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PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY: *RETURN TO THE DESERT*

By Chris R. Bullard

Somewhere along the way the members of Christ's family have made a subtle but demoralizing decision which is now obvious. As a result, many Christians are committed, but disillusioned; faithful, but weary.

How long has it been since another believer has asked you: "How is your personal relationship with the Lord?" Probably not often, if ever. That has not been the focus of most among Churches of Christ. We have been more interested in correct theology, and along the way we have forgotten the relational side of salvation. This basic flaw derailed our Christian experience. It is not that an intellectual grasp of God is unimportant; rather, alone it is inadequate.

The "streams of living water flowing from within" that Jesus promises have run dry. The contemporary church has lost the spiritual vitality and excitement that dominated the early church's experience. Why is that? How can we recapture that radiant spirituality?

Jesus provides the answer to our dilemma. When asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus replies, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37). Twenty centuries later the church has exchanged a passion for God, for a passion for information *about* God. We have studied the Word, analyzed its truths, and organized our beliefs. In the process we missed God. Our minds are filled with facts about

God, but our lives are empty of the experience of God's presence.

In his letter to the Ephesian church, the apostle Paul prays, "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph 3:14-17). Paul's prayer is not that knowledge about Christ will dwell in their hearts but that Christ himself will dwell there. A living relationship with the Lord is what Paul aims for, not merely the multiplying of facts. The New Testament is clear: God is in the business of nurturing a family, not in instilling facts about its members. The center of a family is relationship.

Steve Meeks, in *Relational Christianity*, writes concerning the necessity of experience in achieving intimate relationship. He says,

Psalm 34:8 tells us to "Taste and see that the Lord is good." First Peter 2:3 teaches to long for more ". . . now that you have *tasted* that the Lord is good." Taste is an experiential word. If a person has never tasted chocolate, I defy you to explain to him what it tastes like. You may be able

to explain the ingredients but you cannot explain the taste. Yet by *experience*, we even know what “dark” chocolate tastes like as compared to “milk” chocolate. Experience runs deeper than knowledge. Taste is based on experience, not information.¹

Believers who are filled with biblical truths but do not experience those truths in daily living have an aborted spirituality. A church that teaches doctrine but does not lead its members into the experience of a personal, intimate relationship with the Savior has failed in its mission. Information about God is not our goal. God is our goal. “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection,” cried the apostle Paul (Phil 3:10).

The renewal of the church will not come through tinkering with worship services or changes in ministry methodologies. Renewal will only come through a vibrant relationship with the Savior. Jesus said: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.” When we come to know Jesus intimately, the excitement will return and we will be satisfied. The diminishing of our thirst for a meaningful spirituality will again be a dynamic experience.

To know Jesus and to know the power of his resurrection, we must commit to the overall lifestyle he practiced. Jesus ordered his life around a few basic disciplines that kept him constantly in fellowship with his father. Among those spiritual activities were prayer, silence, solitude, a simple lifestyle, service to others. However, first among those disciplines was time in the desert.

It was in the desert in which Jesus’ public ministry began (Luke 4:-13). Luke says he was “led by the Spirit into the desert.” In that place of solitude he nurtured his relationship with his father, clarified his mission in his mind, focused his heart on his father and his true calling, and strengthened his spirit to battle the wiles of the devil. Only after his forty days alone in the desert was Satan allowed to approach him. Jesus emerged from that initial confrontation victorious over evil, and Luke records that “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. . . “First, there was time in the desert, then he moved in the power of the Spirit. Today we desire the power without the desert.

The desert was a time of preparation for Jesus. Such a retreat was not a remote or strange idea. The desert experience was part of Israel’s heritage. Moses spent forty years in luxury in the urban center of his world, but God did not appear to him until he had spent forty years in the desert. It was in that place of solitude his heart was prepared to answer God’s

calling for his life.

The Children of Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness. Often we tend to think of this journey as a time of punishment, but it was a time of discipline and preparation. As the prophet Jeremiah reflects, the wilderness years were a time when God nurtured his relationship with the nation of Israel.

Elijah fled south to the Negev desert in a fit of depression. There he encountered God in a still small voice, his spirit was refreshed, and his commission to ministry renewed. Likewise, David fled from King Saul to the desert. Living in solitude, he penned many of his psalms. John the Baptist was reared in the desert and from it carried out his preaching ministry.

It is not surprising that Jesus begins his ministry in the desert. In the solitude and silence of the desert his heart is renewed and his vision clarified. The desert draws Jesus back time and again during his ministry to meet with his father. Later, even Paul went immediately into the Arabian desert following his conversion and reflected on the dramatic changes that his life would take as he became an apostle for Jesus Christ.

What is the desert? More than a parched and arid patch of land remote from civilization, the desert is a quiet place where one withdraws from the crowded routines of daily life and the constant demands of others. It is a place to be alone with self and with God. It does not have to be in an arid place. In the words of Carlo Carretto: “If man cannot go to the desert, the desert can come to man.”² To create a desert one may shut himself/herself in his/her room for a day, or set up a special room in an attic, or travel to a motel in another community for twenty-four to thirty-six hours. To create a desert means learning to remain undisturbed with one’s own thoughts and one’s own prayer for a time.

Why do this? Because there in the silence and solitude of one’s own desert he/she can search for God and listen for his voice. There is time to stop long enough to face personal sin in confession, to examine one’s soul, and battle temptations. In the desert the Word of God, heard for years, can surface to consciousness in areas of life which have been neglected. The much-needed silence and solitude that is crowded out of a daily schedule leads to reflection about personal goals, aspirations, dreams, and ambitions. Without time in the desert one loses his/her focus or never struggles with the deep issues of a relationship with the Lord.

The contemporary church desperately needs a desert experience. Our busyness robs us of practicing the presence of God. We rush from one church program to another, constantly active for God, but

the busyness is a shallow substitute for a significant relationship with God. Our ceaseless activity anesthetizes us to the emptiness of our spirituality, to that gnawing sense of unfulfillment that underlies our filled days. The desert breaks that cycle of busyness and gives us a time and place for God, and him alone. It is our response to Jesus' command to "go into your room, close the door and pray to your father, who is unseen" (Matt 6:6).

Christians who never have a desert experience are much like my son Christopher who is an avid baseball player. When he first began to play, he walked to home plate and stood as the Royal's third baseman George Brett stood. He gripped his bat as George Brett gripped his bat. He swung his bat as George Brett swung his bat. But he never hit the ball like George Brett!

Why? Because Christopher knew nothing about the "hiddenness" of George Brett's career. The long hours in the batting cage that prepared Brett to face a pitcher were unseen by my son. The hours of discipline preparing his body to respond accurately at the right moment were unknown by Christopher. All Christopher knew was the "will to perform" on the spur of the moment.

Many Christians are like that. When the opportunity to turn the other cheek presents itself, or to go the second mile, or to return blessing for a curse, Christians often try to will themselves to do it. And they usually fail. That is what the Bible calls "will worship" (Col 2:23).

All too often we want to make the right choices at critical points in our daily walk, imitating our Lord Jesus, without first practicing the "hidden" life of Jesus. This only invites spiritual failure. Knowledge of what is right alone cannot bring victory; we must be vitally connected to the Source of Victory. Time spent in the desert with God, drawing strength from his presence, enables the believer to come forth "in the power of the Spirit."

The desert is a frightening place! Alone with God, he unmask our superficiality. Anger and greed begin to show their ugly faces. The more time we spend in the presence of the holy God, the more our own ungodliness is exposed. We see things about ourselves that pass unnoticed in the crush of our

daily schedules. That is a painful experience, but God uses the desert to purify us and makes possible a closer fellowship with him.

What does one do when he/she goes into the desert? The answer is as varied as the needs of the individual who asks the question. Here are a few suggestions which will help any person begin that journey. 1) Using a notebook or journal, write out your spiritual pilgrimage. Explain how you first learned of God and who encouraged you in the mountain peaks and the valleys of God. 2) Fast. 3) Spend an hour in confession. Name people you may have offended. Tell God of the failures that still haunt your memory. Ask God to show you any blind spots in your life. Detail sins of omission and commission. 4) Spend an hour simply praising God. Sing the psalms to your own melody, personalizing the words. 5) Read one of the gospels aloud. 6) Record any insights. 7) Be silent and quiet your spirit in God's presence.

With human nature as it is, we will not routinely go to the desert. There are too many reasons to avoid taking the time. Therefore, we must carefully plan our desert retreats. Whether we choose to do it weekly or monthly or quarterly or by our own spiritual rhythm, we will have to write it in ink in our daytimer so nobody else can take it from us. Then we can say to our friends, relatives, clients, customers, patients, "I'm sorry but that time has already been taken with another appointment and I'm afraid that it cannot be changed." At first that may be hard to say to loved one or a business associate. But the difference it will make in our personal spiritual development cannot be calculated. After a few retreats to the desert, the difficulty of saying "no" to others to spend time with God will evaporate.

To experience the daily power and companionship of our God, we must passionately desire to develop our relationship with him. Information about God cannot be allowed to satisfy us. Our hearts must cry out with the heart of David who said, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Psalm 42:1-2)