

IN A DESERT PLACE

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John was born to Jesus' Aunt Elizabeth—the miracle child of an older woman who had been unable to bear children of her own. He was filled with the Holy Spirit while he was still in his mother's womb. He served as the forerunner of Jesus, the Messiah. The ministry of John the Baptist (as he became known) was introduced by the gospel writers as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy:

Matthew 3:3 'In the desert prepare the way of Adonai! Make straight paths for him!' (JNT)

'In the desert prepare...'

Do you know why John went to the wilderness around the Jordan River to preach? Because of that ancient prophecy.

'In the desert prepare the way of Adonai!'

If you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

Look back over the centuries with me and I think you will agree that a pattern emerges ...

Pattern in the Desert

Jacob wrestled with an angel in the desert in order to learn that if you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

Moses received his instructions from God in the desert so that he might know that if you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

The Hebrews wandered in the desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land to learn this lesson: if you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

Moses lifted up the serpent on a pole in the desert, and as many as looked were healed, because if you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

David was chased by Saul into the wilderness for years so he could learn that if you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

Do you know why John the Baptist was raised in the wilderness until his preaching ministry began?

If you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

Why did Jesus lead the multitudes into the desert to teach them about the Kingdom of God?

If you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

Jesus took His disciples into the desert to rest from their ministries so they could learn this valuable lesson: if you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

The Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil so He could show us that if you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

A Curse?

Is the desert a cursed place? No. When God created Adam, as the Bible says, He formed him, not from the lushness of a watered lawn, but from “the dust of the ground.” Then, the Lord God “planted a garden eastward of Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.”

In other words, the desert was the raw material from which God planted a garden, and from which He created man. All the earth was not a garden, or Eden would not have been special. But life began to flow out of Eden to the rest of the earth: first, by a branching river; later, by the man and the woman, who were exiled from the garden because of their sin.

Ever since our first father and mother were banned from the garden for their disobedience, the desert life is simply “the way of life.” Some are able to build houses and cities and reservoirs and plumbing and gardens of our own, but we cannot escape the deserts of life altogether.

You do not have to be individually cursed to find yourself in a desert place; it is really the norm of life (though we all seek to avoid it). The garden experience is the unusual, though we all wish it were normal.

Your desert experiences are simply the backdrop for your blessings. They are the “normal” stuff of life, out of which God, in His grace, fashions miracles, great and small.

Your Deserts

The desert represents a dry place, a lonely place, a difficult place, a solitary place, a quiet place. The desert represents all those times and places in your life when you have felt abandoned, rejected, empty, dried out, used up, up against it, alone without a friend.

If you can prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you can meet with Him anywhere.

But if you cannot prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you will never really know Him. If you cannot prepare a way for the Lord in the desert, you cannot bring Him to anyone else, or help anyone else to meet Him.

How to Prepare a Way

To learn how to “prepare a way for the Lord” we must return to the original message recorded by Isaiah (561):

Isaiah 40:4 Fill in the valleys,
and level the mountains and hills.
Straighten the curves,
and smooth out the rough places.
⁵ Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
The Lord has spoken! (NLT)

The Holy Spirit gives Isaiah four necessary and inescapable elements of this process:

- Fill in the valleys
- Level the mountains and hills
- Straighten the curves
- Smooth out the rough places

Fill In

“Fill in the valleys” means the low places in our lives must be filled in, like we would fill in a pothole in the road to avoid damaging our car or losing our load. I imagine this refers to our emotional lows and relational lows. Such low points are familiar territory to all of us. But what are you doing to “fill them in”?

Ignoring them certainly is not filling them in. Steering around them to avoid them is not filling them in either.

Filling them in requires taking note of their location and rebuilding what is missing.

For instance, by thoughtful reflection or the help of a wise friend or professional counselor (whatever it takes), you may locate a missing emotional building block in your life (an absent father, an indifferent mother, a distant spouse, a lost loved one). While you cannot change the past, you can rebuild.

First, take it to God in prayer. Don’t whine, but acknowledge the lack and ask your Heavenly Father to help you fill it in.

Then, follow up with your own actions. You can take your spouse to counseling, or at least go for yourself. You can find a trustworthy man to fit the father figure that is missing. You can make a new friend. You can ask God to place you in a warm, caring church family. Such “replacements” cannot offer the integrity of the original, but they can “fill in” the valleys of your life. As a result of your efforts, long before they are completed, you will find a new way of meeting with God.

*Psalm 84:6 As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
They make it a spring;
The rain also covers it with pools.
7 They go from strength to strength;
Each one appears before God in Zion. (NKJV)*

Level

“Level the mountains and hills” refers to bringing down the emotional barriers that have been erected in your life. Some of them were an effort to protect yourself from further pain; others were erected by others to control you.

The mountains that must be brought down are the falsehoods from which you have naively expected safety.

*Psalm 121:1 I look up to the mountains—
does my help come from there?
2 My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth! (NLT)*

Over the course of our lives we raise up all manner of hills and mountains that we think will shelter us, protect us, separate us from our enemies. Many of them are emotional lies we have been told or told ourselves, until at last we believe them.

“You’ll never amount to anything.”
“Put on the happy face.”
“You can’t trust anyone.”
“I’ll never do that.”
“Your opinions don’t count.”
“Always keep a stiff upper lip.”
“Never show your hand.”
“You’re smarter than other people.”
“You’re stupid.”
“I never get a break.”

Such thoughts or words, repeated often enough, develop full blown attitudes or outlooks that are difficult to shake. The walls we erect to protect ourselves become our prison cells.

To make them level, you must first recognize the lie and counter it with the truth from God’s Word. In the desert, Jesus repeatedly asserted, *“It is written...”* By the Word of God He defeated His tempter. So shall you.

Don’t remain comfortable with your pain or grief. Begin to level those hills and mountains. Begin to repeat to yourself God’s thoughts about you, as they are presented in the Bible. Place your trust in His all-knowing words.

You are not a nobody; you are a child of God.
You are not insignificant; you are God’s beloved.
You are not cursed; you are blessed with every blessing.
You are not headed for calamity; you have a future and a hope.

Matthew 17:20 *If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. (NKJV)*

Straighten

Pixar’s animated film, *Cars* (sure to become a classic), suggests that roads that flow with the natural terrain, around mountains instead of through them, are environmentally better, more peaceful, and sensitive to their surroundings.

However, in our emotional lives, there is another perspective. Curves are made to avoid the unpleasant, the inconvenient, the uncomfortable, the difficult.

That is not to say that everything difficult or uncomfortable is automatically good for you. In some cases, convenience may be the wise choice. But when it comes to pursuing the will of God for your life, you may expect opposition and difficulty. If you are simply in the habit of choosing what is convenient, you will often miss what is good.

“Straighten the curves” tells us to overcome habits of avoidance. It tells us that we must break straight through some obstacles in order to reach our destination and not be sidetracked or sidelined.

You cannot overcome the evil one by ignoring him. You cannot overcome your fears by avoiding them. You cannot overcome anxiety by taking pills. You cannot overcome emotional pain by drinking. All of these responses only extend and compound the trauma.

Proverbs 21:8 The guilty walk a crooked path; the innocent travel a straight road. (NLT)

You must face those difficult places in your life. But, do not do it alone! Take the Lord Jesus with you. In actual practice, bring them to the Lord in prayer. Confess your weaknesses to Him. Ask for His strength and courage to replace your fear and timidity. Then, grit your teeth, and push through that hillside, trusting the Lord for His power.

Sometimes, in answer to your prayer, the Lord will blast a hole through the mountain, and all you will have to do is pave it. Other times, you will have to drill—tediously and persistently—until you break through to the other side. Either way, the Lord will work with you and on your behalf to complete the work.

Curves are the lazy man's way. It is the path of the short-sighted. God provides a healthier and more productive alternative:

Proverbs 4:25 Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you.

²⁶ *Mark out a straight path for your feet; stay on the safe path.*

²⁷ *Don't get sidetracked; keep your feet from following evil. (NLT)*

And He offers this promise:

Proverbs 4:11 I will teach you wisdom's ways and lead you in straight paths.

¹² *When you walk, you won't be held back; when you run, you won't stumble.*

¹³ *Take hold of my instructions; don't let them go. Guard them, for they are the key to life. (NLT)*

Smooth Out

You're not unaware of at least some of the "rough edges" in your life—the crusty residue of your life before Jesus. They may be in your speech, or in your private thoughts. They may be your knee-jerk reactions to unpleasant circumstances or people. They may be your self-willed rejection of "the rules" or refusal to submit to another's authority.

Later, Isaiah wrote, "*Smooth out the road; pull out the boulders.*"

"Smooth out the rough places" means to file down those rough edges. To remove the boulders and sweep away the residue gravel. Bottom line: to submit your whole being to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To give Him the practical pre-eminence in your decisions and plans. To intentionally invite and allow Him to show you your boulders of self-will and agree to deliberately remove them.

Here, the words of Apostle James have particular application:

James 5:16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (NLT)

This is not a job for Superman, this is a job for fellow believers. Two are definitely better than one when it comes to removing boulders from the road. Sure, you'll have to humble yourself to get their agreement in prayer, but that's the path to ending self-will. Relationships of humility are how you "smooth out the rough places."

The Glory of the Lord

And what are the results of following this road map?

Isaiah has said, *"The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the rose. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. I give waters in the wilderness and rivers in the desert to give drink to my people, my chosen."*

Isaiah 40:5 Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
The Lord has spoken! (NLT)

It is fascinating to see the transition that Isaiah's prophecy makes between the Old and New Testaments. What Isaiah wrote as an instruction, Luke presents as an affirmation:

Luke 3:4 Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.
⁵ Every valley shall be filled
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough ways smooth;
⁶ And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' (NKJV)

This is the power and assurance of God's Word!

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.
¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

Take God at His Word. Apply His Word to your life through faith and prayerful practice. You can expect Him to back it up with all of Heaven's resources.