

A sepia-toned landscape photograph. In the foreground, a dirt road curves from the bottom right towards the center. The middle ground is a vast, flat field with some sparse vegetation. In the background, there are rolling hills or mountains under a hazy, golden sky. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

A LENTEN JOURNEY

A 40 DAY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

This journal is designed to guide you on an inner journey through the 40 days of Lent as we pause and remember again the real significance of Easter. Our journey will take us through the wilderness – the land between – which is often a place of pain and suffering, but which is also a place of formation and transformation. Just as Jesus spent 40 days being tempted in the desert, we will spend the next few weeks reflecting on the desert place and what it teaches us about ourselves and God.

There are daily readings with Scriptures on which to meditate and thoughts designed to help you come to a place of reflection and stillness in which God can speak to you. There are also spaces in which you can write your thoughts and the answers to some questions that aim to help guide the time you spend in prayer and meditation.

We pray that as you use this journal, you may discover more of the secrets of your own soul and that you may draw nearer to the Living Water, Jesus Christ, Who died for You and calls You to go ever-deeper with Him.

We come to remember...

We come to remember dust and ashes and death

We come to remember the journey You took

One that went from obscurity to adulation to humiliation to darkness – and ultimately to a brightness and a greater glory than we can understand

We come again to remember that You emptied Yourself and became like the creatures You created – the people that You lovingly formed from dust

– and that You gave Yourself for us

We come so that we may never forget that our life cost Your death

Ash Wednesday: Dust to dust

We come to remember.

Ash Wednesday draws us back again to the beginning of Lent when we journey each year with Jesus towards the cross. We take this journey because it is so easy, in the busyness and activity of our lives, to forget what Jesus did for us and what it cost. It is all too easy to take the grace of God for granted and we become easily accustomed to our Christian freedom and favour. And so, we come again today to allow God to root deeply within us the truth that we are free, but that this freedom came at great cost; that we are His children, but that our adoption cost Him His Son.

We also come to acknowledge our frailty and mortality – that we know that we are just dust (Psalm 103:14) – and that this earthly life and the possessions we gather and empires we build are temporary. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. We remember that we were created for eternity and that it can only be found in Christ. We remember that death must come before life.

We invite you on a 40 day Lenten journey which is ultimately an inward journey. We encourage and challenge you to set aside times of quiet and stillness in which to seek God and to do so more purposefully and intentionally than before. Traditionally, Lent is a season in which we practice sacrifice and austerity, and the idea behind giving things up is to remind ourselves of what's really important and to bring into focus again the reality of the cross.

*“The desert fathers and mothers were the inspiration for the church’s season of Lent. In the fourth century, bishops visited these solitaries living in caves in the wilderness of Egypt and were inspired by the visible joyous witness of Christian discipleship. They wanted members of their parishes to catch a glimpse of the healing power of the solitary life. And since they could not arrange for caravans to bring all the people out into the wilderness, they resolved to bring the wilderness to them. For forty days prior to Easter, parishioners would enter wilderness territory, not out in the desert of Egypt, but in their own familiar surroundings through a Lenten discipline, marked by abstinence. Fasting, simplicity and silence were to reconstruct the austere and fierce conditions of wilderness living; and instead of wrestling demons in caves and monastic cells, believers would be setting foot in the cave of their soul. By eating less, doing less and doing with less, they were brought face-to-face with the powers and demons that owned them, the habits that controlled them, and the possessions and attachments that had taken precedence over the place of God in Christ.” – Annemarie Kidder, *The Power of Solitude**

Read and reflect on Psalm 103:13-18. What does it mean for you that the Psalmist notes that God remembers that we are but dust?

What would you like to accomplish in this Lenten season? What spiritual goals will you set for yourself?

How will you make your life simpler and sacrificial during this time?

Formation in the wilderness

It is in the dry places that we become who we are. It was in the desert that the Israelites became a nation as they learnt what it meant to trust and serve God. It was in the 40 days in the desert, in a time of testing and tempting, that Jesus' was firmly established in His identity and fully surrendered to His destiny.

In this time of Lent, we will be reflecting on the dry places of the soul and how they shape and form us. The reality of life is that there will be seasons of testing and difficulty for all of us, and although these may be times of pain, they can also be times of growth and development. They can be times that teach us who we really are and Who our God really is. When things are going well it is easy to be self-reliant, but the dry places often drive us to our knees and cause us again, to remember that God is our only hope, our strength, our Provider and the source of our purpose.

God desires that every situation we face, whether one of joy or pain, would draw us closer to Him and cause us to seek Him more deeply than before. As we journey towards the cross in this Lenten time, let us ask ourselves some difficult questions as to who it is on whom we rely. Who are we trusting for our lives, whether we find ourselves in a good place or a place of deep pain right now? Where have we become self-reliant and self-sufficient and left no room for God?

God promises, that when we seek Him, we will find Him. When we long for more of Him, He is there, ready to give of Himself to us again. Will you long for Him? Will you let Him in?

"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water." -

Psalm 63:1-4

Would you say you are in a dry place, or in a place of abundance in your spiritual life at the moment? Why? Can you identify what brought you to this place?

What do you think God wants to teach you in the circumstances in which you find yourself right now?

In what ways have you become self-reliant? What are the things you need to let go and give over to God and His care again, or for the first time?

Choices in the desert place

The desert is a dangerous place where there is little water and vegetation, a real risk of dehydration and malnourishment and the habitat of some dangerous animals. It is a place of extremes and therefore, because of its harsh reality, it is a place where choices are more clear-cut than they may be in other places. It is a place in which things come into focus and priorities must be clearly established.

As we journey through Lent and allow it to draw us into the wilderness place with Jesus, it is an opportunity for us to allow our faith to come into sharper focus again – to take some time to examine the condition of our hearts and our spiritual lives and to ask some difficult questions about our priorities. It is an opportunity to ask again the basic questions about our faith; where it has been, how it is doing and where it is going.

The following 10 Questions come from Donald S. Whitney's Book, *Ten Questions to diagnose your spiritual health*. Spend some praying and meditating on them as you reflect on your spiritual health at present.

1. Do you thirst for God?
2. Are you increasingly governed by God's Word?
3. Are you more loving?
4. Are you more sensitive to the presence of God?

Complaints in the desert place

When the Israelites found themselves in the desert on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land it was a season of struggle and complaint. When we find ourselves in wilderness experiences there are two main temptations we must resist:

1. We must resist the urge to say, “This is far enough. I’m not going any further.” Sometimes we simply become weary and the journey towards the promise God has for us seems too difficult and we tempted to simply settle with what we have and where we are. The Israelites were tempted to settle at the oasis of Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13:26, 20:1) but God had greater things in mind for them and staying where they were was not an option. It was their failure to trust God in taking the next step when they did arrive at the Promised Land that led to them being in the desert for 40 years instead of a few months. Despite the difficulties of the desert, we can become complacent about our spiritual situations and resist the urge to keep going, to persevere, to hold on and to claim the promises God has for us with courage and faith.
2. The second temptation and complaint against which we must guard is that of wanting to go back to where we have come from. The Israelites kept getting discouraged and afraid, despite the incredible miracles and faithfulness of God, and kept saying, “Let’s go back to Egypt” (Exodus 14:11). Their lack of faith made even their slavery in Egypt seem like a better option than trusting God with their present and their future. Sometimes, in desert experiences, we are tempted to believe that the lives we lived before, our lives before God or the things from which He rescued us, hold better answers for us than He does, but that is

never true. Don't give up hope that God will complete the work He has begun in you and that, if you trust Him, He will lead you to into His promise.

Are there any places in your spiritual life and journey where you have become "stuck" or complacent? What do you need to do in order to move forward?

Are there any ways in which you are living in the past or in destructive nostalgia that is hindering you from moving forward with God?

From wonder to wasteland

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

- Matthew 3:13-4:1

One moment Jesus heard the very voice of God speaking Truth over His life as the heavens opened and glory was revealed. The next moment, He found Himself in a wasteland and the only voice He heard was that of the devil, tempting and testing Him. At His baptism He was surrounded by friends and the very tangible presence of God, but in the desert He was utterly alone.

Life is very unpredictable and often, we go from moments of wonder, when things seem to be going really well and working for us, to being blindsided by something that drastically alters our situation. In a spiritual sense too, it is easy to find ourselves on a spiritual “high” one day, only to wrestle with deep doubts, fear and disappointment the next.

Our emotions and experiences may be fickle, but our God is not. One of the things we need to do in order to develop spiritual maturity is to learn to rely on the unchanging character and nature of God regardless of what our external circumstances may be. He is faithful in the place of plenty, but He is also faithful in the desert place. He is near when we feel His presence and He is near when we do not. He is the same... yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Think of and write down a time in which you found yourself in what you would describe as a place of plenty in a spiritual sense. What did you learn about God during that time?

Now think of a time in which you had a desert experience. What did you learn about God during this time?

The purpose of the dry place

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there’s more of God and His rule.”
- Matthew 5:3, *The Message*

Desert experiences often reveal what we really believe about God. It is easy to fake our way through an attempt at a spiritual life when things are going well. It is easy to rely on God when we are really quite self-sufficient and in control, but in the desert place our true faith is exposed.

As difficult as these situations may be, for those who follow Christ, dry places of the soul in which you become completely dependent on God and His mercy are also places of unique blessing because when we make room for God in our lives, He will come. When we give Him our emptiness, He fills us. When we trust Him, He will respond. When we draw near to Him, He draws near to us. When there is less of us – less pride, ego and self-importance – it allows more room for God to work in us and through us.

Desert places also teach and remind us that true faith is not about our feelings. Our spiritual experience has to be about much more than simply emotions. Rick Warren says it like this in *The Purpose Driven Life*:

“God is real, no matter how you feel. It is easy to worship God when things are going great in your life – when he has provided food, friends, family, health and happy situations. But circumstances are not always pleasant. How do you worship God then? What do you do when God seems a million miles away?”

The deepest level of worship is praising God in spite of pain, thanking God during a trial, trusting him when tempted, surrendering while suffering and loving him when he seems distant.”

Do you feel close to God or far from Him right now? Why?

What are some things you know to be true about God and His character regardless of how you may feel about Him, yourself or your circumstances?

“Yes, he wants you to sense his presence, but he’s more concerned that you trust him than that you feel him.

Faith, not feelings, pleases God.”

– Rick Warren, The Purpose Drive Life

The wasteland of sin

Sometimes it is the circumstances of life, that are completely out of our control, that lead us into desert places, but often, we find ourselves in a spiritually dry season because of sin. When we choose to disobey God, it separates us from Him and disconnects us from His presence, His power and His blessing. This is not to say that God abandons us when we sin. His grace is sufficient for us and Jesus died to ensure that we would never be truly separated from God if we accept His death in our place. However, sin damages the relationship between us and God and ultimately, always ends up leaving us in places of isolation, loneliness, bitterness and destruction.

Lent is a time in which we focus on the consequences and reality of our sin and it is a reminder of the fact that we have a great need of God's grace and forgiveness.

Take some time today to repent – to prayerfully reflect on the things in your life that are not pleasing to God, to ask Him for forgiveness and to commit to making a change going forward.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." – 1 John 1:9

I need to repent of...

The gift of the uncomfortable place

As uncomfortable and unpleasant as dry seasons of the soul may be, as much as the refining fire of trials may burn and as much as our wounds may hurt, there is a sacred gift in the uncomfortable place. It is a place in which reality is confronted and in which we cannot hide. It is a place in which we are exposed and truth is revealed... and if we will let it, this truth will transform and shape us. It is the place in which faith is put into practice and miracles happen.

May we allow ourselves to be discomfited, uprooted and pushed beyond our boundaries. May we allow God to stir a holy discontent within our souls that makes us unsettled and uneasy. May we allow the desert place to teach us and shape us so that we may become more like Jesus.

“May God bless you with a restless discomfort about half-truths and superficial relationships so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart. May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom and peace among all people. May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain to joy. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God’s grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.” – Benedictine Sr. Ruth Fox, OSB (1985)

In what ways are you allowing God to make you uncomfortable right now? How do you need to be stepping out of your comfort zones in terms of your spiritual journey?

What are the injustices you see around you? How do you think God wants you to respond to them?

The desert: A place of presence

When God appeared to Moses and called him to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness journey, Moses was not a very willing participant and he asked, “When I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what am I to tell them.” God replied, “I AM who I AM” (Exodus 3:13-14). Before the journey to the desert began, God made it clear to Moses and to his people that He is I AM – He is ever present. He is everything we need. He is our Provider. He is with us. He is God. He is...

John Gill notes that the name “I AM” *“signifies the real being of God, his self-existence, and that he is the Being of beings; as also it denotes his eternity and immutability, and his constancy and faithfulness in fulfilling his promises, for it includes all time, past, present, and to come; and the sense is, not only I am what I am at present, but I am what I have been, and I am what I shall be, and shall be what I am...”*

God doesn’t send us into difficult places alone. The Great I AM goes before us and with us. He is all you need.

How does it make you feel to know that God is with you and has gone before you into the situations you face right now?

In this desert place

In this Desert Place

By Danette Kettwich

(www.christart.com)

I've let myself wander
Into the desert once again,
Where my spirit thirsts
And sin becomes my friend.

Parched as the sand is here
My life has now become,
Leaving me so empty
And Your will's undone.

Lord, find me in this place
Send Your healing rain,
I can't bear it any longer
The cracked dryness of this pain.

Lord, please wash over me
With Your unfailing grace;
As I meet with you here
In this desert place.

One day apart from You
I find is all it takes,
For sin to grab my heart
And fill me with mistakes.

Wonder in the wasteland

There is wonder in the wasteland. There is grace and comfort in the places of our deepest pain. There is mercy in the moments of our most heinous sin. There is provision in the place of our emptiness. There is beauty that comes from ashes and joy from mourning because our God is good and supremely faithful, even in the desert place.

When the Israelites found themselves in the desert, although they were not in an ideal situation, they experienced incredible miracles and saw first-hand the power and provision of God. He did not let their clothes and shoes wear out and faithfully provided manna and quail for them to eat. He granted them His presence, protection and guidance in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. He revealed His will in the law and His power in His miracles. By and large, however, all the Israelites did was complain. They did not see the wonder in their wasteland and how God was shaping them into the people they needed to be.

The true wonder of the wasteland is that it creates a unique opportunity for us to seek God more intentionally and intently. It opens up avenues of deeper relationship with Him as we learn to trust Him more and entrust ourselves to Him in unconditional surrender. The wilderness is really an invitation to the wonder of knowing Jesus more. Will you heed the call? Will you accept the invitation?

“Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her Beloved?” - Song of Songs 8:5

Surviving in the desert

There will be desert times in our lives. Whether these come as a result of our sin, or the sin of others, the circumstances of life or simply a necessary season in our faith, all of us will experience moments of difficulty and trial. When we find ourselves in these places, how do we survive? How do we go on? How do we seek a God that seems a million miles away?

David had a very intimate relationship with God and yet, he knew very well the pain of feeling disconnected and far from Him. Psalm 13 is one of the many Psalms David wrote in response to finding himself a difficult and painful space.

Read and reflect on the Psalm below. What stands out for you?

Psalm 13

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

¹ *How long, LORD? Will you forget me for ever?*

How long will you hide your face from me?

² *How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?*

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

³ *Look on me and answer, LORD my God.*

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

⁴ *and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,'
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

⁵ *But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.*

⁶ *I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me.*

In David's cry to God we see several survival tools for desert times that we'll be examining in more detail over the next few days.

Firstly, David is honest with God about how he feels. He freely expresses his pain, frustration, anger and sense of abandonment. One key factor in making it through desert times is honesty with God and with ourselves. When we have negative emotions, we often feel as though we can't bring these to God. The truth, however, is that God already knows how you feel better than you do and He is not afraid of your anger or pain. He wants you to come to Him just as you are, without masks or pretences and live in authentic relationship with Him.

We also need to be honest with ourselves. We are often so good at keeping up appearances that we struggle to admit when we aren't doing well, but until we do, we are holding onto self-reliance and pride, rather than humbly asking God for help and acknowledging that we need Him.

What masks are you wearing / tempted to wear at present?

How do you really feel about God right now? Spend some time honestly telling him how you feel.

What do you think prevents you from always being completely honest with God?

Respond with worship

The second thing David did when he found himself in difficult seasons is that he still chose to respond to God with worship. He understood that worship is not about our emotions, but about a decision. It's a choice that we make. We need to decide and will, moment by moment, "Will I live my life for the glory of God, even when I don't feel like it?" When we make that decision, we choose to live a life that pleases God and a life that has eternal impact.

Our decision to worship also has powerful consequences and can often lead to a place of liberation and faith. In Acts 16 vs 23-25 we read about Paul and Silas who were beaten and jailed for spreading the Gospel and their response is really amazing. We read that they were sitting in stocks in the prison at midnight and they started to pray and sing songs of praise to God. I'm pretty sure that as they sat there in the dark, bruised and battered from their beating with their fate rather uncertain, none of us would have blamed them if they responded with anger or disappointment in the God who could have prevented their difficult situation. So what is it that inspires them to praise God in that moment? I think that they had learnt and were holding onto the truth that God is always worthy of praise because despite our external circumstances He is unchanging. His love, mercy and grace remain constant. He is the same, yesterday, today and forever and although He often works in ways we don't understand and allows things we can't comprehend, He remains faithful despite what may be going on in this temporal, difficult world. What He has done for us in eternity makes Him always worthy of our worship.

I think Paul and Silas were also able to choose to worship in that moment because they understood that worship is about God – not about us. As they chose to respond in worship an earthquake shook the prison and their shackles snapped open and they escaped.

When we think about Paul’s life, we see that he suffered more than most but yet, when he once again finds himself in a different jail cell, he writes this in Philippians 4 vs 4: “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!” I don’t think this is a call to superficial happiness or glossing over hurt or difficulty and plastering on a fake smile. This is a call to rejoice in the knowledge that though the mountains crumble into the sea, our God is there, unchanged and eternal. When we choose to worship in difficult times, we are declaring our faith in God to redeem us and our decision to stand firm on His promises.

"Praise is a declaration, a victory cry, proclaiming faith to stand firm in the place God has given you. Praise is a proclamation that the enemy's intent to plunder you will not rock you. Praise declares that you will not be moved by the enemy's attempt to snatch you away." - Darlene Zschech

Remember God's faithfulness

Psalm 13:5-6:

*"But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me."*

When David found himself in a dry season of the soul he responded by being honest with God about how he felt and by running towards Him, instead of away from Him. He also responded with worship that came from a deep-rooted sense of Who God really was, regardless of the pain of his present circumstances. He reacted and a faith that could continue to hope and endure. The third thing David did was to respond by remembering God's faithfulness.

When we find ourselves in painful seasons, it is easy to allow our current circumstances to overwhelm us and to become hopeless. The desert is a vast and empty place where there doesn't seem to be any clear direction. If we look around, all we may see is more of the same – more sand, more aridity, more struggle – but we need, in those moments, to look up and to remember the One Who will never leave nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). In moments of despair, remember the former faithfulness of God and take heart. His faithfulness is an eternal reality confirmed once and for all for us in the death of Christ on our behalf.

Trust in the desert

We live in a broken world and almost daily, we come across things or experience things that may cause us to question God's character and His love for us. We suffer terrible disappointments, we endure unfairness, we come face to face with suffering and death and perhaps you find yourself in a place right now where you are questioning God's ability or willingness to be good to you. Perhaps you are questioning His very character. In these moments, when we find ourselves questioning God's nature and love, we need to remember that He gave a definitive answer to all these questions once and for all over two thousand years ago on the cross. We need to interpret our world and our circumstances through the cross of Christ that speaks of unconditional love and eternal life, even when we don't understand.

Read and reflect on the following excerpt from Charles Slagle's book, *From the Father's Heart*. What emotion or response does this letter evoke in you?

"Worried Child,

I AM just, pure and holy. My love is limitless and seeks not its own. When those dark thoughts cloud your mind, causing you to question my love, I ask that you do one thing: remember the cross.

See it now. See the One crucified. See the humiliation, the horror of Innocence disrobed, mutilated and bleeding. Pain racks His every atom. Each gasp of air is agony untold. His every nerve is a conduit of fire. Can you hear Him cry? No one else can either, but I can. I hear

Keep on keeping on

In times of trial, doubt and suffering, we need to hold on to the promises of God. We need to endure and persevere, holding fast to the hope we have in Christ that can never be undermined or shaken.

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." - Hebrews 10:23

"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised." - Hebrews 10:36

In order to persevere in faith, we need to make sure that we are growing our faith and doing things that expand and increase it, rather than things that diminish it. This involves having the right disciplines, spending time with the right people and making sure we make our relationship with God a priority.

Spend some time today thinking about the state of your faith. How would you describe your level of faith at present?

What are the things that grow your faith and how can you do more of these things?

What are the things that diminish and undermine your faith and how can you avoid or deal with these things?

Lean on me

In desert seasons the importance of community becomes clear. As much as our walk with God is deeply personal and requires personal sacrifice, commitment and endurance, we cannot do it alone, especially in the difficult times.

In Mark 2 (1-12) the author recounts for us the story of a paralysed man could not get to Jesus on his own. He needed his friends to carry him, to hoist him up onto the roof, to dig through the roof and to lower him down to Jesus. His friends didn't just take him there and then give up because of the crowds. They were incredibly insistent, persistent and inventive and did whatever it took to get their friend to Jesus.

That man needed the dedication and commitment of his community... and so do we. There are times when all of us will become discouraged; when all of us will be in a spiritual wilderness. In those times, we need others who love God and who love us who will help us – who will carry us to Jesus when we are unable to get there on our own. Sometimes we need to be those who are carried: we need to be willing to ask for help and to admit when we are struggling. At other times, we need to be those who carry others. When we are strong, when we feel close to God, we need to reach out a hand and help others who are weak.

Do you have people around you in Christian community that can hold you accountable, support you, encourage you and care for you during difficult times? Who are they?

Who are the people in your life at present that need your support and encouragement? How can you help others who are perhaps in difficult seasons?

Longing for more

The dry places in our lives bring the longing of our hearts into focus. When we find ourselves in difficult places, they often become places of honesty in which we can confront what our hearts really desire.

We were all created for intimate relationship with God and so, by virtue of the way we were created, the deepest longing of our souls is for Him. Blaise Pascal speaks about a “God-shaped void” that each of us have in our souls. The problem is that we often try to fill this void with other things – material possessions, earthly relationships, power, prestige, activity... and nothing really satisfies because only God can fill that longing in our hearts.

In the desert places, when distractions are diminished and things come into focus, ask yourself the question as to what the longing of your heart really is – and ensure that you seek God above all else.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” – Psalm 42:1-2

Voices in the desert

Read and reflect on Luke 4:1-13.

The temptation of Jesus in the desert reminds us that there will be times of testing and temptation for all of us. Temptation is a reality of our human condition because none of us is immune to sinful desires. There are many voices vying for our attention and urging us to go their way.

The voice of God speaks over our lives and guides us in the way we should go, but His is not the only voice we hear. The voices of the world – of mass media and marketing, of consumer-culture and hedonistic pursuits – cry out to us loudly. They yell from billboards and heckle us in the form of telemarketers. They sneak into our subconscious in subtle ways we don't even notice as we become immersed in the world around us.

We also have to contend with the voice of the enemy. It is a harsh reality that there is an enemy of our souls who prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us and to bring death and destruction (1 Peter 5:8, John 10:10). His voice speaks to our souls with the specific intention of derailing us from God's plan and causing us to sin.

Finally, we also have to contend with the voice of our own sinful desire and human nature that resides within us and seeks comfort and self-satisfaction.

In the desert place, in places of pain, sometimes it becomes easier to discern the voices speaking to us, but sometimes it becomes even more difficult to know to which voice we should be listening. We

need to ensure that we seek out and learn to clearly hear God's voice, pushing back and quietening the others. If we are uncertain if it is God's voice we're hearing, we can ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Is it consistent with Scripture?
2. Is it in line with God's nature and character? (God is Love, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Shepherd, Healer, Bringer of hope)
3. Does it build up, edify, encourage and bring life? (Remember, God convicts, but never condemns).

What can you practically do in order to hear God's voice more clearly and not be distracted or led astray by the other voices vying for your attention?

Did God really say?

From the very beginning of time, one of the enemy's chief tactics has been to make us question what God has said to us and to undermine the Truth He has spoken. We see that the snake poses this question to Eve in the Garden of Eden when he says, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden.'" (Genesis 3:1). He sows doubt into the minds and hearts of humanity by causing us to question what God has spoken to us and His motives for saying it.

When Jesus was tempted in the desert, it was immediately after His baptism at which God clearly established His identity. God spoke over Jesus saying, "This is my Son whom I love; with Him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17). Immediately Jesus' temptation follows as the enemy tries to get Jesus to question what God has spoken over Him and to be destabilised in His identity. Notice how Satan's temptations to Jesus begin with the statement, "If you are the Son of God..." (Luke 4:3, 9). What He's really saying is, "Did God really say that you are His Son? Is that really true?"

It is not always easy to trust God when things are going well and we find ourselves in pleasant places, but it is much more difficult in the desert place when we feel deserted and alone. Here, we are especially vulnerable to the enemy's lies as he tries to make us question Who God is and Who we are in Him. No matter how we feel however, the reality of God's unchanging character and nature is eternal, as is the adoption as His beloved children of those who have accepted Jesus Christ. We need to know the Truth and cling to it with all we are. The truth protects us and sets us free.

"Never doubt in the dark what God told you in the light."

– V. Raymond Edman

The easy way or the God way?

“The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, ‘I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.” -Luke 4:5-8

Sometimes temptation is obvious because we are tempted to do something we know is contrary to God’s will or way. While these temptations are not necessarily less difficult to navigate, they are easier to identify. What is more difficult to identify is when we are tempted to do good and right things in the wrong way.

Jesus’ task was to subdue the kingdoms of the earth and ultimately gain authority over all of humanity and take back the power and authority of Satan, but the way God had set out for Him to accomplish this meant a journey of sacrifice, suffering and death. Satan offered him that same authority – the same end goal – but by very different means (worshipping him and denying God).

At times, we may be tempted to do the right things for the wrong reasons or with the wrong motives, but we need to ensure that we are doing things God’s way, even when His way is the harder road.

“In the Gospels, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness to be a different kind of Messiah; to take the path of spectacle and power rather than that of humble service, but this temptation would continue throughout his ministry up to his death itself when he is taunted to come down off the cross.

During his temptations in the wilderness, Jesus is also tempted to live by a set of values totally different from those of the Father. Will he be the kind of Messiah that God was calling him to be, or would he go the more culturally acceptable way of power, prestige and spectacle? We know the answer.

During Lent we examine our lives in the light of our sharing in the covenant of Christ. We too are called to a view of reality and a set of values quite different from those of the culture(s) around us. Do we really embody them in our lives?”

*From: “In the desert with Jesus: Biblical themes of Lent” by Michael D. Guinan,
www.americancatholic.org*

The Sword of the Spirit

When we read about Jesus' temptation (Luke 4:1-13) we see that Jesus deals with the attacks of the devil by standing on the truth of God's Word. Jesus is tempted with lies, but speaks Truth – Truth that is firmly rooted in His heart and mind through the Scriptures – and Satan has no option but to move on to a different temptation.

In Ephesians 6, Paul speaks about the armour of God that is available to those who follow Christ. He speaks about the Sword of the Spirit that is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17) that we can use as a weapon in the war that we wage with the powers and principalities of darkness. Hebrews 4 also reminds us that the Word of God is "living and powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword".

God's Word is the most effective weapon we have in terms of dealing with temptation. It is the Truth against which no lies and deceit can stand, but in order to use it effectively, we must know it and allow it to take hold of our hearts and souls.

How well do you know God's Word right now? How do you think you can engage with it more intentionally and learn it better?

Dealing with temptation

“Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” – Matthew 26:41

Temptation is not a sin – Jesus was tempted, but He never gave in to the temptation and therefore, never sinned. We all face temptations, but what matters in the end is how we respond to them. Often, we are our own worst enemies when it comes to resisting the things that tempt us, because instead of dealing with them decisively the moment they arise and removing ourselves from situations in which we struggle, we sometimes like to hang around and see what will happen. Instead of seeking true purity and staying far away from the things that tempt us, we tend to hover on the boundary lines and then, inevitably, cross them from time to time.

If we are really serious about dealing with the sin in our lives, we have to deal with the things that habitually tempt us. We need to acknowledge that our spirits may be willing, but our flesh is weak and ask God to give us the wisdom and courage to deal with our tempting situations differently.

What are the things that tempt you and lead you to sin? How can you respond to those situations differently or avoid them altogether?

When we do give in

We need to do all we can to resist temptation, but because we are flawed and human, there will be times that we give in to our temptations and sin. As we approach Easter we celebrate again the incredible truth that Jesus Christ died to forgive our sin and that He offers us His everlasting mercy and limitless grace. However, we also need to remember that His grace, although free, is not cheap. It cost Jesus His life. Therefore, when we sin, we need to respond appropriately with confession (acknowledging that we have fallen short and asking God to forgive us) and with repentance.

Repentance literally means to “think differently” or to turn away from. The image it creates for us is of moving in one direction and then stopping, changing our minds and doing a 180 degree turnaround and moving in the opposite direction. The point at which I stop heading in the wrong direction is the moment of confession – when I have come face to face with myself and I realise that I have gone down the wrong path, and then repentance is the work of actually turning around and coming back to God again – thinking differently about something, or choosing to live differently.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14 God says to the Israelites:

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

Notice the conditions placed on God’s forgiveness in this passage. It is freely available, but in order to receive it, the people have to humble themselves and pray – they have to admit their mistakes and confess. Then they have to seek God’s face – in other words – see what God truly desires and then turn from their wicked ways. They

have to repent. They must let go of the things they are holding onto so that their hands are open to receiving the forgiveness of God.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we know what we are doing is wrong – and we can perhaps even get to a place of confessing and admitting that it's wrong, but we aren't yet ready to let go of that sin and move in a different direction. In order to receive God's forgiveness and freedom however, we have to let go of our wickedness. We have to be willing to leave that behind and move into a new future with Him.

This of course, doesn't mean that we're never going to go back to that sin again... our sin has a way of finding us, doesn't it? But the incredible thing about God is that when we do receive His forgiveness, He removes that sin from us as far as the east is from the west and it is completely gone.

Every day is a fresh start and God doesn't hold our forgiven sins of the past against us, but in order to really find forgiveness, we must be willing to repent: to let go, and move forward in a different direction.

What practical action do you need to take in terms of repentance and moving in the opposite direction to the way you're currently going?

A new beginning

The amazing thing about God's grace is that it extends to us, no matter where we are or where we find ourselves. No matter what we have done or how much we have rebelled against God, no matter how long you may have been wandering around in a desert of your pride or sin – no matter how far you may have run from Him, when you stop, turn around and ask for His forgiveness and His help, He is always right there. We are promised that when we seek God, we will find Him.

“And you shall seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.” – Jeremiah 29:13

You are not too broken to be restored by God's grace. You are not too far gone to receive His forgiveness and you will never be too far from Him that He cannot catch you in His grip of grace. All you have to do is ask. Acknowledge where you have failed and confess. Ask for God's forgiveness and then know, that because of Christ's sacrifice for you, you are truly forgiven and truly free.

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. – Lamentations 3:22-23

Are there temptations to which you have succumbed and sins you have committed that you feel have a hold on you? Bring them to

God in prayer today and let them go, knowing that when Christ sets you free, you are free indeed (John 8:36).

Be still

*“He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.” – Psalm 46:10*

One of the gifts of the desert place is that it allows us an opportunity for stillness. We live in a world in which we are constantly bombarded with noise, activity, stimulation and communication, but in order to really connect with God, we need to practise the discipline of quieting our hearts and listening for His voice. We have to be still.

Take some time today to be silent in God’s presence. Quieten your heart, deal with the distractions around you and just be still.

“The one journey that ultimately matters is the journey to the place of stillness, deep within oneself. To reach that place is to be home. To fail to reach it is to be forever restless.” – Elizabeth O’Connor

Attuned to God's whisper

A.W. Tozer once wrote: "God is not silent. It is the nature of God to speak. The second person of the Holy Trinity is called 'the Word.' "

Take a moment and let that reality sink deeply into your heart and soul.... God speaks and wants to speak to you. The Almighty Creator of the Universe does not sit far off and passively observe what is going on down here. He is engaged, He is involved, He is invested... and He talks to us. John 1 makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the Word of God... the Word made flesh to become available and accessible to us. It is by the Word that God created and brought all things into being and it is by the Word that we are brought into relationship with Him. It is also by the Word that we are shaped and moulded into the people that He intends for us to be.

In Matthew 4:4 Jesus said, "People cannot live on bread alone, but on every Word that comes from the mouth of God." The Word is our nourishment and our source of life. The problem, however, is that God usually doesn't speak in a bellowing audible voice. Usually, He speaks in a quiet whisper to our hearts and in order to hear from Him, we need to ensure that we are attuned to His whispers. We need to find and create moments of stillness in our lives and our days so that we can listen for God's voice. When we do, it will leave us forever changed.

I've come to believe that hearing the quiet whisper of the transcendent God is one of the most extraordinary privileges in all of life and potentially the most transforming dynamic in the Christian faith. When people hear from heaven, they are rarely the

same again... Without a hint of exaggeration, I can boldly declare that God's low-volume whispers have saved me from a life of sure boredom and self-destruction. They have redirected my path, rescued me from temptation and re-energised me during some of my deepest moments of despair. They inspire me to live my life at what boaters call 'wide-open throttle' – full on!... I firmly believe that God whispers to you too. If you lower the ambient noise of your life and listen expectantly for those whispers of God, your ears will hear them. And when you follow their lead, your world will be rocked." - Bill Hybels, The Power of a Whisper

How can I create more moments of stillness in my life in order to listen for God's whispers?

What is the last thing you clearly heard God say to you? What have you done about it?

Listening for God

“The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he ran to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ But Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ So he went and lay down. Again the Lord called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ ‘My son,’ Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down. Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. A third time the Lord called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ Then Eli realised that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, ‘Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.”

– 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Spend some time today listening to God. Pray the prayer, “Speak Lord, I’m listening...” and then take some time in silence, asking God to speak to you.

The still small voice

“The Lord said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.” – 1 Kings 19:11-13

Elijah found himself in a very real desert place, physically and spiritually. He was completely burnt-out and depressed, but God met his needs and provided for him. He gave Elijah food and allowed him to rest and then He called him up onto Mount Horeb where He spoke to him. Ultimately, God provided for the very deepest need of Elijah's heart in that place - relationship and intimacy with him. Just as the physical food and rest nourished Elijah's body, God's Word to Him nourished and filled His soul. It touched and filled a place in his life and heart that nothing else could. You and I have that deep need too... a need and longing to be connected to God in relationship and to hear His Word... which is like living water that brings life to our spirits and our souls. But the way in which God spoke to Elijah was not in a big, obvious way – not in the earthquake, fire or wind, but in a still, small voice. The deepest needs of your heart can only be met as God whispers His truth to your spirit. Are you still enough to hear it? Will you quieten your heart and listen?

Stand still

“As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, “Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians”? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’ Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.’” – Exodus 14:10-14

Sometimes being still means standing still. It means ceasing from our own striving and activity and trusting in God instead of in our ability to help ourselves. When we find ourselves in difficult situations, our default may be to kick into problem-solving mode and attempt to do more to get ourselves out of our problems, but sometimes, what we really need to do is just stop and wait on God. He is our Deliverer and our Strength and He is at work for His children. Will you trust Him?

In what areas of your life are you striving at present? What are things you need to hand over to God’s care and trust Him to do on your behalf?

The stillness of fasting

Lent is usually associated with a time of fasting or giving something up. The reason we do this is to identify with the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus, but it is also to quieten our hearts and minds and to focus on the spiritual rather than the physical. Fasting helps increase our appetite for God. Jesus said that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (Matthew 5:6). He desired that we would hunger for more of God and thereby, become more like Him. It is easy, however, to allow ourselves to be so filled up with worldly things that we do not take notice of the spiritual hunger within us. We need to desire more of God in order to keep seeking Him and growing more like Him. We need to hunger for Him and His righteousness. Fasting, that results in physical hunger, can be a powerful tool to remind us of the far deeper spiritual hunger to which we must attend. Denying ourselves physical food helps us think again about the quality and amount of spiritual food we are taking in and forces us to pause and ask ourselves a very important question: **“Do I truly desire more of God?”**

“Do you have a hunger for God? If we don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because we have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because we have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Our soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great. If we are full of what the world offers, then perhaps a fast might express, or even increase, our soul's appetite for God. Between the dangers of self-denial and self-indulgence is the path of pleasant pain called fasting.” - John Piper

Barriers to stillness

The desert places in our lives are meant to teach and form us, but they can only do this if we are listening and receptive. God is speaking, but we need create moments of stillness in order to ensure that we are hearing Him. There are however, barriers to stillness in all our lives. Sometimes these barriers are external – busyness, pressures, demands on our time, media – and sometimes, they are internal – conflicted thoughts, doubts and the hurt of broken relationships.

What are the things that create “noise” – whether external or internal – in your life? How can you deal with the barriers to stillness in your life right now?

The oasis of hope

"Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness, streams flow in the desert. Hot sands will become a cool oasis, thirsty ground a splashing fountain."

– Isaiah 35:6 (The Message)

With God there is always hope. Regardless of what our circumstances may be, what pain we endure or struggles we face, faith in Christ offers us an eternal hope.

Hope is sometimes associated with nothing more than wishful thinking, but Christian hope is far more than wishing on an uncertainty. The hope we have in Christ is founded on the eternally firm foundation of the promises of God that remain true no matter where we find ourselves.

There are thousands of promises in Scripture. Take some time today to read and reflect on the following ten and know that there is hope, even in the driest and most deserted places of the soul, because the One Who called you in faithful (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

- Jeremiah 29:11
- Matthew 11:28-29
- Isaiah 40:29-31
- Philippians 4:19
- Romans 8:1-2
- John 14:27
- Romans 10:9
- Romans 6:23
- Psalm 50:15
- John 8:36

"Hope is like the sun, which, as we journey toward it, casts the shadow of our burden behind us." - Samuel Smiles

The hope of faithful provision

God is our source of nourishment, life and rest. Even in the desert place He can bring refreshing, provision and restoration. In the most difficult and painful situations God still brings hope. In the midst of our pain, the beauty of God's eternal promise is still ever-present.

When the Israelites found themselves in the desert – a place they remained far longer than they needed to because of their sin and disobedience – even there God nourished and provided for them. There was manna every morning and quail provided to satisfy their hunger. The entire time they were in the desert their clothes and shoes didn't wear out (Deuteronomy 8:2-4). God was right there, providing for them and caring for them, despite their disobedience and complaints.

No matter where we find ourselves or how we may feel, God's faithfulness remains true and unchanging. He is good and He is faithful. He knows the deepest needs of our souls, even before we ask Him (Matthew 6:8). Whatever your circumstances may be, there is hope in the truth that our supremely faithful God is with you in them.

"The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." - Isaiah 58:11:

What is your deepest need right now? Bring it to God in prayer, knowing that He delights in giving good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:9-10).

The hope of miraculous intervention

*“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”
- Isaiah 43:19*

God is the God of the impossible. There is nothing He cannot do. He can make water of refreshing and joy spring up in the driest and most barren of places. He can do new things and turn situations around. He can move mountains and change hearts. With God there is always hope because He can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20-21).

What miracle do you need from God right now? For what are you trusting Him?

The hope of transformation

God will complete the good work He has begun in us. There is hope in the fact that whatever we face right now, God is using it to shape and form us into the people He destined us to be. Even in our most painful situations and experiences, He is holding us, like a Potter holds clay – expectantly and hopefully – with the promise of greatness and beauty. Our trials and pain are never wasted when we're in God's hands. He works all things to the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). He is at work in you, in the seasons of joy and abundance, and perhaps more than ever, in the seasons of darkness, aridity and despair. No matter what happens, He will never let you go.

How do you think God is using your current circumstances to refine, form and shape you?

"In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." - Philippians 1:4-6

Hope in the Overcomer

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." – John 16:33

Jesus did not promise His followers a life of comfort and happiness. In fact, he told them that choosing to follow Him would have a great cost – one that they must carefully weigh and consider (Luke 14:27-33). He taught that the life of discipleship is one of self-denial and sacrifice. He warned against persecutions and suffering that would inevitably come, but He also offered true hope in all circumstances... a hope that looks beyond today and the struggles and trials we endure to a tomorrow that is secure and safe in Him.

This world with its chaos, trouble and hurt is temporary and the power of God has overcome it all. He is greater than any problem we face and bigger than any brokenness. He has also made those who trust in Him more than conquerors (Romans 8:37). In Him we will overcome because He has already overcome the world and defeated even death.

The hope of the Comforter

Read and reflect on the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3.

Sometimes, for reasons we don't understand, God does not remove us from our painful situations. We feel as though we are walking through the fire and He just doesn't seem to bring His healing rain to extinguish the flames. God may not always remove us from the fire of trials, but we can find hope and strength in the eternal truth that He is there with us in the midst of them. He will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He will never let us go and there is nothing in this world or the next that can ever separate us from His love (Romans 8:38-39).

“But now, this is what the Lord says – he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.’” – Isaiah 43:1-3

The hope of eternity

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” - Revelation 21:4

As we journey towards Easter we are reminded that no matter what happens, Jesus has overcome. Whatever pain and suffering we face in this world, Christ has overcome it by His death and His victorious resurrection. The cross was not the end and the promise of resurrection, newness and an eternity with Him awaits us all.

The Christ-follower has an unquenchable hope in the truth that there is something beyond the here and now. There is a new tomorrow, a new life, a new beginning that will come when pain will be forever abolished and tears will be no more. Brokenness, suffering and death are an undeniable reality, but so is resurrection and therein lies our hope that can never be shaken.

When your oasis is a mirage

When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!' 'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'
- Mark 11:7-10

Today, we remember and celebrate Palm Sunday and it is a bitter-sweet day. We remember today Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We remember that He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and that He is victorious over all, but at the same time, we remember that Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week and that this celebration of Jesus' kingship happened in the shadow of the cross. He entered into Jerusalem triumphantly, but only a few days later, He was mocked, ridiculed and crucified – dying a sinner's death.

The strange thing about Palm Sunday and the events that followed it is the behaviour of the crowd – the people gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. For three years Jesus had been teaching and performing miracles. Many of them had probably seen Him at work and heard His message. Certainly, everyone had heard Him, and so here they were on this Sunday shouting His praises and declaring that He was their King and Deliverer, but yet, just a few days later this same crowd that was shouting, "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" was shouting, "Crucify Him!"

That day as the crowd waved their palm branches in the streets and honoured Jesus, they praised Him as the liberator they wanted instead of the King He was. They welcomed Him as a political rescuer who would save them from Roman oppression, but they failed to see that Jesus had come to set them free in a much more powerful, eternal way. They wanted immediate results and the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel and so failed to see that Jesus came to bring them the all-powerful, never-ending Kingdom of God.

Jesus knew, all too well, what's it's like to deal with disappointment. In that moment as people were laying down their clothes in the road as He passed by and waved branches, shouting praises, there must have been hope within Him that they had finally seen, finally understood His message, but His hope was crushed when they called for Him to be crucified. They had not understood at all.

There comes a critical moment for every Christian when we will face deep disappointment, not only with those around us or with our circumstances, but when we will face disappointment with God. Sometimes, we may feel as though we are in the desert and we just begin to hope at the site of an oasis, only to realise that our oasis is a mirage. Where do we go when our hope is not the hope we thought?

The people in Jerusalem were disappointed with Jesus because they wanted Him to be something other than what He was. They wanted a political leader and He was never going to liberate them in the way they imagined. When we face disappointment, it leads us to ask difficult questions about whether we really see Jesus for Who He is? Do we recognise Him as the King of Kings and the Lord of all... the unchangeable and eternal I AM... or have we created an image of who we want Him to be for us? Do we realise Who He really is and

how He works, in an eternal way that doesn't always make our present circumstances easier or comfortable, or are we still wanting Him to do things our way?

Reflect on a time you have been disappointed with God. What did that season teach you? How did you deal with that disappointment?

How do you think we can ensure that we have an accurate perception and understanding of Who God is and that we don't make an idol for ourselves and worship who we want Him to be?

Hope in the nowhere place

*“God, God... my God!
Why did you dump me miles from nowhere?
Doubled up with pain, I call to God all the day long.
No answer. Nothing.
I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.”
– Psalm 22:1-2 (The Message)*

Sometimes we feel disappointed in God. We feel as if we are nowhere – and we don’t know how we got there or how to get back to a place of faith and trust. Worst of all, it feels like God has abandoned us or can’t hear our prayers. How do we hold onto hope in this place? How do we keep trusting when God feels far away?

One way we can keep our hope in God when things feel hopeless is by remembering the cross. Jesus cried out the words of Psalm (22) just before His death: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34). At the moment of Christ’s death, He took the sin of the world upon Himself and God, Who is perfect and cannot look on sin, therefore had to turn away from Jesus. He truly was alone and forsaken in that moment. You and I, regardless of how alone and abandoned we may feel are promised that because Jesus took our rejection upon Himself, God is always near and we are always perfectly safe in His everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27). Jesus went through true abandonment and rejection so that you and I would never have to. God is near, no matter how far away He feels.

Tuesday

The right hope

Sometimes when we find ourselves bitterly disappointed, we are forced to ask ourselves difficult questions about the things in which we have placed our hope. It is easy to put our trust in earthly things – in schemes that offer quick-fix solutions and in people who promise they will come through for us. Perhaps the thing we tend to place our hope in most often, sometimes even without realising it, is ourselves. We place our hope in our own ability and strength. Ultimately however, all these sources of hope will come up short. They will all disappoint us in the end. When our hopes are crushed and our dreams are dashed, we need to ask, “Have I been hoping and trusting in the right things? Have I been trusting in my circumstances, or have I been trusting in the One Who holds all my circumstances?”

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.” - Psalm 42:5

How do you think you can make sure you are placing your hope in God and not in yourself or your circumstances? Do you need to repent of depending and having faith in something or someone other than God?

Beauty for Ashes

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” – Romans 5:1-5

Our hope in God does not mean that we will never be disappointed or that we will never face difficulty or pain. There is, however, an eternal hope we hold in the truth that even in our darkest places and our deepest struggles, God is working all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). He uses our trials to develop our characters and He brings beauty and life out of places of barrenness and death.

What negative or painful things has God used to shape and form you?

How have you experienced that God used a difficult or painful experience for your good or the good of others?

Isaiah 61:1-3:

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning...”*

The hope of a temporary today and an eternal tomorrow

“For the person who suffers, Christianity offers one last contribution, the most important contribution of all. As we have seen, the entire Bible, representing 3000 years of history and culture and human drama, focuses like a magnifying glass on the execution at Calvary. It is the crux of history, the cornerstone. But death is decidedly not the end of the story.

After three days in a dark tomb, Jesus was reported alive again. Alive! Could it be? The news is too good to be true... The resurrection and its victory over death brought a decisive new word to the vocabulary of pain and suffering: temporary. Jesus Christ holds out the startling promise of an afterlife without pain. Whatever anguish we feel now will not last.”

– Philip Yancy, Where is God when it hurts?

Whatever struggles, pain and disappointment you face, there is hope in the knowledge that they are temporary. The journey in the desert will come to an end and the Promised Land of eternity awaits. Our hope in eternity does not trivialise or minimise our suffering in the present, but it does enable us hold on and to persevere because eternity has been set in our hearts and there is more than the here and now. Easter reminds us that even death is not the end and that our God is God of new beginnings and hope that can never be defeated.

How does thinking about your struggles in the context of eternity change the way you think about them?

Dying in the desert

Jesus spent 40 days in the desert grappling with His calling – a calling that meant death and suffering and the giving of Himself for others. As we remember Good Friday and the reality of what Jesus did for us when He sacrificed Himself at Calvary, we are reminded that that we too are called to wrestle with a calling to die. We are called to die to ourselves, to die to sin and to die to selfishness and pride. It is only in Jesus' death that we find eternal life, and it is only in our willingness to die to self that we find the true, abundant life He died to give us. His death for us sets us free, but it is only when we are willing to release our grasp on life, and come to a place of death, that this freedom becomes a reality.

“Then he said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?’” –

Luke 9:23-25

As you come to Calvary again today and pause as you gaze upon the cross; as you see the love of God displayed in the pain and horror you find there, will you surrender yourself and make the decision to die so that you may really live?

As you consider the cross today, what does Jesus' death mean for you?

What do you think it means to die to yourself? In what areas do you think you are not completely surrendered to Christ?

Pray this prayer of surrender as you commit yourself to God.

Lord Jesus,

Thank You that You died for me. Today, as I remember that You gave everything for me, I give everything am I to You. I surrender myself completely to You. I long to love and serve You with an undivided heart. I'm sorry Lord, for the ways in which I have held back, the ways I have been self-seeking and the ways in which I serve my pride and my selfish desires. Help me to die to myself. I give my life to You and thank You that as I do, You give me true, abundant life.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.

The rising Son

Easter reminds us that no matter what pain we suffer or disappointments we face, there is always hope, because after the tragedy and horror of Good Friday, Easter Sunday comes. Resurrection is a reality. Death is defeated. Jesus is victorious.

The disciples were confused and crushed when Jesus died. All their hopes seemed shattered and everything they thought they knew was suddenly called into question. Things had certainly not worked out the way they thought they would and they had nowhere to turn, but God resurrected their hope by doing the impossible, and He does the same for you and me.

This is the true message of Easter - that all our desert experiences, our disappointment and pain, even death, is only temporary because the Son will rise and healing will come.

“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings...”

– Malachi 4:2

What hope do you need God to resurrect in you right now? What healing do you need from Him?

Leaving the desert behind

Jesus is alive. What a beautiful truth... what a magnificent promise! Our Saviour is alive and He calls us to true, abundant life with Him. No matter the desert experiences we've had, He offers us His Living Water to quench the thirst of our souls and restore us so that we may never thirst again and so that we may find true freedom in Him. He calls us to leave the desert place behind and to drink deeply of His Spirit... to find healing and fulfilment in Him.

Sometimes however, we are reluctant to leave the desert behind. Like the Israelites who arrived at the Promised Land but did not want to enter it because of fear of its inhabitants and a lack of faith in God's ability to protect and establish them, at times we don't want to leave the desert behind because it requires stepping into something new and leaving our comfort zones and the places we have known, regardless of how painful they may have been. Sometimes it is an unwillingness to let go of our sin that leaves us stuck in desert sand when the lush pastures of promise are actually within our reach.

Commit today to leaving the desert behind and going with God where He is leading you. Don't let sin, fear or uncertainty keep you from living the life Jesus died to give you. He is alive and you are free. Claim that freedom today and rejoice in the truth that you are redeemed and you are His.

"But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." – Jeremiah 17:7-8

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