

'Living in the Desert ... When God seems Absent'



Brochure One

Brochure 1 of 4

In these four brochures I want to explore a theme which we have all experienced at times for a shorter or longer period and which could be given the name *the desert experience*. We feel as if we are living in a desert. Our overwhelming experience is that God seems absent or at least distant from our life.

So what can we do? How can we understand this? This Series is intended to help us understand some of the possibilities and how we might begin to respond.

Being in a desert seems an apt way to describe what we are experiencing. We think of deserts as being dry, arid and almost lifeless places where the sun beats down, the heat seems oppressive and there is no food or water. How do we survive? How do we not become lost? There is a silence, a stillness, and an almost overwhelming awareness that we stand alone and of our solitariness. It can seem a good place from which to stay away. How can we escape this seeming oppressiveness? (Compare Elijah's situation in I Kings 19.4)

The world is laughing and enjoying the moment. Inwardly we are crying and desperate for help – and nobody knows. The psalmist's cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (22.1) is our cry too, as it was for Jesus on the Cross (Mark 15.34).

We feel helpless and vulnerable and having to fall back on our own resources. They seem totally inadequate for the task. The desert strips us bare. The comforts of home are left behind and we must travel lightly. This is true whether we be traversing a physical desert or the desert of the heart.

The psalmist cries, ‘My soul is thirsty for God, thirsty for the living God: when shall I come and see His face? My tears have been my food day and night: while they ask me all day long “Where now is your God?”’ (42.2-3)

We will not survive long in the physical desert without nourishment and likewise we know we will not survive in the desert of the heart unless God comes to nourish us. It is as simple as that. We are like Job sitting among the ashes contemplating all that had befallen him (Job 2.8). So what can we do? There are a number of things that can be said and in this particular brochure, I want to start with preliminaries.

At the risk of seeming to ‘blame the victim’, we need to start with ourselves and what is going on or not going on in our life. The first suggestion may not be true of your life because to be reading this more than likely means that you are trying to take your spiritual journey with God seriously. To put it simply, 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. Sin separates us from God to a lesser or greater degree depending on the nature and seriousness of the sin. (Compare I John 1.5-10)

Nevertheless, you think, maybe this is me. Maybe the sin in my life is worse than I imagined and consequently God has drawn back and that is why I feel I am living in a desert! We need to beware of scrupulosity, with its obsessive and compulsive attention to detail concerning even the most insignificant of sins (and sometimes those that are not). It is an unhealthy place to be for we are becoming self-absorbed rather than being present to God.

It could be easy enough to slip into this way of thinking. We each find that our life is somewhat divided and we are pulled in different directions. St Paul alluded to this when he said, ‘For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.’ (Romans 7.19) He goes on to say how wretched he feels about this (v.24). The key is that Paul recognised this aspect of his character, his sins and the human frailty, which is there in all of us, and did not allow it to overwhelm him in scrupulosity.

In his book on St John of the Cross Alain Cugno writes ‘... it is when man has a relationship with the Absolute, not when he hasn’t, that his abandonment is thinkable’. Put another way, if we did not have a living relationship with God we would not be bothered by His absence. If you experience your life as being in a desert and this bothers you, then you have a living relationship with God and something deeper and more profound is going on.

Apart from sin, there can be other possibilities for our experiencing the desert in our relationship with God. It might be that we have a health issue with which we are struggling and that is naturally affecting our walk with God such as pain, or something that has the potential to be life threatening or debilitating. The physical, psychological and spiritual are all interrelated in some ways.

Then too some people have what Martin Marty calls a ‘Wintery personality’ and others a ‘Summery personality’. He says this will be reflected in their spirituality. He goes on to say in his book *A Cry of Absence* that ‘Not every believer can move easily into the rhythms of country-and-Western Christianity with its foot-stomping, exuberant styles’.

For some, living in a desert just comes more naturally and they may feel it more deeply. Perhaps not. Perhaps it is what they would expect and they are not surprised, whereas for someone with a ‘Summery personality’ who has had little experience of darkness and doubt now finds it very difficult to cope with. Certainly, that person will not now be quite so sure of himself or herself or where they are going.

We will continue to dig deeper in succeeding brochures.

Things to Consider

- ▶ There are numerous biblical passages that speak to our situation of being in the desert and which can remind us that others too experience what we are going through. Examples are Psalms 22; 42; 63.2; 88; 130; Job, Lamentations 3.1-2; the Song of Songs, Jesus in the

Garden of Gethsemane. Alongside this questioning, lost-ness, longing and even at times sense of despair, there are verses like Psalm 56.8 where we are told that God keeps our 'tears in his bottle'; a beautiful reminder that God knows us and has not forgotten us (see Psalm 139). Speaking to Israel and thus indirectly to us, God says 'I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me' (Isaiah 45.4). We are loved and not forgotten despite all.

- ▶ It might also help to reflect on the image that we have of God. Perhaps our image has been that of an old man with a white beard who is fairly irrelevant to our life and who we don't think would understand us anyway. Or, our earlier life experience may have left us with an image of a God who is judgemental and tricky to deal with, with whom we feel we need to keep 'on the right side'. Is our life spent placating such a God? On the other hand, has God for us been the fairy godmother? The invitation is for us to reconsider whom we worship and, ask ourselves do we need to have a more wholesome and mature image.
- ▶ Another possible reason for our experiencing the 'Desert' is that we are praying in a way that is no longer suitable for us. For example, if our approach to praying alone has been to read prayers from a book, whilst this may be initially helpful, in the end it will prove detrimental since God wants to move us from book reading to a conversational style of prayer. A 15-year-old reading a 5 year old's book will find it unsatisfying. In the same way, we might need to change our approach, style or even the content of our prayer if we have had the same pattern for quite some time.
- ▶ Might you need to talk to someone about this such as your priest or someone whose judgement on prayer you trust?

MBH