



Many of you know that I spent the first five years of my life after college planting a church in Las Vegas. I've talked about that experience several times before. In Las Vegas I met and married my wife, bought our first home, had our first child, and led a wonderful ministry. For several reasons we decided to move to Los Angeles so that I could finish seminary. We left family, friends and a great church behind. I started school as a full time student and my wife worked part-time for the seminary. We went from a new house in a gated community to a 500 square foot apartment in a poor area of Pasadena. We didn't know anyone, we were broke, had no church, no friends, no family and one mint green 1993 Honda Civic. I had no emails to check, no sermons to write, and no church to lead. We had no idea what we would do and where we would we move after seminary. We were in this middle stage of life between what once was and what will be.¹ We were wandering in the desert. The desert is where life is not as it once was and where the future is uncertain. How many of you know what I'm talking about?

The desert is a familiar place to many of us. It is the where everything normal is interrupted. Where life becomes dry, barren and unsettled. Here are some of the things we hear before entering the desert:

"Your job has been eliminated."

"I don't think I love you anymore."

"The tumor is malignant."

"Mom, Dad, I'm pregnant."

"I'm having second thoughts about the wedding."

"Dad, uh...I'm at the police station."

"Your mother and I are getting a divorce."

"We're moving."

"There has been a terrible accident, meet us at the hospital."

The nation of Israel with Moses at the helm found itself for 40 years in the desert. Israel had been slaves for hundreds of years under the heavy hand of Pharaoh in Egypt. Towards the end of Exodus 2 God says that he's heard the cries of his people and seen their suffering. God raises up an unlikely leader, Moses, who would miraculously lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Canaan, the Promised Land, was a land flowing with milk and honey. It was a great place to relocate and start over new. So, God said to Moses, take my people from **here** (Egypt) to **there** (Canaan), but you know what, there was no mention about the desert. Let me show you on a map what

I'm talking about. What you have here is Egypt on the left, green and luscious, and Canaan on the right, also green and luscious. What's in the middle? Desert.

On there way from Egypt to Canaan, the Israelites would pass through the barren wasteland of the Sinai desert. The Lord provided both water and "bread from heaven." What was the food from heaven called? Manna. It was an interesting substance that fell from the sky in the morning like dew. In Hebrew manna literally meant, "What is it?" The Israelites would gather the "what is it" and it could be baked, boiled, beaten, cooked in pans, and made into cakes. Sounds yummy right? Wrong. God provided manna every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Israel would eat "what is it" every day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Then again for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Do you get the picture? Manna got real old real quick. Israel was sick of manna. They say things don't grow in the desert. That is not true. The desert is fertile ground for complaint. Let's listen to Israel's whining.

The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Num. 11:4–6).

The Desert is Fertile Ground for Complaint

The Israelites who left Egypt were not mature, faith-filled, followers of Yahweh. They were an unruly mob of 2-4 million former slaves who loved to complain and be resentful of Moses' leadership. At this point in time, the Israelites had been in the desert for nearly two years. There were also a group of folks called the "rabble" who were not Jews but traveled with the Israelites through the desert. The rabble began to crave meat and started complaining about it to others. The text says they were "weeping" and "whining" about the food situation. The Israelites picked up on the complaining too. They too were sick of "what is it?" Even though they did not have meat, they did have memories of the good food in Egypt.

What I want you to notice is that they are not just complaining about the cafeteria food, they are rejecting God. They were angry and bitter about their dismal existence in the desert. Exodus 16:4 tells is that manna was a test of Israel's faith. God could have given them any food they wanted, but would they trust God to provide it? Do we trust God to provide? Sadly, Israel would succumb to a spirit of complaint. This soon led to a rejection of God's provision and even his goodness. Unbelievably, they wanted to

go back to Egypt. It only took two years for Israel to forget about the whips, the bricks, the pain, and the injustice. How quickly do we forget God's hand in our own lives? How easy is it to ignore God and take matters into our own hands?

Let's consider our own lives for a moment. If you are in the desert today, what is wearing you out? What is sapping your energy and joy? Maybe you've never complained about food, but what makes you say, "I'm sick of this God!"?

"I'm sick of this living in this apartment! It's too small, I need another place but I just can't afford it."

"I'm sick of this job. I hate my boss. I hate what I am doing. I am sick of coming here day after day and if I could only find another job I'd be happier."

"I'm sick of the doctor every week wondering what is wrong with me and no one seems to know."

"I'm sick of my child rebelling. I'm sick of worrying about where she is, what she is doing, and why she won't listen anymore."

"I'm sick of not being able to lose weight. I eat right, I work out, and I can't lose a pound."

"I am sick of waiting for this depression to lift."

"I am sick of this manna, God!"

Here's where we need to be careful. Have our complaints about manna turned into a rejection of God? It is very possible that our complaints imply, "God, I was better off without you. I was better off in Egypt." Let's check in with Moses and see how he handles the situation.

Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me (verses 10–14).

The Desert is Fertile Ground for an Emotional Collapse

The desert is fertile ground for an emotional collapse. As we pass through the desert, it is important to recognize not only the hardship, but also our reaction to the hardship. It is also forming us. Dealing with drama was nothing new to Moses. The difference here was that Moses was fed up with the grumbling. He's had it. But, he does something right about it. Moses takes their grumbling to the Lord in prayer. What I love about Moses is the authenticity and honesty of his prayer. He doesn't hold any of his frustrations back from God! The Israelites are complaining about God, Moses is praying to God; big difference. But Moses

is frustrated, burned out, and discouraged. And battling discouragement is one of the dangers of the desert. I want you to see how many gut-honest questions Moses asks God—about six of them. If you are in the desert, you tend to ask God lots of questions, especially the question, Why? If you don't think Moses was on the verge of emotional collapse, let's read verse 15.

"If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."

Moses wanted to die. There are many famous meltdowns in the Bible—Job, Jonah, and Elijah are all good examples. But the verse that deeply resonates with me is verse 14. Moses confesses, "***I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me.***" What burden are you carrying in the desert on your own? What pain? What worry? I hear in Moses' voice a mother of preschool kids saying, "I can't do this anymore, my kids are driving me crazy, I need a break." I hear a person who has been looking for a job for over a year about to give up, "I can't carry this burden any longer, how am I going to pay my bills?" I hear the voice of a person battling cancer crying out, "I cannot handle one more round of chemo." But, you know what, I also hear the words of Jesus extending his invitation to us today, "***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest***" (Matt. 11:28). If you are burdened and wandering in the desert you can go at it alone or you can come to Jesus and lay your burden down at his feet. It's your choice.

Please listen to this—our view of God deeply affects whether we will seek him in the desert or not. If your view of God is big, you'll trust him. You'll come to him for rest. If your view of God is small, you won't. You'll muster more will power and try to do it all on your own. Self-sufficiency is a big danger to your relationship with Jesus. How is God going to answer Moses' cry for help? What is God going to do? I believe that how God responds to Israel is exactly how he responds to us when we find ourselves in the desert.

The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone" (verses 16–17).

The Desert is Fertile Ground for God's Provision

They say things don't grow in the desert. That is not true. The desert is fertile ground for God's provision. Moses was worn out and exhausted but God meets Moses in a very special way. He tells Moses to gather 70 men from the elders of Israel. These were men who have proven to be faithful and wise. God says have these men meet me at the tent of meeting, the tabernacle. God then empowers these men in a unique way with the Holy Spirit. By doing this God spreads out the burden of leadership.

God has heard Moses's prayer. God shows his love and concern for him and provides leaders for his work.

I am so grateful that there are elders at CPC who are leading our church together with me. The burden of leadership is spread out among us. I am beyond blessed by our deacons and staff who oversee large areas of ministry. The burden of leadership is spread out among them. I am so grateful for many of you who sacrifice your time, talent and treasure to serve God and his church by volunteering at CPC. The burden of leadership is spread out. The easiest way to kill a church or a ministry is to allow one person or just a small handful of people to do it alone. That has never been God's design for his church. You are the church, the body of Christ. If you only attend here on a Sunday morning, you are missing a big piece of God's plan for your life.

If you are in the desert, please know that God will provide. In fact, God loves to provide for his children. He hears your cries in the desert, he understands the pressure, pain and circumstances you are dealing with there. God allowed his own son, Jesus, to be tempted in the desert for 40 days and yet God took care of him. I don't know what he will provide for you in the desert, but he will. He may provide a friend when you really need someone to bear your burden. He may provide an email or phone call just at the moment you need it. He may provide a financial gift right at the time the bill is due. He may give you that job you've been searching for. Or he may just give you the patience to show up to one more interview. God always provides for his children. It usually just looks a lot different than we expect!

I can't tell you how many times God has provided for me and my family over the years. I can tell you story after story of God's generosity in my life. While I was in seminary God provided for us financially through surprise checks in the mail, speaking engagements and even bags of groceries. It was incredible. Just last night a dear friend watched our kids for free so that Missy and I could go out on a date.

The beauty about the desert is that it helps us to see God's provision. Now that I'm long done with seminary and have a job and can provide for my family, it's really easy to forget that I still need to rely on the Lord. How often in success and abundance do we forget about who it is that gave us those things? The Bible says that every good thing is from our Father. If you are in the desert, know that while you may feel alone, you are never left to fend for yourselves. God is with you. Often times God is with us through the prayers and presence of someone else. That is why we always talk about the importance of community here at CPC. Who are you doing life with? Who is sharing your burden with you? It's dangerous to be a lone-ranger Christian. Let's look next at a sober reality of life in the desert.

"Tell the people: 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The Lord heard you when you wailed, 'If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!' Now the Lord will give you

meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the Lord, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'"

But Moses said, "Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!' Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?"

The Lord answered Moses, "Is the Lord's arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you" (verses 18–23).

The Desert is Fertile Ground for God's Discipline

God tells Moses that he will not only provide leaders but he will provide meat for a whole month. Moses, thinking practically about this wonders how in the world God is going to do that in the barren wasteland where nothing lives or grows. Not to mention there are a few million people to feed. In his finite thinking, they'd have to find and slaughter herds of animals for meat and they are way too far from the sea for fish. Just imagine throwing a church potluck with 2 million people and there is no Costco. In Moses' mind it's impossible.

The Lord sees Moses' weak faith and asks him a deeply probing question, "Is the Lord's arm too short?" This was a challenging question aimed at Moses' unbelief. Israel's wandering in the desert was all about teaching them to trust God. Trusting in God's promises is the key to growth in the desert. God has rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, parted the Red Sea, provided water and food, protected them from other nations, provided additional leaders, and is bringing them to the verge of the Promised Land. Is the arm of the Lord too short? If you are in the desert, that is a great question to chew on today. If God can do all that for Israel, why wouldn't he help you? Let's read what God does next.

Now a wind went out from the Lord and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction. All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. Then they spread them out all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague (verses 31–33).

This was the mother of all quail migrations! Quail covered the land in every direction as far as the eye could see up to 3 feet tall! Can you imagine that? The people went nuts and grabbed loads of quail for themselves. Fires were instantly ignited and the smell of cooked quail waffled through the air like Daly City fog. But this was a spoiled meal. While the taste of quail was hitting their lips, God's discipline was unleashed and a great plague killed many of the people. Why would God do this?

When I played football in high school, I hated getting ready for the season because of the two-a-day practices in the heat of August. We'd practice in the morning and the evening. It was exhausting, not to mention our coach thrived on discipline. When we got out of line or didn't perform well, we had to run "lines". That's where you started in the end zone and ran to each 10 yard marker and back. There was always someone throwing up on the sidelines! At the time, I hated the training, but without it, I wouldn't survive the fourth quarter of a football game. I needed to get back into shape. But it was painful. It was hard.

Good discipline inflicts pain in order to save or rescue something. Hebrews 12:10 tells us, *"For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness."* God loves us and knows what's best for us. His goal for your life is to make you holy, not happy. Do you agree with that? If holiness is the goal, then his discipline is for our good. Israel was about to enter a land contaminated with pagan worship and idolatry. They were going to have to drive out those who occupied the land. This would take incredible courage, faith and obedience. God wanted them set apart. The desert was their training ground for the Promised Land. God not only provided for Israel, he also disciplined them for their good. In this case, God's discipline came in the form of something they wanted, but it turned out to be a spoiled meal.

Has God ever answered your prayer only to find out that the meal was spoiled? Israel got the meat they wanted but it was a spoiled meal. One of the marks of spiritual maturity and emotional health is the ability to suffer without making the people around you suffer too. Maybe, the job you now have was an answer to prayer, but because of what you went through to get the job, the meal is spoiled. You complained about being out of work, you moaned about it, and made everyone around you miserable. God answered your prayers, but the meal is spoiled.

Maybe you are finally in the home of your dreams. You got sick and tired of living in a condo. You made some changes, tweaked a few things, drained an account, borrowed from a family member and finally got the home. You now find yourself stretched way too far financially; you're house poor; the meal is spoiled.

Maybe you were tired of being single. Most of your friends are married, you really want kids and you're tired of living alone. So, you ignore your standards, begin dating someone who doesn't love Jesus, and you find yourself in a less than ideal situation. You got the meal you wanted, but it's spoiled.

If we are not careful that is exactly what happens in the desert. God will sometimes give us what we demand and in his love he

allows us to deal with the consequences that come. He's still in control. He sees the bigger picture. His discipline is for our good. And, hopefully, we learn from our mistakes, grow and at some point, we see God's discipline as his grace. I want you to know one last thing about the desert.

The Desert is Fertile Ground for Faith to Grow

If you work out and exercise, it's because you believe that momentary pain is worth the long run health benefits. God loves us enough to bring us discomfort to rescue us from the attitudes, traits, and habits that will derail our growth and his work in our lives. The desert can be a really hard place to be, but it is also fertile ground for our faith to grow. Here's the truth—God is always at work in the desert. Our faith can thrive in the desert but it can also shrivel up and die but only if we let it. I believe that it is possible to have a strong faith and be at your best when things are at their worst. It is possible for the best version of you to emerge while you are passing through a season of disappointment, chaos or pain. If you've been in the desert before, I bet you can now look back and see how it was the one thing God used to grow your faith.

I can look back on my family's time in seminary with great joy. We got involved in a wonderful church and that was really good for us. We needed a place to just be. We made life long friends in Pasadena. Since I was not working, I got to spend quality time with my son and learn how to be a dad. Missy and I spent a lot of time together because we couldn't afford cable! Our marriage was strengthened and we even got pregnant with our daughter! Our faith was stretched too as we learned to trust God with our future. It was in the desert where we made the decision to come to CPC just weeks before I was going to graduate. Until that point, we had no idea where we were going. The desert was a time of trust and faith building for us.

While none of us are willing sign up for the desert, the truth is that it is fertile ground for faith to grow. In fact it is the perfect climate for transformational growth. It's God's greenhouse. If you are in the desert or going into it or coming out of it, know that God is up to something good. Ask the Lord to give you faith to trust him more.

¹ Many of the insights and main points were taken from Jeff Manion's sermon given at the Global Leadership Summit on August 5, 2010, and from his book, *The Land Between*.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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