has disappeared as quickly as a doctor can utter the word "cancer". Has a friend you love dearly hurt you with gossip? Whatever the situation...suddenly it seems the shade and

comfort you've always enjoyed has left you feeling the blinding heat of adversity with only an aching hunger and thirst.

I can't help but think of the story of Hagar in Genesis 16 when I think of a desert experience, and the amazing lesson she found there! Having been used as a baby-making-machine for Sarah, then cast aside as unimportant due to her mistress' jealousy, she flees to the desert, runs out of water, has to listen to the cries of her distressed teenager, and finally just sits down...waiting to die. God appears to her in the middle of her crisis and shows her what to do. She has seen God for the first time!! She reverently creates a personal name for God: "The God Who sees." I can tell you today, brothers and sisters, that it doesn't matter what you are going through: Your God is a God Who sees you! The Tempter may come and offer you what seems like a quick fix, immediate relief or momentary pleasure...He may even tell you God has abandoned you and doesn't see! But I think if Hagar were here today, she would tell you that a desert experience alone with God is worth it! It's worth seeing Him! She got to know Him more deeply when she had no one else, in a way she wouldn't have otherwise!

Let's re-visit the story of David, hunter and now-desert wanderer. That fatal shot that killed Juan was fired by Moises, a family friend who was also along on the trip! Inexperience and excitement had formed a deadly combination, as he had confused the father and son's rifle butts for deer antlers. After realizing his irreversible error, he too fell to the ground and wept, seeing no reason to go on living. He felt his life was over along with Juan's. When he came face to face with Juan's father his shame and remorse were all the greater, yet he was met with a God-sized love. David opened his arms and offered forgiveness, even before it was asked for. He offered Moises an oasis in HIS desert experience, from his own reservoir of Living Water. At the funeral, David and his family prayed for Moises, and later petitioned the court for mercy. Love and forgiveness were a testimony to many, and healing was the result.

Now, God could have *prevented* each of these families the desolation of the desert. Frankly, we don't like to hear His promise that in this life we WILL have tribulation! You see, we are still waiting in faith for our paradise where we will never suffer again and He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. We will be tempted to skirt the desert even if it means compromise. Satan is good at making us believe that we can build "kingdoms" of our own and come up with our own solutions. Use your times of testing to listen to the Father's instructions, enjoying the ways He meets you in your need, and be assured that He is the God Who sees!

3. How did Satan try to mess with Jesus' mind during his temptation?

4. How did Satan use compromise as a tactic?

5. Read Luke 4:1-14 one more time.

How did Satan tempt Jesus to be self-sufficient (verse 3)?

To enjoy what the world has to offer (verses 6 and 7)?

To take foolish risks (verse 9)?

How are you tempted with these 3 things?

6. How did God the Father use Jesus' hard experience for good?
7. What importance do you think fasting played in this situation?
8. Read James 1:12-13. How do you reconcile the fact that God does not tempt anyone with what we have studied today?
9. How can we follow Christ's example when we are tempted?
10. What, if any, results did Jesus' temptation have on his ministry (verse 14)?



Ministry

11. Are you presently going through a desert experience? If so, tell your group. Have the group gather around those struggling, placing hands on them and interceding for their needs.
12. Jesus didn't have a Bible in the desert! He built Himself up and ministered to His own spirit by reciting Scripture. If He needed to draw from its strength, how much more do we! Take a moment to share with each other the Scriptures that have helped you, and maybe someone will bring one to your mind that applies to your situation.



Worship

13. Be on the lookout this week for those outside your group who are silently hurting. Invite them to the celebration next week!