

‘Living in the Desert ... When God seems Absent’



Brochure Two

Brochure 2 of 4

The author to the Letter to the Hebrews writes, ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (10.31). If we are experiencing something of the desert then these words might resonate with us. Maybe we began our journey with God so well; there was life and light and our world seemed to open up in new and profound ways. Perhaps we struggled to understand why others could not see and experience what we were. Now, all this seems to have evaporated and we feel a sense of being lost. Life seems to be an eternal, or at least mostly grey day. Where is God and why is He doing this to me? Alternatively, am I the cause? Now we truly do feel ‘it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’!

While the Old Testament story of Jacob is not exactly our story, there are elements in it that can assist us. Jacob is a cunning character (Genesis 25.29-34; 27.1-46) who more than once deceives his brother and the upshot is that he needs to flee for his life to his uncle’s distant lands where God blesses him in abundance. However, the time comes when he knows he must return home with his wives, servants and animals. He has done well for himself, but always in the back of his mind is the way he cheated his brother and he needs to try to deal with this and make his peace. So he journeys towards home (Genesis 32.1-21).

Jacob must face the consequences of his earlier actions alone. He sends all those with him, including his flocks, across the ford at Jabbok, and we are told that night he wrestles with God. He has to see himself as God sees him. The deceitfulness of his youth is now past but he still needs to deal with it. Meeting Esau seems child’s play in comparison with having to face the truth

about himself. He passes the test without cringing or making excuses, for he is now a mature adult, but he is left with a permanent limp, as his hip is out of joint. This wound will forever remind him of who he is and what he has been (Genesis 32.22-32).

So what might this story say to us? It is not that we have behaved precisely as Jacob did, but rather that in each of us there is a darkness, or at the very least, a shadow that comes from our past and is to some extent there in our present having influence over us. God gazes with great love at us and wants us to face this and deal with it so that we can move on. Can we return His gaze? Do we have the inner strength, fortitude and courage to face this truth whatever it is? We are placed in the desert (or do we place ourself there?) as we struggle to hear and accept the truth about self. This all sounds very negative but another way of putting it is to ask, can we bear to allow God to love us as we truly are and will be? We are wrestling with God and it seems to us like being in a desert with no escape. The invitation to us is to become more truly our deepest self. That is painful. For someone very advanced on the spiritual journey, they may eventually have to face an even deeper desert experience, called the 'dark night of the soul' and that phrase describes it precisely (compare Psalm 88).

But, it is not simply our past, it is also our present! Each day in our thoughts, actions and fantasies, we can struggle with temptation. They are like hooks that ensnare us. The hooks and loops of Velcro describe this exactly. They tend to catch us at our most vulnerable points; different for each of us, and most often when we are tired or bored. We need to teach ourselves to recognise these times in advance and gently resist them.

St John Climacus (c.579-649) sees five steps in the psychological development of temptation from its inception to an act of sin. First the thought pops into our mind (There is nothing we can do to prevent this occurring). Then we begin to dialogue with it (Now it becomes a sin for we are entertaining the thought). The third step is that we now consent to the thought. Then, we become enslaved to it and finally with a passion, it has us in its grip.

A way to deal with this is when the thought pops into your mind (the first step) remind yourself of those words in Colossians 3.2: 'Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.' Hopefully, in this way, we do not dialogue with it because the mind is now distracted by the promise of glory and thus, we do not choose to proceed on to the remaining steps. Is there some other positive thought you might have?

Another helpful thing (which we tend to forget!) is to avoid placing ourselves in the way of temptation. A silly little example that is not a sin: If you know you should not eat chocolate then do not place a box in front of you where you can constantly see it! Reapply that illustration as you like. Why not have a hand cross with you and grasp it when you find yourself tempted. Fashion your own ways of resisting; but always remember to be gentle in doing this. To do so in a violent manner will have the opposite effect and create tension that makes resistance even more difficult.

So, am I not agreeing with what I wrote in the first brochure: 'If you were leading a life that is seriously engaged in sin and you wondered why God seems absent then you might care to look more closely at what is going on in your life'. Surely, this is me! No wonder I am in the desert!

There is actually a more than subtle difference here between the two. With the one we are indifferent to sin, we think nothing of it, or see it as something of a joke, even something to embrace; certainly not something to take seriously. The other is what I am addressing here; we are trying, struggling, succeeding and sometimes failing. At times Augustine's prayer is our prayer: 'Lord help me to stop sinning, but not just yet!' Yet our deepest desire is to change, to be as God wants us to be.

Things to Consider

- ▶ When visiting the optician and discovering that we need new glasses, when putting them on, we find there is a new clarity and sharpness of vision. We can see what we did not realise we were missing. In a similar way as our relationship with God deepens, we will discover negative things about ourselves and we might begin to think we are getting worse. Not so! As with the new glasses, our clarity of spiritual vision is growing and God is allowing us to see what we could not see before about self, but which was always there (1 John 1.7). It can be likened to a desert experience for it seems like that to us.
- ▶ Another aspect is this: As we begin to grow in spiritual depth so our prayer life will need to be transformed. What was appropriate at one stage will not be any longer. It is like a five-year-old child starting school. They will need to do things differently and their approach will change. Alternatively, it is like a young engaged couple who marry. Life will be different and the way in which they relate will slowly change and mature. This is what happens in our spiritual journey as we take God seriously, and finding ourselves in the desert comes as a result. However, the desert is where we truly meet God for it is there He has chosen to make His 'home'. Why? Because there is nothing to distract us in the desert and we have to face the truths and lose the illusions we have about ourselves, thus allowing transformation to begin. It is very hard.
- ▶ One of the things that is happening is that we are learning to relate to God less on the emotional surface level and more towards the core of our being. There is a maturity evolving and we are no longer as dependent on our emotions regarding what God is doing in our life as we were previously. We are not busily wondering where God is and what He is doing in our life at this moment. We come to recognise that if God does not seem to be present, it does not actually mean that He is not. We are less at the mercy of our feelings and emotions.
- ▶ There is more: it would seem, St Paul, had extraordinary experience(s) of God (2 Corinthians 12.2,4) and he tells us that to prevent him from getting too elated (12.7) God gave him 'a thorn in the flesh'. One purpose of our own desert experience is similar, even if we have not been blessed with extraordinary experiences. It is to keep 'our feet on the ground'. There is always the danger of making the mistake of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18.9-14). Pride in so-called 'spiritual achievements' is always lurking at the door.

MBH