

Streams in the Desert

by Mark Greening

God's promise to reveal Himself and sustain us in the desert, even in the midst of trials and difficulties.

Duration: 37:25

Scripture: Deuteronomy 29:4, Isaiah 43:1-2, Isaiah 43:18-19, Philippians 4:19, 2 Timothy 3:16

Topics: "Holy Spirit"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the different types of deserts that Christians may go through in their lives. These include deserts of bitter loss, insecurity, and alienation from God. The preacher emphasizes that God is always faithful to provide for His children's needs, even in the midst of these deserts. He encourages the congregation to trust in God's provision and to perceive the new things that God is doing in their lives. The sermon is based on passages from Isaiah and Deuteronomy, highlighting God's ability to sustain and guide His people through difficult times.

Transcript

Surely as sparks fly upward. Jesus said in John 16 33, in this world you shall have tribulation. Sometimes that seems like an understatement.

If you've been a Christian for any length of time you know these statements are true. If you are here this morning and you're saying yourself, you know I haven't really gone through that much trouble in my life, then be encouraged, it will come. You may have heard that old saying that goes, Christians are like tea bags, they're not much good until they've been through hot water.

And the Lord is not only more than willing to put us through hot water, He also puts us through the fire to purify us as gold. People describe trials in many different ways but perhaps the best illustration of our feelings and thoughts in the midst of these difficulties is the description of a desert experience. Like the Israelites, every Christian is led into a desert to be tested and taught by the Lord and not just once in our lifetimes but many times.

As we learn and as we will learn from Scripture this morning, it's in the midst of these desert experiences that God reveals Himself and sustains us with streams of living water and He shows us the way out. This morning I'd like to speak on the topic streams in the desert and I want to read a parallel passage to the one published in the Bulletin from Isaiah 35. I'd like us to look at Isaiah 43 verse 1. If you have your Bibles turn to Isaiah chapter 43, we'll be reading verses 1 and 2 and then verses 18 and 19 to continue the flow

of that thought.

Isaiah 43 verse 1. But now this is what the Lord says, He who created you, O Jacob, He who forms you, O Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.

The flames will not set you ablaze. Then verse 18, forget the former things, do not dwell on the past, see I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up, do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

There are various types of deserts that a Christian can go through. Three of the most common deserts I notice in Scripture are deserts of bitterness and loss, deserts of insecurity often tied in with finances, financial insecurity, and deserts of alienation from God. If any of you have been through one of those, I don't even need to explain what that feels like already, the Holy Spirit has touched a chord in your heart.

But all three of these deserts describe and are described for us in Scripture through various stories in the Old Testament and New Testament and specifically through the lives of the saints as they experience these difficulties. We have the story of Naomi and Ruth who epitomized the desert of bitterness and loss. We have a clear example of a desert of insecurity in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath.

And we have a wonderful example, not so much wonderful, wonderful in terms of the end result, but a wonderful example of what it's like to be alienated from God and then restored to God in the life of Job. Now this morning, for sake of time, we're going to be looking at only the first two deserts of bitterness and insecurity, and Lord willing we'll touch on Job's desert experience at some other point, but this morning we just want to look at these two stories in the Old Testament. But regardless of what desert you have gone through, and for those of you who are younger, regardless of what desert you will go through, and you will go through what I'm preaching on this morning, in one way or another, at one point in your lives, we will all go through these for that is God's plan for us.

And so to be forewarned, I trust, will be to be forearmed, and I trust that the Holy Spirit will apply this to our hearts regardless of our situations and past experiences. But regardless of the desert that we go through, God's promise to you and me is found in verse 18 of Isaiah 43, forget the former things, do not dwell on the past, see I am doing a new thing, now it springs up, do not perceive it, I'm making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. Now for some of us this morning, this may be an encouragement, this verse, but for others it's an exegetical stumbling block.

In other words, how are we to interpret this? Because there's quite a movement in churches these days that would discourage the reading and applying of Old Testament truths written to Israel to us as Christians today. And some people say, well that was written to them, therefore we can't apply it to us today. I was talking to someone just a few weeks ago and talking about a promise that my mother found in Isaiah, and this person turned to me and said, can she really apply that promise to her life today? The main question we should be asking ourselves is not to whom was this passage written, but how does it apply to us in our experiences today? In other words, if the principles of these passages that we read this morning are applicable and taught in the New Testament, then they apply to us regardless of when they were written.

And then as Jesus said, let him who has ears to hear, let him hear. In 2nd Timothy 3.16 we read all Scripture and Paul's talking to Timothy about the Old Testament, and obviously the New as it was being written, but all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. Now that we've gotten that theological house cleaning issue out of the way, let's look into our passage.

I want us to take a look at the examples of Naomi and Ruth, because in that story we have an example of what a desert of bitterness and loss looks and feels like for a Christian. You don't have to turn there, but I will read for you. In Ruth 1.1 we pick up the story.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and where there's a famine, there's not a desert far behind. There was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem and Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi, which means sweetness or pleasantness.

And the names of his two sons were Malan and Kilian. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women.

One was named Orpah, and the other Ruth. And after they had lived there about ten years, and ten is significant here, we'll talk about this in a moment. Both Malan and Kilian also died, and Naomi, whose name means sweetness, was left without her two sons and her husband.

Now this is a desert of bitter loss, a desert of crushing despair, of hopelessness and helplessness. And all of this took place to this woman whose name was sweetness and pleasantness, over a time period of ten years. And I want to pause on this point, because the number ten is very significant in the Scriptures.

Very often the number ten is related and refers to a time of testing in a believer's life. You'll remember that God gave His promise to Abraham that he would have a son, but in Genesis 16, 3, after ten years of testing Abraham's faith, that he would have a son. Ten years of testing in the desert.

Sarai gave Hagar to Abraham as his wife, and the consequences are still being felt today to that sin. We read that for ten years, Elisha poured water on the hands of Elijah. He was a water boy.

For ten years, this man of God, who was later to become one of the most powerful prophets, performing the most miracles of any of the Old Testament prophets, with a double portion of God's Spirit, all he did, he was sidelined for ten years as a test, pouring water and washing Elijah's hands and feet. Daniel asked for vegetables for ten days to improve his health and his mind and his countenance before going before the King. In Jesus' parable, ten virgins were tested.

Five passed and five failed. Jesus healed the ten lepers to test which one of them would come back to thank Him. The disciples had to wait and pray ten days in Jerusalem before the power of the Holy Spirit was put out on them.

And so ten is a time of testing in Scripture, and the reason I bring this up is that in our times of desert that we are either in today or will be in on an ongoing basis as God sees fit, that these times of testing can be long and drawn out. You know, when we first become Christians, often God will hand out ten-minute tests, ten-minute temptations. But the older we get, the longer these tests and trials go, even so much as ten years of desert sometimes.

I recall one desert experience in my life that lasted ten years almost to the day, and I remember it. I'll never forget that, before Lord taught me what He had for me to learn in that ten years of dryness in my life. We pick up the story in verse 6, and when she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

With her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you as you have shown to your dead and to me.

May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. Then she kissed them and they wept aloud. And in verse 13, we pick it up, Naomi said to them, it is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me.

At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. Look, said Naomi, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods go back with her.

But Ruth replied, don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women exclaimed, can this be Naomi? Sweetness and pleasantness.

In verse 20, we read, don't call me Naomi, she told them, call me Marah, which in the Hebrew means bitter. Call me Marah because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. Here is one expression, an example of a desert of bitterness and loss.

And I'm sure Naomi second-guessed her decisions a thousand times. Should we ever have left Israel? Was it right for us to not dissuade our sons from marrying the women, the Moabite women they did? Did God take my husband and my sons from me because of a lack of faith or disobedience to God somewhere in my life? And if this is God's judgment against me and us, then what hope is there of ever being restored and blessed again? Folks, she was thinking those things just as you and I have thought those things in times past. And for all sakes and purposes like Naomi, we find ourselves in a desert of bitterness, sometimes hopeless and helpless to change our situation.

But behind the scenes, unperceived by Naomi and Ruth, God was making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland for these two faithful women. The story continues to unravel and Ruth, in order to provide for herself and her mother-in-law, goes by chance to the field of Boaz to pick up leftover barley behind the harvesters. They felt compassion.

They saw her and they would drop some barley so she could have enough to eat that night. To make a long story short, Boaz, a kinsman redeemer of the family, notices Ruth with the help of her mother-in-law. Things haven't changed much today because mothers and mothers-in-law often play an integral role in matchmaking.

So Naomi told Ruth how to play it. She played it right. Boaz took notice and we pick up the story in chapter 4 verse 13.

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her and the Lord enabled her to conceive and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi, praise be to the Lord who this day has not left you without a kinsman redeemer, may become famous throughout Israel.

He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age for your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons has given birth to him. Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap and cared for him and the women living there said Naomi has a son and they named him Obed and he was the father of Jesse, the father of David and I might add and through this lineage came Joseph the husband of Mary, the mother of Christ. That which began as a great loss became one of the greatest love stories in the Bible.

From loss to love, from bitterness to bliss, from desert to delight. Many of us have gone through similar distressful situations this morning and from an outsider's perspective life and love have dealt you a bad hand. Like Naomi your grief and anguish has been great and you've even quoted her words in verse 13 it is more bitter for me than you because the Lord's hand has gone out against me.

Yet in the midst of our affliction God is at work behind the scenes and as verse 19 of Isaiah 43 says he is doing a new thing and he asks you this morning do you not perceive it? You may say this morning Mark I've lost someone in my life but the Lord never replaced them like he did for Ruth. This being the case then the Lord has something else for you. See he didn't replace someone for Naomi he did replace someone for Ruth.

I remember when my father walked out on us as a family and my mother came to grips with and perceived that God was going to do a new thing in her life and in our lives. She didn't know what but she trusted God's promise. She trusted that in the midst of her desert in the midst of her feelings of betrayal and rejection and abandonment in the midst of her dilemma as to how to provide for three children and raise them that God opened her eyes to see streams in the desert and to find that living water who was Christ himself and he showed her in time a way out.

It was during that time that God applied Isaiah 54 5 to her life. For your maker is your husband the Lord Almighty is his name the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer. He is called the God of all the earth.

The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife distressed and deserted in spirit. A wife who married young only to be rejected says you're God. For a brief moment I abandoned you but with deep compassion I will bring you back.

You ever considered that God can take the role of a spouse in your life? You say I'm already married. Sometimes we need God to take the role of a spouse in our life regardless. You ever considered that he can take the role of a parent on behalf of your children? Continuing on in Isaiah 54 the Holy Spirit again promised my mother.

She says I don't know how to raise these children. In Isaiah 54 13 God said to her all your sons will be taught by the Lord and great will be your children's peace. The Lord honored these promises to my mother and he kept and taught her three children through such a tumultuous upbringing and circumstances and God will do the same for you if you find yourself in this desert this morning.

If only you will trust in him and by faith perceive that he is doing a new thing. Some of the deserts we go through as Christians are deserts of bitter loss. But there's another desert that we go through as Christians and that can be the desert of insecurity often tied in with finances and how are we going to get through all of this? Originally I wanted to call this the desert of loss of provision but as Christians there's no such thing as God not supplying our needs.

He may take us down to the wire. He will test our faith. He will raise someone or something up at the last minute to meet our needs for scripture says my God shall supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

God will always provide for our basic needs not our wants but our needs. Nevertheless we have or will be going through or are going through deserts of insecurity. That sense of helplessness and hopelessness and wondering if God truly will supply for our needs in this life.

And our example is drawn from the life of Elijah and a widow of Zarephath. This is interesting because it's a double lesson both to Elijah and this poor woman. Scripture says that iron sharpens iron and so Elijah had to first learn from the hand of God the lesson that he would teach the widow of Zarephath through him.

In 1st Kings 17.1 we read the story. Now Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe and Gilead said to Ahab, as the Lord the God of Israel lives whom I serve there will neither be dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word. I would imagine as he as those words rolled off his tongue to the king he probably realized he was going to be the first one to feel the pinch of that prophecy.

You see prophets weren't known to be. Prophet was not spelled P-R-O-F-I-T in those days. You live from hand to mouth believe me.

And he realizes he said that he was the first one that was going to feel it. Verse 2 then the word of the Lord came to Elijah leave here turn eastward and hide in the Kareth ravine east of the Jordan you will drink from the brook and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there. So he did what the Lord had told him.

He went to the Kareth ravine east of the Jordan and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening and he drank from the brook. Sometime later because of the desert and the famine the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

Elijah must have been wondering where's my next meal coming from Lord why have you brought me here? Then the word of the Lord came to him go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food. You know if I was in that predicament with no food and I heard the Lord say to me I've asked a widow to provide you with food I would have said Lord let me get this straight you did say a widow not a window I mean a drive-thru window where someone's going to hand me a free bag of food that's not good for me I mean you're told me to go to a window right?

No the Lord says I'm sending you to a dirt poor widow who will supply your needs I've already spoken to her I've already commanded her to feed you.

So Elijah goes to the widow let me just take a look in my Bible to continue on the passage so he went to Zarephath and we came to the town gate a widow was there gathering sticks he called to her and asked would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink as she was going to get it he called and

bring me a piece of bread please as surely as the Lord your God lives she replied I don't have any bread only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son that we may eat it and die Elijah said her don't be afraid go home and do as you have said but first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me and then make something for yourself and your son for this is what the

Lord the God of Israel says the jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land she went away and did as Elijah had told her so there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family for the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah now there is a wonderful story of provision in the midst of a desert you see God says my ways are not your ways neither are my thoughts your thoughts declares the Lord God calls things that are not as though they were but you see when we're led into the desert like the Israelites as I led into the desert oftentimes we deny God do you think that the Israelites of the midst of that desert when they ran out

of food and ran out of drink believe that God could raise up water and sprout water from a rock no they didn't you think that they believe that in the midst of this desert wasteland that would grow nothing but cacti that God would supply every morning man on the ground they did not do you think of that first Bible conference of seekers who came to hear Jesus speak that the disciples actually believe that these 5,000 men apart from women and children that the Jesus could supply from them for them through five loaves and two fish and fishes but he did you see my God shall supply all your need according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus and he asked us this I am doing a new thing do you not perceive it I love what Deuteronomy 29 for says but to this day the Lord has not given you a mind

that understands or eyes that see or or ears that hear he's saying this to the Israelites in the desert during the 40 years that I led you through the desert he said your clothes did not wear out nor did the sandals on your feet their shoes didn't wear out and their clothes did not wear out you know that the Lord can provide for us just by having things last a lot longer than they otherwise would have you ever noticed that I remember in my late I guess I must have been early 20s must have been 21 22 and I was in Montreal at the time and I was just getting ready to wind up my business I used to own a garage and a body shop it had been a family business for 23 years that was what I did and and so we decided to sell the business and I was gonna move to Toronto but just before that the Lord

laid on my heart that there was a need he wanted me to meet of a specific financial amount and I didn't have it but the Lord said what about your car I said oh I don't know that's a nice car isn't it Virginia knows it by my standard it was a nice car because you wouldn't believe what are you in the garage it's like cobbler's kids has no shoes right well any mechanic that you know especially a young one you just drive old beaters you know why do I want to put money into a car so I used up crap but this one car was a nice car and Laura said what about that one I said okay well Lord if I sell it you'll have to provide another car so I sold it and and met that need and all I was left with in the bank was about \$400 and a customer happened to come in and he had a Plymouth Valiant for sale and

the only thing valiant about it was the name on the trunk because it was a four-door a two-tone that was as in blue and rust it was a terrible and I thought that's all I can afford and Lord I'm going to turn I'd already landed a new another job running a small sales engineering company for process control instrumentation and I was coming and I had to do about 40,000 miles over about a year and a half of traveling and sales and I thought Lord I got to take this thing to Toronto so I put it up on the lift I did a safety on it and I looked

at the and it was the old shoe brakes not the disc brakes we have to they had four shoe brakes and I looked at the thickness and I only had five to ten thousand miles left of asbestos like they were really thin they're really thin if that was a customer I

would have changed them but for me you know I said Lord if I hear metal on metal I'll change them so that's what I thought I'm going to spend money on this thing I'll just drive it I drove it and drove it and I listened and I kept driving in a year and a half later and about 70,000 kilometers later I never heard grinding and and I decided to scrap the car because that's what should have happened at the time of purchase but anyways I went sky I never spent any money on it and I thought to myself this is amazing I'm gonna pull off those drums and see what those brakes are doing because I've never seen brakes last that long and I pulled the drums off and as God is my witness they were still as thick as the day I had looked at them they still had 10,000 miles left on I said Lord and then I

remember that verse he caused even the brake shoes not to wear out you know that the Lord can do things like this you see there's ways that God can provide for us and sustain us if only we will open our eyes it's amazing what the Lord can do and I just a quick story the Lord used to test us sometimes it's easier to go through testing when you don't have much you know the the older we get the more comfortable we get that the more we flinch and squirm and not want to be tested we want to stay in our comfort zone George Verber wrote a book what is it out of your comfort zone or something of that nature Steve Hawkins gave but I remember one time just before we got married I was saving up for for furniture I figured that was something a wife would want in a barren apartment and I had looked at

Virginia I had looked in Sears and we had picked out you know it's things that I had seen I like this living room set and that dining room set and that bedroom set and each one was worth about \$1,500 each or so and so we needed \$4,500 I could do the math and I had \$3,000 in the bank and again the Lord came and I want you to meet \$1,500 need over here I said Lord if I do that then you know what are we gonna do what am I gonna tell Virginia he said don't you mind about that you just give that money so I'm left with \$1,500 and I said Lord you've got to show me a way in this desert and I just looked in the paper and there was sales of some furniture and I went to the apartment where the girl was had just been divorced and she was moving out west and I looked and it was the same set that was

selling for \$1,500 and Sears looked almost new I said to her how much do you want for that she said 500 bucks paid her 500 bucks put it in the truck drove the Brampton where there was another ad in the paper and the fellow said you know it was his son the owner's son was there he says listen my old man's not here tonight he's been trying to sell this for weeks he wants \$800 for it no one's offering me \$800 just give me 500 bucks I'll tell him that I could that you couldn't afford more and it's yours so I got it for \$500 and then I went back to my apartment and the superintendent always felt sorry for me came up and she says I understand you need furniture she says a lady downstairs on the second floor just died suddenly and she's got a new living room set would you like to come and see it

and I looked at it was the same one we had looked at in Sears I said how much do you want for it she says just offer me 500 bucks and I'll tell him that's what we got for it now that's God supplied and I want you to know that when God supplies there's no GST or PST hey you don't have to render under Caesar when God supplies but the Lord can supply his ways are not our ways his thoughts are not our thoughts what situation do you find yourself in this morning are you in a desert then rejoice because God is doing a new thing and preparing to fill your heart with greater love towards him and a closer walk than you've ever experienced Romans 5 3 says not only so but we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that

suffering produces perseverance perseverance character and character hope

and hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us we all want to feel God's love and feel more love to God but the way of affection is the way of affliction commenting on this verse and its relationship to desert experiences in the Christian life Mrs.

Charles E Cowan who wrote the best-selling devotional called streams in the desert no stranger to desert experiences and bitterness herself she wrote these words so few are willing to undergo the suffering out of which thorough gentleness comes we must die before we are turned into gentleness and crucifixion involves suffering it is a real breaking and crushing of self which rings the heart and conquers the mind there is a good deal of mere mental and logical sanctification nowadays which is only a religious fiction it can see it consists of mentally putting oneself on the altar and then mentally saying the altar sanctifies the gift and then logically concluding therefore one is sanctified and such and one goes forth with a gay flippant theological prattle about the deep things of God but the natural heartstrings have not been snapped and the Adamic flint has not been ground to powder and the bosom has not throbbed with the lonely surging size of Gethsemane and not having the real death marks of Calvary there cannot be that soft sweet gentle floating victorious overflowing triumphant life that flows from a spring morning from an empty tomb let's pray Heavenly Father we thank you so much for all that you have done for us and we wish by faith this morning to do what's impossible to do without knowing you and that is we wish to give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus Heavenly Father we thank you that in the desert we no longer look for our own wells but we drink from Christ himself and Lord we would just pray that each one today regardless of what station we're in regardless of what has happened to us Lord that you would just meet us where we're at that you would open our eyes that we would perceive the wonderful things that you are doing away in the desert streams in the wasteland by faith turn our hearts to you O Lord may we come to the place where we rejoice in the fact that though all of this has happened to us Jesus has been right there surely God is in this place and I knew it not said Jacob and you are here with us this morning O Lord I pray that out of our hardship for these fiery trials you would purify us as gold that we would become like Christ that you would break us and make us into the people you want us to be I pray for each one here you would increase his and her faith increase my faith that we might trust in you fully thank you Lord for what you will do in Jesus name we pray amen

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