

. . . With Refreshments to Follow

Desertification

Every desert on earth is expanding. This is, in part, due to global warming, but it is also because of land use over many centuries. Throughout the late middle ages and up until modern times, and stretching from the Balkans, through the middle east, along the North coast of Africa was ruled vast Turkish Ottoman Empire. At one point, the Turks, throughout this Empire placed a tax on *every single living tree*. As a consequence of this tax, over time most of the trees in the land we now call Israel and Palestine were chopped down by impoverished peasants who could not or would not pay the tree tax. And without the trees to hold the soil, this otherwise fertile land was blown over by the dry winds and reduced to a desert.

The American writer Mark Twain visited Palestine in 1867 and wrote: "Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies. Palestine is desolate and unlovely -- Palestine is no more of this workday world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition, it is dreamland." [But] "there is hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, have almost deserted the country". "A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. . . [After a long day of travel he writes]

"We reached Tabor safely. We never saw a human being on the whole route". "There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent – not for thirty miles in either direction. ...One may ride ten miles hereabouts and not see ten human beings." ...these unpeopled deserts, these rusty mounds of barrenness..." (Chapters 46,49,52 and 56 of *Innocents Abroad*)

The prophecy of Isaiah 35 envisions the land in much the same way – a desert – but begins with a promise: the desert will bloom again. (35:1)

Historical Context

With the defeat of Sennacherib, the once mighty Assyrian Empire entered its last dying days. The Egyptian Pharaoh Neco advanced from the South to fill the power vacuum and for a brief time, gain control over the land of Judah. But from the North, Babylonians were gaining the momentum. This left the king of Judah in a tricky position: he now owed his throne to Egyptian intervention (2 Kings 23: 34-35) but Egypt is now in the process of being driven from the region by Babylon and after a major battle at Carchemish, the Babylonians gain control of Judah and eventually the deportation of the Jews begins, leaving Judah a sparsely populated, desolate land – a desert.

This prophecy of Isaiah was first heard by a people who being led in chains along a cross a hot dry highway, destined to live for generations as a subjugated people in a foreign culture, a culture hostile to their faith. But Isaiah says God would one day lead them home. And when he does, their deserted land would bloom again once more. God had delivered them a promise: a shoot from the root of Jesse would grow. A Messiah would be there to sit on the throne of David. God's kingdom would come.

But in the dry desert agony of what has become their lives, they desperately want to know, "What will it be like?" When God rescues us, and Messiah rules, what will life be like? And Isaiah, with all his poetic genius says picture this:

This desert land will begin to be reclaimed (1-2)

The geography described here is the region on the border with Edom. It is dry land, forbidding in the eyes of most people, for the shepherds and farmers who roamed it in search of bits of green pasture and who prayed for the rains that usually came it was home. They knew this was fertile land, if handled well and irrigated properly, it would be fruitful. It since it was along on a major trade route, with the caravans constantly traveling through, it was a place where they knew they could make a living.

But now with their deportation, this land was in the hands of the Edomites, and was hostile. But the previous chapter is about God's judgement on the Edomites which would take place before they could reclaim this land. . .

This dis-empowered people need to be re-energized. 3-7

Once this land was theirs again, the people who lived there, even the feeblest ones, with bad knees and fearful hearts, and the blind and the lame and the deaf, any one could make the pilgrimage through the drylands to Jerusalem. They could travel unmolested to Zion and meet with God. But as it stands now, the route to Jerusalem lies through a hostile territory and only the very fit and brave would dare make the journey. But in the days of the Messiah, that would change. . .

A disused path would be rediscovered 8

This is a promise to all future pilgrims who would pass through the drylands. There would be a clearly marked route for anyone to travel. But it would be a "holy road." A controlled access highway.

The main highway through the region was known as "the Way of the Sea." Along it traveled the military, the traders, the diplomats. It the route by which the exiles would be taken into exile. The "Way of the Sea" was a road of sorrows for the people of Israel's God. But Isaiah said that along this very road, "a people walking in darkness would see a great light". For unto them a child would be born. . . (Isaiah 9). Somewhere along this weary "Way of the Sea", Isaiah says there would be an exit ramp marked: "Road to Zion," It would not be an easy road. It would be uphill all the way. And the only ones who would get to walk on that road would be *those who walk the (Capital "W") Way*. "It would be a journey of faith to Mount Zion. Unless you really had an interest knowing the God of Israel, you wouldn't be bothered with this road. You'd pass it by. Most would miss the exit on their way to other places. Other opportunities, other goals.

But the people who would return along this highway would have their eyes peeled, looking for that exit. They would stream back along the road in their droves. But today, that path of holiness desolate, Lonely. Poorly marked. Fallen into disrepair. Ah, but in the days of Messiah. .

The road hazards will be cleared away 9

This was road on which bad things happened. Wild beasts prowled. It was hostile territory, held by the enemies. Edomite territory. But the day would come when "the redeemed of the LORD would return. With the people free from exile, and the land free from the Edomites control, a generations-long hope would finally be realized.

*They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.*

*Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

Now what does this rather strange ancient vision given to a desert people of a distant land say to us about . . .

Reclaiming our deserted spirituality

Throughout the world today where the deserts have been gain ground for centuries, millions of trees are being planted. Advancements in irrigation and agricultural techniques have meant that, in some places, the desert can bloom again.

In many ways, our lives are a reclamation project. Some challenges we face in our spiritual lives come from living in a secular culture. Like global warming this culture's effects are seemingly inexorable. The modern age was disastrous and left a desertification of spirituality in the Western world. No one person or church or state can fix it. It seems to eat away at the edges of our lives, turning them into deserts. But the situation can change. With the right irrigation, the right techniques, those parts of our lives that have fallen into disrepair and become dry even toxic, can be reclaimed and restored and made fruitful once again.

Maybe after years of marriage with a real love, a man and a woman start to sense that love slowly drying up and married life becomes more and more of a desert.

Or, perhaps, suddenly an illness presents itself in your body. Severe illness, can be a desert.

Or, through growing older or a disability you lose some of the life you've always had. When it happens life feels like a desert, so dried up and dead.

Or you lose your job. The income dries up. You don't know where to turn because there's nowhere to turn.

Or loneliness or depression creep in –there's nothing inside, no energy – life has lost its driving gear.

And then it's Christmas – again. It can be the worst time – when you're in the desert. It's *supposed* to be fun, but know people who just hanging on and waiting for Christmas to be over. For desert people all the Christmas pressure to eat, drink and be merry only leaves them more and more hungry and thirsty drained. Are you aware that Christmas time is the number one time for suicide and depression? Because for many people, life is a desert, and life seems even more deserted at this time of year. Life can be like a desert for each one of us.

The Word of the Lord is this: "When the Messiah comes, your desert will bloom again." This gives us . . .

A new way of being in the desert

What is there about the nativity scene that attracts us? Why does it draw us in? Why, after so many years do we continue to stop and ponder it so many different ways, on Christmas cards, ceramic figures, lawn displays. . .

Here, in the middle of the desert is a tiny inn – a road-house for caravans. And out back, in the stable a small sphere of love. Peace. God and humanity together. You don't have to stay here very long. No one can stay here very long – not even Joseph and Mary and Jesus. But you get what you need: a decent meal, a little sleep, simple down-home hospitality. And then you move on – back out into the desert. But just being in that little inn for just a short time and you're

ready to take the desert for a few more days. And then another little inn, a few simple pleasures.

C. S. Lewis in his book The Problem of Pain writes:

“The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world; but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It’s not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and pose an obstacle to our return to God; a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for *home*” (C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain ch 7)