

Moses: A Journey Toward God, Part 7: **A Desert Survival Manual**

Intro: “Man vs. Wild”

Do you know who Bear Grylls is? Bear Grylls is an adventurer who served with a special forces unit of the British army, where he was trained as a survival expert (discovery.com). He’s also the star of a reality TV show called “Man vs. Wild.”

As described on the Discovery Channel website, “In each episode of Man vs. Wild Bear strands himself in popular wilderness destinations where tourists often find themselves lost or in danger. As he finds his way back to civilization, he demonstrates local survival techniques, including escaping quicksand in the Moab Desert, navigating dangerous jungle rivers in Costa Rica, crossing ravines in the Alps and surviving sharks off Hawaii.”

What fascinates most viewers are the survival techniques that Bear demonstrates in every show. These techniques are intended to help viewers if they are ever stuck in similar environments.

For example, say Bear is stuck in the middle of a barren wasteland and hungry for food, he may dig under a scraggly bush until he finds a juicy grub at the roots, which he then pops into his mouth like a delicacy!

I remember one particularly charming episode when he was in dire need of water on the African savanna. Yet, there were no obvious sources of water to be found, so he picked up a huge wad of elephant dung and squeezed it until the liquid in it ran into his mouth!

These survival techniques sound gross, but if you were ever stranded in a desert, what would you do to survive?

Most of us will never find ourselves stranded in a literal desert, but all of us at one time or another will experience desert seasons in our life. At those times, it will help to know spiritual survival techniques in order to make it through.

Our Deserts

Last week, Craig talked about the “roundabout ways” of God, how God leads us in a roundabout way through the desert seasons of life.

Today’s sermon is a sequel of sorts. I want to continue to talk about the desert seasons of life. In case you were not here last week, let’s recap what constitutes being in the desert. Basically deserts are those extended periods of time when we find ourselves in very trying, difficult situations of one kind or another. For example...

- Maybe you are in a spiritual desert, a time when you feel disconnected or distant from God.
- Maybe you are in a financial desert, a time when you desperately need God to provide a new job or more income.

- Maybe you are in a relational desert, a time when you need God to repair a damaged relationship or provide more meaningful new relationships.
- Maybe you are in an addiction desert, a time when you need God to provide freedom from that addiction.

Maybe your desert is of another kind. No matter what kind it is, to survive it you will need help until God finally brings you out of it.

Therefore, today I want to present a “Desert Survival Manual” to help us make it through those rough seasons of life.

Four Survival Techniques for the Desert Dweller

As we look at the continuing experiences of the Israelites on their 40-year journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, we will uncover four survival techniques that we can apply to our own situations... four survival techniques for the desert dweller!

The Israelites Grumble Without Faith

Ex. 15: 22 — *“Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. ²³When they came to Marah [maw-raw'], they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) [‘Marah’ means ‘bitter.’] ²⁴So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’”*

This event occurs immediately after God has parted the Red Sea and successfully brought the Israelites through to the other side.

At this point, they have traveled in the desert for three days without finding water. Whether they had brought any water with them is unclear but, in any event, three days is the maximum amount of time the human body can survive without water and not experience serious consequences.

The Israelites are extremely thirsty and legitimately in need of water. Imagine their frustration then when they come to a source of water at Marah only to find they cannot drink it. It would be like dying of thirst on a raft in the middle of the ocean surrounded by undrinkable salt water.

Because of this hardship, the Israelites do something they will do over and over again on their journey... **they grumble and complain!**

Later, after God has provided water for them and they move on, they complain again:

Ex. 16:1 — *“The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. ²In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’”*

In response, God gives them quail and manna to eat.

Still later we read...

Ex. 17:1 — *“The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim [ref-ee-deem'], but there was no water for the people to drink. ²So they quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses replied, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?’ ³But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’”*

Do you see the pattern here? Almost every time the Israelites encounter a hardship in the desert, they grumble about it.

Survival Technique 1: Grumble WITH Faith

So what survival tip can we learn from this? Certainly grumbling against God will not help us survive in the desert. That’s true. But we can learn from what the Israelites did NOT do.

You see, they grumbled WITHOUT faith.

We should grumble WITH faith! What do I mean by that?

Simply this... The Israelites grumbled because they lacked the faith that God would take care of them in the desert. They didn’t trust him.

We, on the other hand, are free to grumble — to complain to God about our situations — but we should always do it with an underlying faith that God WILL take care of us.

God wants us to bring our complaints to him. He wants us to pour out our hearts to him. Believe me, we’re not going to shock God by revealing something he doesn’t already know! As a loving heavenly Father, he wants his children to come to him to tell him how we honestly feel.

Those of you who are parents, don’t you want your children to be willing to come to you and tell you anything? To share with you whatever is on their hearts? Don’t you think God wants the same kind of open communication with us?

Of course, we’re not to do this in the spirit of blaming God for our problems, but in the spirit of telling him how bad things are in order to entreat his help.

How does bringing our complaints before God help us to survive in the desert? Two ways...

For one thing, it’s cathartic to get it all out. It is not healthy to suppress our pain. But, it is healthy to express our pain to God.

Secondly, if our complaining prayers are uttered with faith that God will do something, then God will often act on our behalf in response. God longs to answer any heartfelt prayer uttered in trust that God will respond in the way that is best for us.

The Psalms of David are the best examples of what I'm talking about. In Psalm after Psalm David complained to the Lord. He was brutally honest. Yet, even in his most agony-filled prayers, David invariably ended them with some form of praise, with some form of trust in God's power and righteousness.

For example, look at how David begins Psalm 13...

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me? ²How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

But David ends the Psalm this way...

⁵"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. ⁶I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me."

David expresses himself similarly in many of his Psalms (cf. Ps. 60; 64; 73:13-14, 25-26; 74). In each one, David felt free to grumble and complain to God, but he always grumbled TO God from a place of faith IN God. That is the way we should grumble and complain in our prayers as well.

We'll feel better when we've gotten things off our chest before God. And we'll feel better knowing we've left our complaints with a God who can do something about them.

That is why "grumbling with faith" is an effective survival technique for the desert dweller.

(It's better than eating grubworms, right?!)

The Israelites Forgot God's Past Provision

To discover our next survival technique, let's look at another lesson we can learn from the constant grumbling of the Israelites.

Looking again at Ex. 15:24, we see *"the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What are we to drink?'"*

Now, think about this. Only a short while ago, God miraculously parted the Red Sea, brought all of the Israelites out of 400 years of bondage to Egypt, and destroyed the Egyptians who pursued them.

Not only that, but prior to the exodus, God miraculously brought 10 plagues on the Egyptians as a prelude to setting his people free.

So clearly God has fully demonstrated not only his great power but the lengths to which he will go to protect his people.

And these same people are worried about not having water to drink??? Are they kidding?

As if that's not dumfounding enough, after God graciously provides water for them at both Marah and Elim (as we will see later in the narrative), they then complain about not having anything good to eat.

So God provides quail and manna.

Then, after that, at Rephidim they complain again about not having water to drink!

What is crystal clear in the Israelites' behavior is that they seem to have forgotten God's past provisions for them. They had a bad case of "What have you done for me lately?"

With all he had done for them in the past, you would think they would know better than to complain about the present. You would think they would simply trust God to provide for them again as he always has. You would think they would be more grateful than complaining. You would think.

Survival Technique 2: Remember God's Past Provision

Let's learn from the Israelites' negative behavior how to be positive in ours. That leads us to our second survival technique, which is to remember God's past provision.

Instead of forgetting God's past provision as the Israelites did, let us remember God's past provision when we are facing needs in the present or future.

When we are in the middle of our deserts and have an immediate need for "water" of one kind or another, let's not panic. Let's make a conscious effort to recall how God has come through for us in past desert circumstances.

The reason remembering God's past provision is an effective survival technique is because it gives us HOPE. It gives us a solid hope that God will rescue us again just as he has done before, even though we may not see how he's going to do it this time.

Illustration: Annual Report

As I have mentioned before, in addition to being a pastor, I have a graphic design business. A major source of income for us is provided by the design of annual reports. A few years ago, my business was suffering because we lost three large annual report clients all at once, although for reasons that had nothing to do with our performance. It was due to management changes, organizational decisions, etc., on the client side. In any event, we were in urgent need of work in order to remain solvent as a company.

I shared my company's need during prayer time one night in our home group. Of course, everyone prayed for us but God also worked in another way. One of the women there was married to a top executive at a biopharmaceutical company and she told him of my dilemma. He called me, met with me, and — long story short — put me in touch with another company that hired me to design their annual report! That job was a life saver!

So, now, whenever my business is in need of more work and things start looking grim, I look back on how God provided for me then. That gives me HOPE that he will do so again.

Remembering God's past provision is an effective survival technique for every kind of desert.

(It's better than squeezing elephant dung, right?!)

The Israelites Are Led to an Oasis

To find our next survival technique, let's go back and pick up the narrative in Ex. 15:25...

“Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. ²⁶He said, “If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you.”

²⁷Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.”

Ex. 16: 1 — *“The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin...*

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.’”

In these verses, we see that the Lord twice says he is “testing” the children of Israel through their wilderness experience. In a nutshell, the very reason God led them into the wilderness and kept them there for forty years was to test their trust and obedience (cf. Deut. 8:2). Would the Israelites trust God and remain obedient to him despite their hardships?

Similarly, perhaps the primary reason God places each of us in desert experiences is to test us. It is to stretch us spiritually, to help us develop deeper trust and obedience. Because Craig also addressed this issue of trust last week, I won't elaborate.

Instead, I want to focus on the fact that in the midst of their desert wanderings, God brought the people to an oasis. He brought them to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees — in other words, an abundance of God's provision.

Notice after they left Elim, they went out into the desert again. Elim was not Canaan. It was not their destination. Elim was only a token of God's full provision that was yet to come. There was no “milk and honey” flowing there, but there was plenty of clean, cool water, refreshing shade from the palm trees, and lots of tasty dates!

Elim was a respite in the desert, a place where the children of Israel could finally find some much needed R & R.

Though God brought the Israelites into the desert to test them, he knew they would never make it to Canaan if it was all desert, all the time. He knew they would need occasional rest stops if they were to survive. So out of God's grace, he brought them to various oases along the way.

Survival Technique 3: Enjoy the Oases

This fact points us to our third survival technique...

When we are journeying in the desert, we must be sure to enjoy the oases along the way.

Often in our desert seasons, God provides us with little oases along the way to refresh and fortify us for the journey ahead. The oases for us are God's periodic provisions of grace on the way to his full deliverance from the desert experience.

God provides the oases to encourage us that he will see us through.

Whenever we encounter one of God's oases, we should drink deeply of the water there to replenish us for the stretches of desert that still await us. We should draw on all of the encouragement to be found in our Elims to help us overcome the desert discouragements that still lie before us.

What might these oases look like?

- Say your desert is a lack of full-time employment. God provides the oasis of a temporary job. You're not out of the financial woods, yet — you're not out of the desert, yet — but the temp job certainly helps.
- Say your desert is a damaged relationship. God provides the oasis of a breakthrough conversation. You haven't fully resolved the conflict yet — you're not out of the desert, yet — but at least there is progress.
- Say your desert is a chronic medical condition. God provides the oasis of a treatment that provides some measure of relief. You are still not completely healed, but at least there is a break in the constant discomfort.
- Say your desert is a situation of great emotional pain. God provides the oasis of a thoughtful phone call from a friend who just listens. The dark clouds are not fully gone but they are pierced for a while by a ray of light.

Allow me to give another illustration from my own life:

Illustration: Scripture on my Treo

My design business is currently in another challenging season. As a result, I have been in a desert of anxiety for some time now. One place I have found comfort is in the Psalms. In particular, I was reading Psalm 55 in an electronic Bible on my Treo a couple of weeks ago.

Flash forward to last week...

We have one prospective job that would be great for us but we haven't won it, yet. Last week, I was on my way to a critical presentation to the client and my anxiety was running high.

I was on the local subway line (I live in Manhattan) and reading my emails on my Treo. Suddenly, we arrived at an express station and the express train was waiting across the platform. I turned the Treo off, threw it into my brief case, and dashed across the platform to catch the express.

After I had settled in my seat, still nervous about the meeting I was headed to, I pulled out my Treo to continue reading my emails. You see, typically the last program you are in is the same one that opens up when you restart the device.

I turned on the Treo but to my amazement the email program did not appear. Instead, somehow my electronic Bible had been activated and at the top of the screen was this verse from Psalm 55, which I had not read since the week before:

“Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you.” (Ps. 55:22)

I couldn't believe it! That was exactly what I needed to hear as I headed to that meeting.

Now, I'm not saying it's magic. After all, I had read that same verse on my Treo the week before. But there is no way I should be able to turn on the Treo to find a program that is different than the one that was open when the Treo was last turned off.

Allow me to demonstrate...(show what has to happen to go from the email program to the electronic Bible).

In bringing up that scripture from Ps. 55, God clearly provided an oasis that gave me a burst of encouragement and confidence in the middle of my anxiety desert.

Truly, finding encouragement in the oases that God provides is an effective survival technique for the desert dweller!

The Israelites Are Refreshed by the Wood and the Rock

There is one last technique that we want to uncover in our Desert Survival Manual.

Let's look again at how God answers the Israelites' cry for water on two occasions.

At Marah, the text says that the Lord showed Moses a piece of wood. When Moses threw the wood into the water, the bitter water became sweet.

Why wood? Why didn't God have Moses throw a lizard or a scorpion or some other handy desert thing into the water? What is the significance of it being wood?

I believe the wood is a type of the Cross of Christ, and God placed it in the Old Testament as a foreshadowing of the ministry of Jesus.

When the Cross of Christ is applied to our lives at salvation, it transforms our lives from the bitterness of not knowing Jesus into the sweetness of knowing him.

Later in Exodus, when the people again cry out for water at Rephidim, look how God responds...

Ex. 17:5 — *“The Lord answered Moses, ‘Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ‘I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.’ So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.”*

To quench the people’s thirst, God causes water to gush out of a rock when Moses strikes it with his staff.

Why a rock? Again, like the piece of wood, the rock is a type of Christ. Over and over again in the Old Testament, God is referred to as the Rock our Savior (Deut. 32:15; II Sam. 22:47; Ps. 18:46; Ps. 62:2; Isa. 17:10). And in the New Testament, Jesus is explicitly identified as the Rock in several places (Mt.7:24; Rom. 9:33; I Pet. 2:8).

In particular, I Cor. 10:4 says the Rock in Exodus represented Jesus. Paul writes...

I Cor. 10:1 — *“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea... ‘and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”*

Twice when the Israelites were looking for life-giving water in the desert, they found it in symbols of Christ.

When we need to find life-giving water in our deserts, the ultimate place we will find it is in Jesus himself.

Survival Technique 4: Cling to Christ

Therefore, the fourth and final survival technique for the desert dweller is to cling to Christ. The other three survival techniques are valuable, but none are as essential as this one.

- Yes, with Survival Technique 1, we find relief in the desert when we express our complaints, our pain, to God in prayers of faith.
- Yes, with Survival Technique 2, we find hope in the desert when we remember God’s past provision, his previous mercies.
- Yes, with Survival Technique 3, we find encouragement in the desert in the oases God brings our way.

But ultimately, if we are to survive in the desert seasons of life, we must find strength in God himself.

That requires pressing in to know him more... pursuing greater intimacy with him... digging deeply into his word... making spending time with him in prayer a top priority.

Two Responses to the Desert Experience

Over the years, I have observed that when Christians go through tough times, they tend to respond to God in one of two ways:

Some people respond to the desert experience by walking away from God. They lose faith in his power and goodness. They may even blame him for their difficult situations.

Other Christians draw closer to God in the midst of the desert. They know he is their only hope. Their faith is tested and strengthened. They come to know Christ in ways they otherwise could not.

Drawing closer to God in the desert has been the critical survival technique of many believers:

- In the Bible, this was true of David, who endured the desert of running for his life from Saul. It is clear from the intimate Psalms he wrote during this period that his relationship with God is what saw him through.
- This was true of Job, who endured the desert of losing all he had. Instead of turning away from God, he turned to him to voice his loud complaints. This eventually resulted in Job gaining a much greater understanding of the sovereignty of God.
- In our time, this was true of Corrie ten Boom, who endured the desert of a Nazi concentration camp. She survived by relying on the comfort of Christ and by learning to practice the forgiveness of Jesus.
- This is true of Joni Eareckson Tada, who has endured the desert of life as quadriplegic. Instead of growing bitter, she turned to Christ in her brokenness and has consequently inspired countless other disabled people around the world.

When we are confronted with desert seasons in our life, as all these people were, may our response be the same as theirs.

Clinging to Christ is the most essential survival technique in the entire Desert Survival Manual!