

## LESSONS IN THE DESERT

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One of my very favorite passages of scripture is one that I have the most difficult time appropriating in my life. I'd like to say to you that the scripture I'm going to preach to you this morning I have learned the lesson one hundred percent well. I have passed the test and I'm now beyond learning anything more from it. But it is one of those kind of scriptures that constantly confronts me in life and challenges me and makes me realize that in this scripture I am at the feet of Jesus as a learner. I have not let arrived.

I think that preachers tend to focus on what their own needs are. I struggle with implementing this text in my own life. It's from Romans 5:3-5 "Not only so but we rejoice in our sufferings [Who really does that? Get serious!] because we know that sufferings produces perseverance, perseverance character and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us."

I've entitled this message "Lessons in the Desert" because there are desert seasons in our life. Sometimes they last a few days, other times a few weeks. Sometimes months, sometimes years. Maybe on occasion, decades.

What is God doing in those desert seasons in our life? This is a verse for a desert season. To illustrate this text today I want to use a missionary illustration. Although this is not a mission sermon per se. But it's meant to be a pastoral sermon of encouragement.

Just seven weeks ago today I had the privilege of representing the USA General Council Assemblies of God at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a church. The Lord has given us wonderful growth over these 83 years and allowed our church to grow in 147 countries. Conservatively we're about thirty million. More realistically we're probably at about forty million believers now world wide. The church there is a church of nine million people in attendance.

I had researched the history of that church as to what had gone into the background of making that church what it is today, a believing church of four hundred thousand adult members in a country of nine million. When I say adult members I mean people who are fiercely committed to Jesus Christ. One of the phenomenal things that happened all that week was the Muslim radio was on the air constantly saying, "If you want to know God, go out to the mountain where the Christians are meeting and you will find him." You talk about an incredible break through! It was a time of celebrating. But the church had never gotten to that day except some things that happened in the long history of its 75 years. It's that history I want to dip into a couple illustrations today to illustrate the scripture about lessons in the desert.

The first lesson of the desert is that in every desert place in your life there will be suffering. It wouldn't be a desert if it didn't have suffering. The very idea of desert is dryness, lack of rain, difficulty of fertility, of any grass green and lush appearing.

As western Christians we would like to avoid this. We would like to avoid desert places. We would like to snap our finger and say, God, change those circumstances. Many times in his grace he does. Other times he lets us be in the desert for a period of time.

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Our work there began in suffering. The first contingent of missionaries arrived in 1921. Just five of them. They did not know the language. They had few resources. There were almost no believers in the country. There were no Bible schools. No church schools like there are to day.

But when God is in something he'll always give you something that's way over your head to do. It was way over their head. Not only was the challenge so great but the fact that they faced tropical diseases, especially malaria. Three years after the first contingent of missionaries in 1924 the a young couple by the name of Eric and Lucille Booth left the shores of America for missionary service in Upper Volta. Eric Both was the grandson of General William Booth who founded the Salvation Army. He had come into the Pentecostal experience, felt the call of God, was being sent out by this fledgling group called the Assemblies of God only ten years into its existence. He arrived with his wife Lucille, their little daughter, Lucille was expecting a second child. Within two weeks after arriving he fell ill with malaria, dysentery and one week later died.

His wife writes a letter home. She's a young widow now in her twenties with a child on the way and a little girl. It was a desert place of suffering. She described the funeral in this fashion. "Brother Taylor [he was one of the early contingent of missionaries there] and I sang 'O Love that will not let me go.' And 'Sweet Will of God.' Brother Taylor told the people how Eric laid down his life because he loved them and wanted them to know about God. Then Brother Taylor talked to them about Jesus' love. He prayed and then placed the top on the coffin and hammered in the nails. The Upper Volta believers lifted the coffin onto a crude cart and the chapel bell tolled as we started toward the cemetery. At the cemetery Brother Taylor read some scripture and then prayed. As the believers lowered the box into the grave all I had left of my precious Eric was his sweet memory, his pictures, and his babies. He was an adorable husband. An ideal, loving, considerate Christ-like husband and I felt I could not live without him. But God will give me grace. I call to mine words written by Eric to his mother shortly before his departure from the United States. 'And now as we turn to Africa I know how hard it will be for us to part. But our Lord bade us occupy until he come and we are obeying his command without reasoning until our work is done.'" Then his widow Lucille adds these powerful words "Oh for more of that implicit trust, that exquisite faith. What a difference it would make for Africa and for every other land if those called, responded joyfully without reasoning or questioning until their work was done."

He had fallen asleep at the age of 29.

My first act when I came there was to visit the cemetery where he lies buried and other of our missionaries and their families are buried in that country. His marker reads "Faithful until death."

As I preached to a hundred thousand that day I told this very story I'm telling you. I said the presence of this church today, the powerful work that God has done in this country if Eric and Lucille could be here today they would say that every sacrifice they invested in this country was worth it because of the harvest that it produced.

You'll find in your life if God is going to do any significant work in your life at all it will be done partly through the crucible of pain. Whether it's emotional or physical or spiritual. It will be done through the crucible of pain.

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The thing that we are most tempted to do when we hit suffering is to check out of the process. And immediately run for something that will drown the hurt. I stood at the gravesite and I looked at the other graves that were there and I told the national church that day, these people's sacrifice is the bedrock of what God has done in this country.

I looked at a little grave marker, a child who had died before she could turn two years of age. Next to her was her mother, died at the age of 31 of typhoid fever. All the family had it. Her husband came to three weeks after his wife had died. On the way back home, he and their little son, their ship was torpedoed by a Uboat. They would spend ten days on a life raft. It was an incredible end to a first term of missionary service.

And the church there is aware of the price that was paid for the gospel to come to them.

Our first reaction to suffering is not to rejoice. Mine isn't. I do not rejoice in suffering. Therefore I've had to go back and look at this scripture and recognize there is something very important about the grammar. There is no period after the word "suffering." If there were we could write that scripture off as written by a masochist. Somebody who took pleasure out of being pained. I am not a masochist.

But it is not a period, it is a comma. In every desert place there will be suffering. But the suffering becomes perseverance. That's the second point of this message. I'm going to collapse my second and third points together with an illustration. Perseverance. I don't know how many times as pastors I talk about that word "perseverance." To abide underneath. It's like carrying a heavy load on your back. God will either remove that load or give you strength to carry it. miracle is when God removes the load. Maturity is when God gives you the strength to carry it.

In this church God did some phenomenal miracles of healing and grace and breakthrough with evangelism and exorcism. But there's also the incredible stories in whom perseverance, staying power, not running, was developed.

We live in a culture that is very ego centered, very narcissistic. It's emphasis is self fulfillment. It's at absolute odds with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Which is not into self fulfillment but into self denial. Which is not into me first but into Jesus first. The temptation of suffering is to try to do something quick to escape it. But staying with it, wrestling with it, develops staying power in our life.

That brings into focus a third quality that as we stay underneath the load and God gives us strength to wrestle through this pain, character is produced.

I've watched that in many of your lives as pastor because I've been with you in moments of grief, moments of heartache. I have seen over the course of time the suffering produces the staying power and the staying power produces the character. It's not so with all people. Some people check out of the process and become bitter and their character becomes corroded.

But to those who are determined to follow Jesus and not get hung up on the why questions, but instead ask he what now questions. God is with you. Something wonderful begins to transform and happen in your life into a better person. Sure we'd be glad if what happened to you never happened to you to begin with. But since it happened God has been at work in the process and you're sweeter today and maturer today and better today and more Christ-like today and kinder

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today and gentler today and more forgiving today than you were before the suffering ever occurred.

In 1937 my uncle and aunt, Paul and Virginia Wideman, came to that church as missionaries to the predominant people group of that country. They had two little boys. Paul Jr and John. Paul Jr was in the country a year and had already learned the language so fluently that he was interpreting for his preacher dad. My uncle Paul would preach in English and Paul Jr would fluently translate his dad's sermons. On February 5, 1938 Paul Jr became suddenly ill with blackwater fever and died three days later. I've been at his gravesite. I had not known the content of a letter my aunt had sent home which I found about two weeks before I left for Africa this last time. This is what she writes, "Saturday afternoon he [Paul Jr] lay in his bed and sang with all of his heart in their language. Then he preached, in delirium, saying do not follow Satan's road but follow God's road for it alone leads to heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord. A short time extreme pain started. How we called upon God for deliverance, yet he gave us grace to say, not my will but thine be done. What a ray of sunshine he has been in our home. Only God can fill the vacancy in times like this we are made to know our redeemer liveth."

Virginia had brought to Africa with her a Japanese silk kimono which she had never worn and she couldn't figure out in this windy dirt filled place why she had brought this totally useless silk garment. Until she looked at the wooden box, her husband uncle Paul had made as the coffin for Paul Jr. She realized that she had brought it so it would be the lining to the casket.

I told this story as I preached to that crowd that day. I said I wish my cousin could have lived because I'd want him to be the one preaching the sermon. But since he's with the Lord, I'm privileged to stand here in his stead and complete the sermon he began in his delirium, the last sermon he preached which was to follow the Jesus road. I think that Paul Jr is absolutely ecstatic in heaven for the good end of his story.

After little Paul, Jr died, Uncle Paul became ill from malaria-dysentery. It lasted about a year. He was in the middle of a high fever and one Africa rainy winter night their mud hut, the roof collapsed on them there was so much rain. Literally fell in on them. Virginia, expecting another child, gathered her sick husband and my little cousin Johnny, got them in a car and drove them north. Then she became ill. The doctor said she'd lose the child if she didn't go to bed. So for the last months of her pregnancy she went to bed. Two weeks before the baby was to be born the French government collapse and the Germans occupied Upper Volta. In one year's time five incredible things had happened to them. They'd lost their son, Uncle Paul had fought malaria-dysentery, their roof had literally fallen in on them, a difficult pregnancy and the government had collapsed.

They didn't know if they were going to have boy or girl. All they had left was their faith. They had a girl and called her Faith. Her and her husband are missionaries today.

But the key to that story is that after all of these things Uncle Paul got better and in his bedroom, one day he knelt by his bed and he prayed this prayer, "Oh God, give me strength, one more time." And God gave him strength, perseverance. He didn't get a bitter character. They went back to where their boy had died, where their roof had fallen in and established a church.

Forty years later before Uncle Paul and Aunt Virginia went to be with the Lord one of the last things they did in their life was to revisit the country. One of their old colleagues was coming in

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from the field with a short handled hoe and saw them by the church. He was so overjoyed. He knew their story. He had been one of their early converts. He ran to them and in typical Africa fashion my uncle and he embraced one another and danced and singed and cried and laughed. Finally the old pastor with tears streaming down his face looked at my uncle Paul and said, "Oh, missionary it was worth it all. There are now churches everywhere. It was not in vein."

Incredible as it seems our deserts can be an oasis of God's presence. Out of the hardship God can produce an incredible fruitfulness if we will not run from the process.

There's a wonderful phrase in Psalm 84 that says "Passing through the valley of Baca [Baca means a tree or shrub that is a desert plant] make it a well. Blessed are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage." Those whose hearts are set on endurance. And character development.

My uncle loved to tell the story of the young convert who came and gave his life to the Lord. The new convert after the service would be invited to come for follow up. In those days they didn't have the Bible. In fact it was the Assemblies of God missionaries because of the death of Eric Booth, leaped into missionary service. They said the young couple has fallen. There needs to be people to take his place. And God supplied people to takes his place just like he did in the death of Jim Elliott and the martyrs of the Auca Indians. For every death like that, God uses other people to spring in and take up the slack. Some had the burden to give the people the Bible in their language. The only problem is the language had never been reduced to writing. So they reduced it to writing. Then translated the Bible then taught the people to read it.

But in those early days, this new convert had come and they would give a new convert one scripture. It was the responsibility of the convert that week to try to learn to read it and to memorize it. The first was Acts 15:16 "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Believers learned that verse all week long. The second week they'd come back and get a second sheet and so on.

But this young man did not come back the second week. He did not come back the third, the fourth. He disappeared. Months went by and nobody knew where he was. Then he showed up again in the service. In the testimony time he stood up and he said, that he'd been gone for these many months but the Lord had wonderfully kept him and blessed him and he had maintained his relationship with the Lord. A deacon got a hold of him after the service, How could you stay saved all that time you were back in the bush? You didn't have a missionary, you didn't have a church, you didn't have other Christians around you. You didn't even have a Bible." The young man looked at him. "I did have a Bible," he reached into his pocket and pulled out his first sheet which he thought was the Bible. All the Bible in one verse. He said to the deacon, "This is the word of God, isn't it? When I would get discouraged I would pray, 'Jesus, save me from discouragement,' and he did. When I got sick and my family was suffering I prayed, 'Jesus, save me from sickness. Save my family.' Every temptation, every trial, every oppression I would pray, 'Jesus save me,' and he did. Jesus kept saving me and saving me and that's why I'm still saved."

That's true of the scripture as we hold it in our hearts. It wonderfully impacts and develops our character.

Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character. And character then metamorphosizes into hope. It's a four step process. That's why Paul at the beginning can say

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we rejoice in our suffering. He knows as a veteran Christian, he knows where suffering is going if you will stay close to the Lord and let the Holy Spirit transform your life, the suffering will develop staying power in you. The staying power will develop the kind of person you are. The character you are. You'll become like Christ. You'll be able to say, Father forgive them for they know not what they do even though they deliberately knew what they were doing. It'll keep you tender. It'll keep you from being brittle and harsh and selfish. Many people as they get older are so into rehearsing their hurts. There are people you don't want to be around because you know when you're around them they're just going to dump a ton of misery on you. And you're going to need to take a spiritual shower after you're been with them for ten minutes. God doesn't want that in our lives.

The last step in the process is hope. That's why this whole experience for me was such a high in my life. I had a chance to look through 75 years of what God was doing in the lives of many people as he was building a great church in a country of 9 million. There are more people in the Assembly of God church there than all of the other Protestant churches in the country. In fact more than twice as many. God has done a special work in that country. They're expecting to grow from 400,000 adult believers to a million in the next 6 years. It's incredible what God is doing there.

Twenty five years ago they had 25,000. Twenty five years later – 400,000. As I ministered on that occasion I kept saying to myself I wish those early pioneers could be here to see this. To see what all their suffering led to. What it all produced. But as it happened, so many times in desert places you may never see the ultimate good of what is produced because the fruitfulness will outlast your life span. It's an incredible thing about staying true to the Lord. We would like to have a neatly tied up life, a present wonderfully wrapped. But there are many loose ends of life. Sometimes people leave life and there are loose ends. But there are no loose ends in God's eternity. He ties all the bows.

I think the most moving experience for me of those 4 days of celebration was on Friday afternoon. Daytime services there were smaller crowds – 25,000. It was morning, noon and night. The general superintendent I think was afraid that some of us Americans were going to check out of the hot afternoon service. There was no air conditioning. We were out in the sun under straw thatch and the temperatures were well over 100 degrees. He said, "I want to make sure you're here this afternoon because we're going to pay special tribute to all the missionaries who have ever served here."

The thanksgiving, the profusion of gratitude was embarrassing. It was so heart felt, so moving. I wish I could have transported every American Christian to that scene to let them know the end of praying for missions and giving to missions. No one would have ever been laxidassical about missions again if you could have seen with your own eyes what happens when we obey the Great Commission. In fact the Assemblies of God was only 7 years of age in the US when we sent our first missionaries there. There were perhaps some people back then that said we're so small. What can we do? We need to use the money here. Why should we be concerned about the world? I've heard all those kind of things. But thank God we have people who are filled with the Spirit who didn't treat missions as an either/or. They said we can minister to our own country but we've got to obey the great commission and go to the ends of the world as well.

The great thing the devil wants to do is make us think we only have one talent so you don't have much to do so don't spend it. Whatever you do don't spend the one talent you have. It won't

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account for anything. But in a Spirit filled church and a Spirit filled life there's faith to believe that a little bit of seed will grow a great big harvest.

Anyway the Friday afternoon comes. There is an outpouring of thanksgiving. John Power the superintendent told how the missionaries came in spite of mosquitoes, snakes, and lions and sickness. And over and over again he said because they came we're here. The high point of the service for me was when an old man, probably in his late 70s, followed by an elderly lady also probably in her late 70s, each sang a solos. My cousin Johnny Wideman. He knows the language fluently. He's giving me a verbatim translation of what they are singing. I have the content. I can't imitate their tune or the music they use. What they did in their two songs which were their own creations, wonderful Africa folksong, with a jubilant wail in it was name the name of every missionary who had ever come and served. Calling special attention to all of those who had laid down their lives in that country. On and on the roll call went.

When that song was sung it somehow transformed all the tears that had been shed in that country. When you are a Christian your sufferings are going somewhere. They are not dead end streets. There will come a day whether in this life or in eternity when we'll all look back and sing a song of sweetness and joy because we found that God was present in our desert places. When we didn't have the strength to walk another step he gave us strength to walk that next step. He gave us strength to connect the whole process. Instead of the suffering derailing us and demoralizing us and destroying us, God transformed the suffering into endurance. And endurance produced a kind of character that bears witness to Jesus Christ in our life. The end result of all of that is hope. Hope. And a bright future because Jesus is with us.

Therefore we can say the whole thing. We rejoice in our sufferings. Why? Because suffering produces perseverance and perseverance character and character hope and when it's all said and done we're not disappointed.

Lord, thank you. Thank you for bearing witness to us through your word and through the experience of this marvelous church in Africa. Encourage those who are in desert places today with your word and with your spirit...

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