

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



## Brochure Three

Brochure 3 of 4

**In this third brochure,** I will try to give further insight into the purpose of the desert experience, and what is really happening. How might we understand it and what might God be doing? And, why the desert anyway?

**In those early days,** God seemed so real to us and our relationship with Him seemed so life giving. Now we seem to be living in something of a desert with the midday sun mercilessly beating down on us. Alternatively, we might choose to see it as just feeling lost in the desert.

**The root meaning of desert** is to be cut off, separated and abandoned. It is a God-forsaken emptiness. We feel empty, helpless and very vulnerable. The desert is also a place of temptations, illusions and demons and how many seem to be lurking close to the surface of our unconscious and occasionally bursting forth! It can all be traumatic. Why?

**Ruth Burrows says of this,** '... we begin to feel bewildered, losing our taste for prayer and spiritual things. Our general state at prayer is one of confusion, darkness, boredom, helplessness; the very opposite in fact of what we expect progress to be like.' She goes on to say that this 'aridity may be very gradual and it may be some time before we notice it'. We come to know what we are really like and this self-discovery is very painful.

**In the desert,** we have to learn to let God be God. We have to change our ideas and preconceived notions about Him, and this is normally painful. God said to Moses, 'I Am who I Am' or, put another way, 'I will be who I will be' (Exodus 3.14). He will be God in the way that He chooses and we cannot control Him. An important lesson for each of us to learn.

**God allows the desert to test** whether we are really seeking Him or just His gifts. The spiritual life is easy when all is going well; the real test of our commitment comes when the rewards are

not so easily forthcoming. In the early days, God can seem to us almost like a 'sugar daddy' who is simply there to provide for our every want and desire. Think of small children and Christmas; their eyes are for the presents and not for the giver. This is understandable and acceptable with young children and yet as adults, we can behave in the same way with God. Through the experience of the desert, God will wean us off His gifts and help us focus on Himself. It is not that He stops blessing us, but rather He is helping us to focus on Himself.

**However, there is also another dimension.** Harry Williams writes, 'To arrive at my truest self where God dwells, it is necessary for me to pass through some pretty rough and decidedly ugly country'. We are coming to know something of our deeper self and not liking what we see. We are left feeling like the landscape in the morning after a big overnight storm, with a few live wires and uprooted trees still lying about. We are left feeling somewhat depressed and sorry for ourselves. Our self-confidence has been deeply shaken.

**The wonderful truth that we do not realise** about ourselves is that the caterpillar is in the process of becoming the beautiful butterfly. In the old fairytale, the ugly frog does not realise that hidden within is the beautiful prince or princess.

**We are experiencing Good Friday** and Holy Saturday as we await Easter Day. We are unsure and struggle to conceive what Easter Day and Resurrection could actually feel like for us. At this moment it all seems impossible, or at best a hope to grasp by our fingers, with white knuckles!

**In an article she wrote,** Cecilia McGowan wrote, 'In the dark night (i.e. the desert), the old props and the familiar comforts are taken away from us, and we have to wait in stillness until they are replaced, like waiting in a darkened theatre for new scenery. The difficult part is waiting without trying to fill the stage with our own ideas of what ought to be there'.

**Returning to the metaphor of the desert,** it is as if we have journeyed to the desert for the first time and are shocked by what we see. There is no lushness, only sparse vegetation and everything seems brown, yellow, or red in colour with a searing sun above. The place seems lifeless and almost soul destroying. It takes time for the desert to reveal its beauty and its hidden life to us and even then, it will seem a harsh beauty compared to climes that are more temperate. The discovery of this beauty will only come through silence and solitude, being patient and just noticing. A thankful and grateful heart will be integral to this.

**Why is this?** Because Scripture tells us that God is a God of the desert. Our Scriptures are full of the desert motif. It is here that the Hebrews met God in the Exodus and here that the prophets spoke to God and He to them. It was here that Jesus was tested in the wilderness and where Paul went to think through and pray about his meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Moreover, it is to the desert that countless men and women in the early church went to embrace God. For them the desert was not simply a physical place, but a spiritual state where God was to be discovered in new, deeper and richer ways by taking Him seriously and just looking.

**What is happening** is that God is purifying us in the desert (Malachi 3.1-3). Like a small child wanting to help a parent with a complex task, they only get in the way and slow things down. God needs our cooperation, but He needs to work His transformation of us alone and out of view (John 15.2; 2 Corinthians 3.18). Our task is to trust despite the strangeness of this new landscape, for now our new home is the desert.

## Things to Consider

- ▶ What might we make of a prayer hurriedly written down before its author, a Jew, was taken to the gas chamber in a concentration camp: 'God, you have disregarded my pleadings. You have failed your own people. You have been heartless, cruel, and deaf beyond belief. You have done everything you can to earn my scorn. You have shown me massive rejection. You have done your worst. But I will not let you go!'

- ➡ The issue of trust, specifically trusting God in the darkness is important. How might you place this story beside the story below?
- ▶ Martin Marty in *A Cry of Absence* gives an illustration to explain what he sees trust as being: 'Two men go on a fishing trip for several days. At some stage one asks the other, what his wife is doing that night, to which the other replies he has no idea. The questioner asks how he can trust her if he does not know where she is and what she is doing. He goes on to try to demonstrate on what his trust is based. "Oh, I want to be able to have confidence in my wife. I know exactly what all her moves are. When I ducked into the general store for a phone call, I was checking. Last night I saw to it that she would be playing bridge in a foursome with your wife ... Tomorrow will be her club night. I have friends who will report whether she was there. There is no room for fooling around. I know her movements and that's why I can trust her."
- ▶ Marty goes on to say, 'The second fisherman (to whom all this was addressed) places his confidence in the character of the trustworthy spouse. She has a record on which he can rely. He knows of her integrity. She is, intrinsically through her love for him, predisposed to be trustworthy. The trust can grow precisely because the two do not and did not have to check up on each other.'
- ▶ Someone experiencing the desert in his or her spiritual life needs to remember this story. God may appear absent, but He is not; we need to just trust God and His goodness and love for us. We should not be anxiously looking around to see where God is or worrying what is happening. Just patiently get on with life, doing what you can, and taking God seriously. Trust is a key issue here.
- ▶ Reflect on the psalmist's words (56.3): 'In the hour of fear: I will put my trust in you'. Might these words speak, at times, to you?

MBH