

So why does God lead us into the desert, those uncomfortable places and circumstances where we hunger and thirst and suffer want? He tells us in our text.

8:1 “Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers. 2 And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. 4 Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you. 6 “Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The desert is a powerful place of testing to see what is in your heart. God wants your heart! He makes it very clear throughout Scripture that He isn't interested in mere lip service. He doesn't want people who simply go along with His people outwardly. Moses says, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” Deut. 10:12

So God uses trials to test you to know what is in your heart. It is not so that God can know what is in our hearts. He sees our hearts and knows us perfectly. These tests are so that WE can see and know what is in our own heart. Doesn't that beg the question, is that really necessary? Shouldn't we know our own hearts? You would think so, but we are very good at covering up what is really in our heart. So God uses the desert for that testing to show us.

The Desert Reveals Your Heart

Martin Luther explains the first commandment very simply by saying, “We should FEAR, LOVE and TRUST in God above all things.” The desert is the perfect place to test you to know if you do Fear, Love and Trust in God above all things. The first test:

-I- Do you Trust God to Provide for you?

You say, “Yes, of course I trust God.” But how do you really know? It's easy to say, “I trust God” when you have an abundance of everything you need. I imagine the Israelites would also have said they trust God to provide for them. So God tested them. Moses said, “He humbled you, allowed you to hunger.” Did they trust God and call upon Him to provide? No! They blamed God and accused Him of evil. Then Moses says, God “fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know.” God showed them that they can trust Him to provide for them.

They ran out of water in the desert. Things got real desperate. They would all soon die without water. Did they trust God then? No! They complained bitterly and accused God of evil. Do you see how the desert revealed what was in their heart? It revealed a lack of trust. It revealed a complaining nature. He gave them water in the desert. He caused a river to suddenly flow out of a flinty rock. See you can trust me.

Do you truly trust God to provide? You think you do. God may test you to reveal what is in your heart. He may allow you to suffer lack or need. He may lead you into the desert of financial stress to see if you trust Him or if you fear and worry or complain, or even turn to cheating and stealing to get what you need. He may allow you to enter the desert of physical injury or health problems to test to see if you trust Him to care for you or if you blame God for your troubles. He may lead you into the desert of sorrow and mourning to see if you will look to Him for comfort and strength or blame Him for taking your loved one away from you.

God has always shown Himself to be faithful. Jesus' brother James told us what to do in our Epistle Reading: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” (James 5:13) It's that simple,

don't complain, don't blame God, just pray and trust Him.

Did you notice in our Old Testament reading in Numbers 11:4, it was "The rabble that was among them," that instigated the complaining and the longing to go back to Egypt where they had all the food they wanted. Who was this "rabble that was among them?" The NKJV calls it a "mixed multitude." These were Egyptians who had gone along with the Children of Israel when they left Egypt. Some of them may have been married to Israelites. Some of them may have decided to go with them because they saw the power of their God and figured things would be much better for them with Israel. They were the ones who usually led the complaining and blaming God and the talk about going back to Egypt. It makes sense that they would want to go back and wouldn't really trust God fully. But the children of Israel were all too quick to follow suit and join in the revolt.

We too, are surrounded by a mixed multitude, a rabble among us who complain and blame God for evil and reject Him. That too is a test. Will we join them, or will we trust God and honour and worship Him, and fear, love and trust in Him above all things? The desert reveals what is in your heart. It also tests you to reveal,

-II- Do you Fear God to Obey Him?

Look again at verse 2 of our text. "And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not."

When God brought the people to Mt. Sinai He appeared to them in a very frightening manner with thunder, lightning and billowing smoke; with an earthquake and the sound of a loud trumpet and the warning not to come near and touch the mountain or they would die. Then God spoke the words of the 10 commandments. The people were terrified and didn't want God speaking to them any more. They said God can speak to Moses and we will listen to him, but don't let God speak to us lest we die.

Then Moses said something very interesting. He said, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." Exodus 20:20 "Do not fear." God doesn't want you to be afraid of Him, and not even want Him to speak to you. But He came in this frightening way so "that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." He wants you to know that He is serious about His commandments. They are not just suggestions, or something He would really like it if we did. They are commands that carry a threat of death for disobedience. We need the true fear of the Lord, to see His holiness and His power so that we have awe and reverence for Him and take His commandments seriously just like He does.

God is testing us constantly to see if we have a heart that truly fears Him and keeps His commands. We are all much better at identifying the difficult circumstances in our life than we are at identifying the problems in our own heart. When you are overtaken with a fit of rage, or a time of worry or fear, or if you speak an unkind word, give in to lust and desire, whatever your sin is, what do you usually attribute it to? What is the cause of your sin?

Don't we almost always point to the circumstances? The kids were yelling and screaming and making a mess, so I lost my temper. My coworker was blaming me for the mistake she made, so I gave her a piece of my mind. My boyfriend and I can't afford two apartments, so we have to live together. Isn't that the case? It has been that way since the very first sin. Adam said, "The woman you gave to be with me gave me of the fruit and I ate." "The serpent tempted me and I ate." We almost always blame the circumstances!

Remember what Jesus said, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Matt. 15:18-19) The circumstances, however difficult they may be, do not cause you to sin. Those circumstances simply reveal the sin that is already in your heart. They reveal the anger in your heart, or the greed and envy, the lust, or the discontent in your heart.

God uses the deserts of life to reveal the sin that is lurking in your heart. That sin comes out and shows itself when we are faced with trying situations, whether it is a lack of physical needs, or people

that try our patience and abuse us, or temptations to sexual sins, or an opportunity to get rich by dishonest means, or the pressure of other things that need to be done instead of going to church or Bible study. None of those things cause us to sin, but they reveal the sin in our heart.

Finally the wilderness tests you to see what is in your heart to know,

-III- Do You Love God to Follow Him?

Some people can't see past the desert. They get hung up on the trials and troubles and don't see God's loving purpose in them. In times of great trial and tribulation they turn away from God, concluding there is no benefit in trusting in God and worshiping Him if He only leads me into deserts. The Apostle Peter warned believers of that, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." 1 Pe 4:12

Thank God that instead of being turned away from following God by the trials of life, He has drawn us closer to Him. We have learned to look to Him for strength and comfort in all those trials. With His love and forgiveness we are moved to love Him and take up our cross to Follow Him.

There is another test about following God that Moses mentions in Deuteronomy 13. He warns the people about false prophets. Even if they show some sign or miracle, if they lead away from following God's word, Moses says: "You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him." (Verses 3-4). Every false teaching, no matter how insignificant as it might seem, is elevating man's reason above God. It is not submitting to God in faith and love, but it is saying we know better than God. So every false teaching is a sin against God and it is a test to see if we love God and will follow Him or take the easy path of least resistance. True love of God is to treasure His word and submit to it and follow it in every point.

A little later in this chapter Moses says that God sends you these tests "to do you good in the end." Vs. 16 They do you good first of all by revealing the sins in our heart so that we can recognize them and turn to God in repentance.

When we talk about the testing in the desert, doesn't that remind you how God led Jesus into the desert wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus faced the most extreme desert circumstances. He had nothing to eat for 40 days and 40 nights. He was literally starving to death.

What did that desert reveal about Jesus' heart? It revealed a totally pure heart of love and obedience. There was not the slightest hint of anger or resentment toward God or blaming Him for His lack, why did you bring me out here just to starve to death? Not even for a moment would Jesus consider getting something to eat in a way that was against His Father's will. Jesus showed perfect trust and obedience.

He showed that there is something even more important in life than food. That's why He quoted the words of our text: "Man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord." God's word is more important and more valuable than food. Jesus heart was pure and holy, therefore not even the most extreme circumstances could bring about any sin in His life. That is the perfect holiness that He gives to all who come to Him in faith and repentance, seeking His forgiveness.

Remember what Moses said in our text, "The Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart." That is the blessing of these desert tests. They are meant to humble us before God by revealing the sin in our heart. So when the desert reveals the sins and lack of trust in our hearts, may we all humble ourselves and fall down before our God in repentance. Then look to Jesus whose desert experience revealed a perfectly pure and holy heart. Call upon Him for forgiveness and God will lift us up by giving us that perfect holiness. Clothed with Jesus blood and righteousness, He leads us through the desert to our Promised Land. And we will learn to follow Him through all.

Amen.