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Desert Living for Modern Day Ministers: Embracing the Life and Practice of Desert Living in Ministry Today

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

DESERT LIVING FOR MODERN DAY MINISTERS: EMBRACING THE LIFE AND
PRACTICE OF DESERT LIVING IN MINISTRY TODAY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY KAYE L. MCKINLEY

NEWBERG, OREGON DECEMBER 2011

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EMBRACING THE LIFE AND PRACTICE OF DESERT LIVING
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ABSTRACT

Title: DESERT LIVING FOR MODERN DAY MINISTERS: EMBRACING THE LIFE AND PRACTICE OF DESERT LIVING FOR MINISTRY TODAY

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Ministers spend most of their time assisting others through trouble and hardship, yet they are often unable to cope with their own personal struggles. In doing so, they neglect their own spiritual lives for the sake of others. This dissertation will explore the desert experiences of the past to determine if the desert metaphor holds value for ministers today as a place of healing and spiritual transformation. In biblical times, the desert was a literal place where people sought God and explored their life and faith. The Desert Fathers and Mother followed this example. Desert living is available for us today, yet many ministers are unwilling to engage the desert as a spiritual place when faced with unexpected hardships or life's difficulties. We need the desert and we must learn to value the desert as a place of healing and spiritual transformation.

Chapter One provides an introduction to our need for the desert and why we might arrive there. This is accomplished through personal experience and evaluation of ministers in need of the desert. This chapter will introduce the proposed solution, which incorporates ways to use the desert for personal and spiritual benefit. This comes through the understanding of a daily practice of desert living regardless of one's vocation or where one lives.

Chapter Two defines the desert as a place and a state of being. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a foundational understanding of the desert as a spiritual place for those of the past as well as for our future. We will look to the models of the Old and New Testament desert experiences as explored in the lives of Moses, the Israelites, Elijah, and Jesus. This chapter concludes with an understanding of desert experiences today.

Chapters Three and Four will introduce two of the three gifts of the desert: silence/solitude and awareness. We will consider these gifts and learn how they hold value in our life and ministry today. These chapters will begin with a conceptual thesis which then results in a renewed appreciation for the desert.

Chapter Five explains desert living as valued in the life of the Mystics. We will explore Christian history to examine how the desert led to a value of discernment. In doing so, we will examine the historical use of discernment as a valuable aspect of Christian practice. This chapter will conclude with the results of discernment for ministers engaging in desert living.

Chapter Six, our final chapter, will provide a conclusion for our research, as well as propose a solution. This solution is intended to encourage ministers to engage with the desert as a vital part of their life and ministry in a retreat model. The intent is to provide a valuable resource to encourage ministers to engage in desert living in their daily life.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.¹

My entrance into George Fox Evangelical Seminary's Doctor of Ministry

Program in the fall of 2009 was an eye-opening experience. Being the youngest member of my cohort, I was surprised by the expressed feelings of burnout, loneliness, and fatigue other colleagues were experiencing. I assumed my naïveté was due to my young age and lack of experience. I began to wonder how ministry, as a fulfilling work, could do so much damage. As I listened intently to what others had to say, it became apparent that a vast majority of ministers and especially so of those who were in the program, had become deeply exhausted—wiped out—by their ministries and were in desperate need of refreshment. This would explain the appeal of a program focused on “leadership and spiritual formation.”

Dr. Frank Green,² often referred to as Frank, introduces every cohort into this program. In his first class session he states, “Who I pretend to be and who I am are not the same.”³ What a way to begin a doctoral program! This statement leads his students toward an understanding of our need to face our life as is. We are ministers, and we are

¹ James 1:2-3.

² Dr. Green holds a Masters in Marriage and Family Counseling as well as a Doctor of Ministry Degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. He has served as a pastor and seminary professor. His experience makes him an excellent candidate for his position in the DMIN program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. I am sure the program would not hold the same value without his presence.

³ Dr. Frank Green, Class Lecture (George Fox Evangelical Seminary, October 20, 2009).

human, with real hurts and feelings. During our class sessions Frank continued to help us understand the above statement with another one: "You are responsible for yourself."

This reality check continued for three days until our cohort of seven found ourselves broken and brutally aware of our humanity.⁴ We also became aware of areas in which our lives were in need of change. Our cohort, small as it was, had experienced a tremendous amount of hurt, disappointment, loss and burnout related to ministry and to life. We were all in need of something and sought a Doctor of Ministry program that would focus on our needs, not truly knowing what those needs were.

Upon entrance in the Doctor of Ministry program, I had no idea what the next two years of my life would look like. As I listened to story upon story from members of my cohort, I began to realize that I had not truly experienced the painful reality of ministry. My life had been relatively easy compared to the other ministers in the room. I still had feelings of brokenness and an awareness of my own need to manage life and ministry, but I had not experienced the extreme hurt and pain that was represented in that room on our first day of class. These feelings held true for me until I began a 365-day journey on July 21, 2010.

The number 365 holds tremendous value in the life of all individuals, as it represents the number of days in each year. These days add up to years that eventually become representations of how we change and grow as individuals. Both days and years also serve as a reminder that life is moving forward. For me personally, these numbers have come to mean so much more, specifically the 365 days between July 21, 2010 and July 20, 2011.

⁴ These three days are referred to as being "Franked."

My cell phone rang on July 21, 2010 and I answered it as I would any phone call, “Hello?” Then I heard the voice of my partner Sarah⁵ excitedly sharing that “social services called today with two Guatemalan girls, Isabella and Elizabeth,⁶ who are in need of care.” My response was, “Did you tell them we are not interested? Remember we have rented our house beginning in 30 days?” Sarah responded, “I realize that, but they have exhausted all of their available resources and they will most likely become adoptable in the next 12 to 18 months.” After a long pause she said, “We should consider this.” *Adoptable?* I thought. *Well, this could change things, but it definitely makes no sense.* I am a forward thinker and every thought I had at that moment led me to believe this would be a bad decision. However, I believed in God’s providence enough to respond, “Sounds like this is what God wants us to do.”

From that moment on, we rearranged our life in response to that one phone call. At the time of the call, I was completing my final week as Skyline Camp and Retreat Center’s Summer Chaplain. Our plan was for me to return from camp, resign from my position as Salisbury University’s Campus Minister, and move somewhere fresh and new. This decision to take in the girls changed everything.

Upon arriving home from camp, Sarah and I frantically began reorganizing our lives to remain in the area. Thankfully, we quickly found somewhere for our renters to live, which solved some of our problems, and I began looking for ministry positions in the area. In August, I applied for a pastoral position at the church where I am now

⁵ The information in this story is a true account of my life and that of my partner Sarah Rushing.

⁶ The girls were 16 months and 5 years of age when we received them. Their names have been changed in accordance with Foster Care Regulations. The names used were the actual names we had selected for them upon adoption.

serving. What we did not realize at the time was that our decision to take the girls began a movement toward a place of difficulty that would forever change our lives.

As I mentioned earlier, the phone call we received indicated the great possibility of the girls becoming adoptable, hence our desire to rearrange life and begin forming a family. We had a court date in October, indicating that an adoption hearing would be set in January. In October, the judge was reluctant to allow a three-month delay before determining placement for the girls. She believed the girls needed to be placed somewhere that would provide them with stability and permanence. Before placement with us, Elizabeth had stayed in four other homes and Isabella in two. Transitions can be devastating to children, so our case was a priority for our local Department of Social Services.

We were anxious about our future court date and we realized that anything could happen. The girls' mother had not been compliant with any court requests, which we believed would assist us in making further progress. We enjoyed spending Thanksgiving and Christmas as a family and were simply waiting in anticipation of January's arrival. When our court date arrived, we received another phone call indicating our court date had been delayed and rescheduled for two weeks later. Our anxiety continued to mount over the next two weeks until we returned to court. This time the girls' mother did not show up, which delayed the process again.

We were into the month of February when we received another life-altering phone call. This call indicated there were family members in Guatemala interested in assuming custody of the girls. This was devastating news, especially since we had lived for seven months as if the girls were our own. The Department had searched for two years for

family members with no results, and now someone was interested. Maryland state law requires for family members to be the primary resource for children placed in care. We had knowledge of the law, yet until this point we had been given no reason to believe family would come forward. This reality changed this case, and our lives, forever.

From the moment we received the second life-altering phone call, until July 20, 2011, we lived in process, attempting to listen, evaluate and understand what God was communicating to us through this experience. The second phone call we received was more difficult than the first, as it indicated we would lose something we had treasured deeply. However, the five months following it proved to be the most difficult, because it was during these months that we attempted to prepare the girls for their new life and family, while preparing ourselves as well.

Factors Leading to the Study

As a minister, I should know how to handle life difficulties. After all, I walk with people through life struggles all the time. However, this experience taught me that I had no clue how to manage my personal struggles. I began to question how many other ministers might be going through similar experiences, and what type of resources might be useful for future shepherds, as they too face difficult times in life. In ministry, we are trained to assist others through their struggles, yet in many ways we are unaware of how to process our own. We must gain a realistic understanding of ourselves while caring for others...and living the life we've been given. For me, it was the gain and loss of children that sent me into the desert. As well as trying to walk alongside Sarah through her grief, which looked similar, but felt different than my own. My experience led me to believe

that we, as ministers, must learn how to embrace our dry, barren places filled with unanswered questions, even as we walk alongside to others.

As I read and studied Scripture, I began to realize that the place Sarah and I have existed for the past few months, and possibly the past year, is a “desert.” Most of us have experienced the place in ministry where we feel alone and spiritually dry. The author of the book of James indicates that we will face our share of difficulties, each having purpose for our life. The desert is where we go to face these trials. This “desert,” which we will refer to throughout the course of this paper, is a place where healing and spiritual transformation can occur. We are not referring to the physical desert necessarily, and though we will take a closer look at individuals in the past who encountered God while traveling over burning sands and under scorching sun, the desert we speak of here is a metaphorical one, though no less real. This place is marked by a spiritual, relational, or emotional dryness that can take place in any geographic region. It is a place of difficulty and disappointment. Yet, the desert is not intended to destroy life or cause unresolved frustration; rather, it should become a place of strength, where we are reminded of our dependence on God. It is a place to awaken.

My time in the Doctor of Ministry program has taught me to pay attention to the lives of people around me and to observe the desert experiences of the ministers that I interact with on a daily basis. In my former ministry position I worked in conjunction with our state convention and local association, so I had the opportunity to observe many ministers over the past five years. I will share a few of their experiences as I feel they provide an additional foundation for our study of the desert and they support the fact that

“modern day deserts” do, in fact, exist. The individuals represented in the following stories have been a support and encouragement to me in my spiritual journey.⁷

Case Studies

Jim Connor⁸ has been the pastor of Expectation Baptist Church for the past thirty years. He arrived at this small town church upon completion of his PhD from The Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, KY. Jim’s enthusiasm and vision has moved the church to grow and transform into one of the thriving local churches in the area. It appears as though all of his hopes and dreams for the church have now come to fruition, yet he is finding himself exhausted and in need of refreshment and renewal.

Currently, Jim arrives at appointments ten or fifteen minutes late and rarely, if ever, has time to do anything of personal benefit. He feels that he is not making a difference anywhere, especially in the life of the church. Jim expresses his concerns that he feels lonely, unproductive, and has no way of living up to the church’s expectations. He has put on fifteen pounds over the past five years primarily from stress, which is leading to his declining health.

Jim knows the importance of maintaining good health and holistic⁹ wellness as a pastor. Over the past ten years, he has consistently engaged in yearly sabbaticals for the purpose of study and spiritual refreshment. This has been his attempt at reconciling the spiritual and physical exhaustion he faces during the year. However, general observation of his sabbatical habits would indicate an expectation of work remains as he attempts to rest. Jim has no idea how to slow down in daily routines, or when he is away. Recently,

⁷ The names of individuals and ministries have been changed out of respect for their privacy.

⁸ This is a true story of my former pastor.

⁹ Mind, body, and soul

the entire church received an email stating that Jim would be taking a forced sabbatical as the result of doctor's orders. My observations have led me to believe that Jim has been led to the desert and needs to take every measure possible to understand why God has him there at this moment.

Another example is Tom Watson, the former pastor of Eggshell Baptist Church. Eggshell gains her name from her ability to make others feel as though they can do nothing right¹⁰. Tom tried his hardest to please members in this congregation, but could do nothing right. Eventually, the deacons met with him and asked him to step down as pastor. I am sure there was some explanation, yet nothing was said by Tom or the deacons to the congregation. This left Tom and his family in a state of helplessness and despair; he was the sole provider for his family. Tom got a job at Wal-Mart working the night shift and filling in at various churches on Sunday mornings.

My conversations with Tom during this difficult time indicated that he had learned more through this experience than any other time in ministry. His painful chapter of "failure" at Eggshell Baptist led him to a deeper dependence on God. As I observed Tom during this time in his life, I recognized a peace that had not been present before. Today, Tom is serving as the Pastor of Administration at another church in town. He is a different man, and more effective leader today, because of his time well spent in the desert.

My final example comes from one of my best friends from college. Currently, Jason Joyner is the campus minister at a university in the south. He inherited the ministry upon completion of seminary. This was not Jason's first ministry position, as he had

¹⁰ I had the opportunity to serve as youth ministers for Eggshell Baptist for two years, so I am aware of Tom's feelings as he walked tip-toed on eggshells.

served as youth minister at a church for three years prior to seminary. There were many factors at play in Jason's life. He was new to this position, in a new town, and attempting to grow a ministry. The prior campus minister had left him with a brand new ministry building, a tremendous amount of debt and a few students.

My conversations with Jason over the first two years of his ministry led me to believe he would not remain there long. Jason loved ministry and loved people, so he was surprised when after a few months in the position he found himself lonely and unproductive. Jason found himself in a place of need that only God could fill. He was in the desert and without his time there, the ministry would not be where it is today. Jason is now married, the ministry is thriving, and his voice communicates a sense of contentment.

The desert is a part of life and as ministers we are often quick to assist others in their desert experience, while ignoring our own. We see this in my life and the lives of Jim Connor, Tom Watson and Jason Joyner. The lives of these three men represent a large amount of ministers today who are struggling in life and in ministry. As we explore the desert, we will be reminded of what journeying through these moments of dark uncertainty have to offer our lives and ministries today. We will become aware of our need for desert encounters with God and though we may never enjoy such life chapters, we will learn to embrace them. We can value our time there as it has potential to transform our lives and ministry.

Many of us have experienced the part of ministry that feels lonely and unproductive. This place usually leaves us feeling dry and in need of refreshment. For some, we may have feelings of abandonment. Many of us remain in this place much

longer than we anticipate, feeling there is no way out, simply because we have no idea where we are. This place, that most of us intentionally avoid, is the desert. When we arrive in the desert nothing familiar can be found. After some time, we realize the primary purpose of the desert is to drop all facades and connect with God in absolute honesty. The more we contemplate this reality it becomes apparent that we actually need the desert for spiritual survival. Our arrival in this lonely place is a product of our past, necessary for our present and vital for our future.

Identifying the Problem

Approximately twenty years ago significant research was conducted regarding the need for pastor self-care. Though two decades have passed, these statistics are valuable for ministers regardless of ministry setting, because the odds have not improved. A compilation of these statistics was used in the book, *Pastors at Greater Risk*, which provides a foundational understanding of the dangers of pastoral ministry. Among the other data, London and Wiseman discovered:

- 90 % of pastors work more than 46 hours a week.
- 80 % of pastors believe their pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families.
- 70 % report a lower self-esteem now compared to when they started ministry.
- 75 % reported a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.
- 50 % felt unable to meet the demands of the job.
- 90 % felt inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands.
- 70 % have a lower self-image than when they began their professions.
- 50 % had considered leaving the ministry within the three months prior to completing the survey.
- 40% reported serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend¹¹

¹¹ H.B. London Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Greater Risk* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003), 20.

Any one of the above situations mentioned in these statistics can lead us to the desert. These statistics serve as reminders of our need to seek out intentional time of retreat to embrace the desert as a source of refreshment and renewal.

While in seminary, ministers are taught the value for personal connection to God and are shown a variety of ways to lead others. However, there is little to no emphasis placed on listening to self, especially during times of difficulty. It seems ironic that we are trained to listen to others, yet we have such a difficult time addressing our own personal needs.

Personal observations of ministers in my life have led me to believe there is a need to address the desert during foundational ministry formation such as during seminary education. Seminaries and theology schools spend a tremendous amount of time evaluating this very issue. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) is currently discussing the possibility of revising Master of Divinity (M.Div.) requirements. Several schools have begun to evaluate the imbalance, which exists between academia and ministry praxis. However, “no two seminaries have the same learning objectives.”¹² The question of how prepared ministers are for ministry upon graduation continues to be a topic of discussion. It is understood that, “An approved MDiv program must include specific content that educates each student about religious heritage, cultural context, personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership.”¹³ The discrepancy exists in each seminary’s understanding of each area, especially around the idea of personal spiritual formation.

¹² The Association of Theological Schools Master of Divinity Folio Review, <http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Documents/MDivFolio.pdf> (Accessed June 30, 2011).

¹³ Ibid.

The Leadership Initiative Team of the Alban Institute has also spent time evaluating areas of ministry leadership in need of revitalization. The institute has attempted to address what they consider to be the new challenges ministry leaders are facing. Their research has led them to believe that new strategies can be developed to retain and inspire ministers in their spiritual journey. They believe there are ways to better prepare ministers and set them up for success. Their research indicated a need for “new, healthy, and safe environments for clergy to learn and connect, as well as new pathways and processes of learning for all congregational leaders leading to new ways to view leadership.” They also found that there are “many leaders who feel dispirited or ill-equipped for their current roles.”¹⁴ Their final conclusion was the need to spend time and energy “training and equipping the next generation of leaders.”¹⁵

The “new” challenges mentioned by The Leadership Initiative Team have been around for many years and we must engage these challenges in order to sustain the ministry of the future. The desert can help us as we move forward, as it reminds us that we are in need of God’s guidance in life. In ministry leadership, it is dangerous to think we can prepare ourselves for leading others without God’s help. A proper understanding of the desert will be the foundational component in meeting these challenges. We can utilize the desert as a new learning environment, which would in turn, incorporate a new view of leadership. It will also help us acknowledge that we are real people in positions of ministry leadership. Our leadership abilities will be enhanced by our time in the desert and as ministry leaders we will be able to share these experiences with others. The

¹⁴ James P. Wind, Gilbert R. Rendle, and The Leadership Initiative Team. September 2001, 23-24.

¹⁵ Ibid.

spiritual desert can be the classroom element missing in seminary training and learning to engage with the desert could be the transforming agent we need for life and ministry.

Our primary problem is that ministers focus a great deal of their time and energy on other people. Ministry is demanding without the outside stress of personal life, yet we must learn to balance and embrace life and ministry. Sheri S. Ferguson, MSSW, explains that what she calls “clergy compassion fatigue” is a leading factor in unhealthy congregational dynamics.¹⁶ This is a common disorder among clergy and, when left unaddressed, can lead a pastor toward neglect of personal needs. A survey taken during two pastors’ conferences indicated that ninety percent of the pastors surveyed¹⁷ felt “frequently fatigued, and worn out on a weekly and even daily basis.”¹⁸ This type of exhaustion is brought on by not attending to personal and spiritual needs.

Ferguson’s diagnosis of “clergy compassion fatigue” provides support that ministers have a tendency to neglect their personal and spiritual needs. The observation of ministers in my life has led me to believe this to be true. As I combine the statistics, which eventually lead to burnout, with observations of my own life and other ministers whom I encounter, I am convinced that something needs to change. Ministers must learn to embrace the desert as a place where they can be real people. We must willingly recognize the desert as a place of transformation, a place where God connects with creation. The desert serves as a reminder that we are in need of God.

¹⁶ Sheri S. Ferguson, MSSW, “Clergy Compassion Fatigue,” *Family Therapy Magazine*, March/April 2007, 17.

¹⁷ There were a total of 1,050 pastors surveyed over the course of two conferences held in Orange County and Pasadena, CA. Other data found at the conference can be found by accessing <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42347&columnid=4545>

¹⁸ Dr. Richard J. Krejcir, “Statistics on Pastors”, <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42347&columnid=4545> (Accessed August 16, 2011).

This paper will explore the desert experiences of the past, to determine if the desert holds value today as a place of healing and transformation in the lives of ministers. As we observed in the stories and statistics above, we all face our share of spiritual deserts. Some of them are brought on by our inability to manage time in ministry and our personal life, while others arrive unexpectedly as life presents itself. As ministers, we can learn from those who have gone before us and take courage to be present in the desert for ourselves. Then, we will be able to lead by vulnerable example showing our people that life exists on the other side and God remains sovereign in our great moments of doubt. In doing so, we will be better prepared to walk alongside others who are also in the midst of a personal desert.

Proposing a Solution

Desert living is available for us today, yet many of us are unwilling to engage the disciplines of the desert when faced with unexpected hardships or life difficulties. Instead, of being present to the scorching truth, we choose to hop a flight and check into the Mirage Hotel where it feels cool and glamorous to hide out underneath a façade of glass and lights. But in doing so, we trade healing and spiritual transformation for a bucket of plastic chips. We must learn to think of the desert as described by John Chryssavgis:

The desert is a place of spiritual revolution, not of personal retreat. It is a place of inner protest, not outward peace. It is a place of deep encounter, not of superficial escape. It is a place of repentance, not recuperation. Living in the desert does not mean living without people; it means living for God.¹⁹

¹⁹ John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 35.

In many evangelical faith traditions, we have traded the raw, honest encounter of the desert that is intended to be a part of our spiritual journey for high-energy, motivational conferences, not much different than a stay at the Mirage. We yearn for an escape when we are actually being invited to stay and go deeper with God who is our teacher and guide. We must recognize that we will face our share of spiritual deserts. However, we must recognize that the way can be just as tiresome and perhaps even more painful than our own. Therefore, it would serve us well to be prepared.

Purpose of the Study

God provides us with modern day desert experiences intending to draw us closer to God's self, to ourself and eventually, to others. These desert experiences link us to our forefathers and foremothers of the faith and remain purposeful for us today. They are reminders for us to return to what is most important and to provide us with refreshment and renewal. Scripture indicates that time in the desert is a time for refocus and connection with God. Across human history, people have been brought to the desert for various reasons and they each had very different experiences, yet they all met God.

The desert can become a place of helplessness and our helplessness has the potential to lead us toward restoration. David Jasper describes the desert as "both a place of exile, but also divine refreshment."²⁰ We need our deserts to move us away from comfort and toward God. As we become helpless, God becomes helpful. Sometimes it takes the difficulty of removal to help us recognize God's presence in our life. The consistent theme of the desert is brokenness. There are times when we enter the desert because of our brokenness and others when we enter the desert *to be broken*. While in the

²⁰ David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert* (Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 151.

desert we are stripped of many things in order to prove that we are in need of God.

Robert Benson explains brokenness this way:

To embrace one's brokenness, whatever it looks like, whatever has caused it, carries within it the possibility that one might come to embrace one's healing, and then one might come to the next step: to embrace another and their brokenness and their possibility for being healed. To avoid one's brokenness is to turn one's back on the possibility that the Healer might be at work here, perhaps for you, perhaps for another.²¹

In many ways ministers are slow to embrace their own areas of brokenness for fear of weakness, which is why some of us avoid the desert altogether. We have somehow come into the understanding that ministers have it all together; this is both an unhealthy and unrealistic view. For ministers, brokenness comes by way of burnout, unsatisfied individuals in our ministries, feelings of ineffectiveness or even from failed relationships. All of the situations documented in the statistics previously mentioned can lead us to a state of brokenness and can lead us to the desert. We come to the desert in need and our need is what allows the desert to become a transforming agent in our life and ministry.

Direction of Study

The following study will address the needs mentioned in the above statistics by arguing our need for the desert and highlighting the gifts that can be found there for ministers. When embraced properly, the desert can become a place of refreshment and renewal for ministers. There is a proven need for the desert as indicated by the statistics of the past and the direction we are headed with technology. Our ability to engage with the desert will continue to decrease if we do not create awareness among ministers today. Our goal is to find some form of resonance with the experiences of those in the past. In

²¹ Robert Benson, "Embracing Brokenness," <http://www.inwardoutward.org/source/living-prayer> (accessed July 13, 2011).

the end, we will gain a greater understanding of the desert as a vital spiritual practice for ministers.

As we move into Chapter Two, we will gain a foundational understanding of the desert as a biblical term/concept and place. We will explore the lives of people in the Bible who experienced the desert. Throughout this chapter, we will explore God's intent for desert experiences in the past and how they are useful for ministers today. We will explore the examples of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, all of whom had drastically different desert experiences. Our intent is to engage with their lives in such a way as to initiate transformation in our own lives. Our in depth analysis of the lives of these three figures from Scripture will lay the foundation for our understanding of the desert.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five will explore what we can gain from our personal desert experiences. We will evaluate the experiences of those in the past in the hope of understanding the necessity of desert experiences in our life and ministry today, as well as in the future. We will seek out what we can gain from our personal desert experiences. This argument will be based around God's intent to use the desert to teach important concepts about our life and ministry. In these three chapters, we will explore the primary gifts of the desert: solitude, self-reflection, and discernment. There are many gifts of the desert, but for the purpose of this study we will focus on these three. Our goal for this exploration will be to understand the value of our desert experiences and how we can use them to enhance our spiritual life today and in the future. It is important for us to understand how the desert can have a tremendous impact on ministers personally, professionally, and spiritually.

Chapter Three will explain and provide a greater understanding of solitude. It is during our time alone that we are able to connect with God in a deeper way. As mentioned above, the three desert experiences we are exploring here were all different. However, the one common theme is solitude. Our true connection with God can only occur when we are alone and prepared to engage with our Creator. Ministers' lives are constantly spent moving from one person to the next. In many cases, we neglect our need for daily solitude in an attempt to accomplish more or meet more needs. Our desert experience provides us with a reminder of this need for a daily pause to connect with God.

Chapter Four explains how the desert can also be a place of self-exploration and awareness. While in the desert, we can take time to evaluate what brought us to our desert and what needs to change while we are there. It could be that we are in need of self-work that might not have occurred to us before. As we mentioned earlier, it is possible for ministers to become so focused on others that they neglect caring for themselves. The desert can help us look deep within ourselves to evaluate what is most important.

Chapter Five will focus on discernment and will help us to understand how decision-making was a vital part of the desert experience for the mystics. We will explore discernment by searching through the use of the term in Scripture and Christian history. As we walk through our deserts we will learn to engage the desert for decisions through discernment. The desert can provide clarity and focus that we sometimes overlook in our daily life and ministry. A proper discernment process can assist us as we explore our desert to see what God is trying to communicate. Decisions are a vital part of life and ministry and most often our deserts illuminate decisions we have neglected in daily life.

As we take time to listen and reflect, we are reminded of the importance a proper discernment practice can hold in our life.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I will present my solution in the form of four specific ways ministers can put the desert into practice. My solutions will revolve around practical ways to gain greater understanding of the desert. The primary avenues through which we can explore the desert will be through retreat, a conference breakout session, a mentoring strategy, and a desert blog. Four very different solutions will be introduced in order to educate ministers in a variety of settings.

As we explore the desert, we must begin to understand “the desert is a necessary stage on the spiritual journey. To avoid it would be harmful. To dress it up or conceal it may be tempting; but it also proves destructive in the spiritual path.”²² When we understand the desert as the valuable asset it is to our spiritual life, only then will we be able to embrace all that it has to offer. In doing so, we must also envision “the physical setting of the desert as a symbol, a powerful reminder of a spiritual space that is within us all.”²³ Jasper explains, “The garden is at the heart of every true desert, and when we reach it, it is utterly familiar, yet we come to it as if for the first time.”²⁴

Ministers engaging in the desert can sustain their ministry and personal life, while experiencing a transformed spiritual life. This, in turn, leads to becoming healthy as a person. Our evaluation of the desert experiences of the past will indicate the benefits of the desert. As we move through this paper we will explore all that the desert has to offer us as ministers and as people. We must learn to embrace and understand why we need to

²² Chrysavgis, 36.

²³ Ibid., 36.

²⁴ Jasper, 151.

engage this type of spiritual space in our life and ministry. Throughout this paper, we will engage with the positive elements of this sacred space and how we can intentionally take advantage of these moments of our life.

Chapter 2

EXPERIENCING THE DESERT

*This is my prayer in the desert
And all that's within me feels dry
This is my prayer in the hunger in me
My God is a God who provides²⁵*

Understanding the Desert

Throughout Scripture we see the terms “desert” and “wilderness” used interchangeably. Desert and wilderness “refer to areas that are largely uninhabited. Desert emphasizes lack of water; it refers to a dry, barren, treeless region. Wilderness emphasizes the difficulty of finding one’s way, whether because of barrenness or dense vegetation.”²⁶ Both are considered to be spiritual terms and hold value today. For the purpose of this paper we will utilize the term “desert” as we make reference to where God spoke to individuals in the past and a way God continues to speak today.

As we evaluate the concept of desert, we must take a closer look at its original meaning. The Hebrew word for desert is *midbaar* and it is interesting to note that *midbaar* is derived from another Hebrew word *dahbaar*, which means, “to speak.”²⁷ The connection between these two words would indicate God’s intent for the desert to be a place of communication where God speaks to us and we speak to God. This is a beautiful picture of the Creator engaging with the created. As we take a deeper look at Scriptural examples, we will see this to be true.

²⁵ http://www.6lyrics.com/the_desert_song-lyrics-hillsong.aspx (accessed August 4, 2011).

²⁶ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/desert> (accessed June 21, 2011).

²⁷ Charles R. Swindoll, *Moses: A Man of Selfless Dedication* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1999), 73.

The word “wilderness”²⁸ is used 300 times in the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible and 265 of those are found in the Old Testament. Here are a few examples:

And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites; they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.²⁹

The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai...³⁰

Who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.³¹

I have led you forty years in the wilderness. The clothes on your back have not worn out, and the sandals on your feet have not worn out;³²

He sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye.³³

A study of the desert in the Bible shows that God has actively pursued people in the desert and continually leads them there, both individually and in groups. Throughout Scripture, we see that God values the desert as a place of impact and meaning, and ultimately it is a place of communication between God and people. This remains true today, and God works in valuable and important ways with ministers as they engage in their own personal desert experiences.

The physical descriptions of the desert in Scripture would lead us to believe no one would willingly want to travel to such desolate places. Why would anyone want to

²⁸ Wilderness and desert are interchangeable words in Scripture, however, *NRSV* makes reference “wilderness” 265 times.

²⁹ Exodus 16:10.

³⁰ Numbers 9:1.

³¹ Deuteronomy 8:15-16.

³² Deuteronomy 29:5.

³³ Deuteronomy 32:10.

enter “an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions,” a place that makes movement difficult with limited amount of sustainable resources? Even the Israelites were reluctant to follow God to the Promised Land because they had to first travel through the desert. They had the opportunity to see the “glory of the Lord” as they approached the wilderness, yet they were resistant.³⁴

Resistance is the natural human response to fear of the unknown and many, if not most, of us would cringe at the idea of intentionally spending time in an uninhabited area. Spiritual deserts resemble a physical wilderness and are intended to lead us away from the comforts of everyday life. However, as we explore these deserts, we will find them to be a necessary part of our spiritual journey. This movement away from comfort is intended to move us closer to God. As we explore the desert experiences of history, we are reminded of God’s purpose for those who have gone before us, and the value that they can hold in our life and present ministry.

Desert Experiences of the Past

Biblical history indicates that the desert was where people met God and experienced transformation. The desert was a place where God met needs and individuals became aware of their need for God. As we look at the past, we see God leading people to the desert for the purpose of transformation. There were those individuals who were led to the desert like Jesus and the Israelites, and those who travelled there by choice, such as Elijah. Likewise, individuals have sought out the desert for hundreds of years. We see glimpses of this from the Old Testament all the way up through Christian mysticism to the present day. Those who traveled to the desert were familiar with its

³⁴ Exodus 16:10.

trials and challenges, but were also confident of the purifying and new awakening that would take place there. Understanding God's choice of the desert in the Old Testament provides a foundation for desert living throughout Christian history.

Old Testament Desert Experiences

The desert experiences of God's people are a vital part of the Old Testament record because the desert "is the place that threatens the very existence of Yahweh's chosen people, but it is also the stage which brightly illuminates God's power and readiness to dispel the threat," writes Ulrich W. Mauser.³⁵ Being in the desert allows one to see and experience God's character and desire for relationship. In his book, *Christ in the Wilderness*, Mauser adds an interesting commentary to the wilderness experience:

The wilderness tradition takes up a major portion of the historical books of the Old Testament, and in this tradition events of fundamental importance to the history and belief of the Israelite tribes are related to the desert locality. Basic data of Yahweh's self-disclosure to his people are given in this are—the revelation of God's name, the theophany on Mount Sinai, the establishment of the covenant with Israel, and the declaration of the law. Within certain limitations it can be said that Israel's fundamental belief in her election as God's chosen people is rooted in the wilderness tradition.³⁶

God chose to use the desert as a place of covenant and communication between God and creation.

As we move through the Old Testament, we are able to observe many individuals who spent time in the desert. For example, King David understood the value of the desert and spent a tremendous amount of time there. In the desert, he wrote many of the Psalms

³⁵ Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (Chatham, Great Britain: W. & J. Mackay & CO LTD, 1963), 21.

³⁶ Mauser, *Ibid.*, 5.

we read today and in his words we see a picture of brokenness and helplessness, which essentially describe our desert places as well. In Psalm 63, we see David crying out:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
 My soul thirsts for you;
 my flesh faints for you,
 As in a dry and weary land where there is no water.³⁷

David's words indicate his need for God. Scripture indicates that David understood and valued testing, understanding it would make his faith stronger.³⁸ It is apparent that David valued the desert because this was where God gave him strength and he was no longer focused on his own ability. God's intention in the desert is to draw us closer to God's self and we are open to meeting Jehovah-Jireh, God our Provider because we, like David, are truly in need. We too are weak, broken, and helpless.

Psalm 78 provides an extensive account of the Israelite wilderness experience. This psalmist begins with a hymn of praise and thankfulness for the desert and what it will mean for the generations to come, "That the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them [God's wondrous works through the testimony of Jacob] to their children, that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God."³⁹ The purpose of this psalm is to provide warnings for the next generation to beware of distractions that will lead them away from God and the desert.⁴⁰

³⁷ Psalm 63:1.

³⁸ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 125.

³⁹ Psalm 79: 6-7.

⁴⁰ Mauser, 38-40.

In Deuteronomy 8, the desert is referred to as a “terrible” wasteland filled with danger. This could be the reason many of us do not think favorably of the desert and why we fear going to this place of the unknown. However, danger and ambiguity are not only a part of life’s journey to avoid at all costs, but perhaps may be a necessary part of the journey itself. The author of Deuteronomy indicates that in the end, our desert experience will be for our benefit. *The Interpreters Bible* explains the purpose of desert hardship this way:

The hardship of the wilderness was thus an example not of God’s wrath or failure to provide, but of his providential discipline. The disciplinary value of hardship does not exhaust the meaning of all suffering; but in both the O.T. and the N.T. it is an important means of understanding the significance of much that has happened. God is good, and yet because of man’s (sic) recalcitrance God sends suffering to humble and discipline him that he may learn.⁴¹

Many of us hold a negative view of discipline, which could limit our ability to see purpose for the desert. It is unnecessary to view the desert as only a form of disciplinary *action* on God’s part, however. We must learn to see the desert as a place where God *speaks* and connects with humanity whether it be for discipline or to bring comfort in the midst of a fallen world. Whatever we gain or lose while in the desert is directly connected to our need for God and our need for that particular desert experience.

The purpose of the testing during the forty years of the Israelites’ wandering was to discover what was actually motivating them by evaluating what was in their heart.⁴² Our human tendency is to only communicate with God when we need something that we believe God can provide. God used hunger as a way of humbling the Israelites. In the same way God can and will humble us with our circumstances or whatever might have

⁴¹ Hill and Walton, 387.

⁴² *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 2 (New York: Abingdon, 1953), 385-386.

led us to the desert. Humility teaches us many things, especially our need for God. It can help break us of ourselves and help us realize why we have arrived at this place. We must learn to understand the desert as a place of humility, which leads us to realize anew that it is God who meets our needs, not our self determination or performance.

God's desire for our transformation while in the desert is deeply connected to our need for God. In Deuteronomy 8, we see Moses reminding the Israelites of what they had been through, to help them as they move forward. His words support the concept of the desert being valuable to our future and also giving us confidence about our future.⁴³ E.

W. Hinton supports this idea by stating:

Israel's connection with the life of the desert was not, therefore, simply a piece of past history to be remembered or forgotten according to choice; it was a significant part of the everyday experience of a fair proportion of the population. Even after Israel had been occupying her cities and sharing the civilization of the Near East for many centuries, the desert still asserted its influence.⁴⁴

The book of Deuteronomy's primary value is the message for Israel not to forget God. Regardless of prosperity, she must remember what God had done in the desert and how all of her needs were met. The book of Deuteronomy expresses a concern that upon Israel's self-sufficiency, God would be abandoned, which is also a concern for ministers today.⁴⁵ Desert experiences reminds us of our need for God and are intended to do so regardless of life circumstances. Understanding one's personal place of loneliness and abandonment creates a space where we can remember God's lovingkindness and promises toward us.

⁴³ Fox, 886.

⁴⁴ E. W. Heaton, *Everyday Life In Old Testament Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1956), 41.

⁴⁵ Anthony Phillips, *Deuteronomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press. 1973), 232-233.

Moses

Moses knew the wilderness quite well; he lived most of his life there. After spending time as the Prince of Egypt, Moses lived as a shepherd to his father-in-law's flock. He was the "second hand man" and yet God used him to do some amazing things. Our life does not have to be spectacular for God to use us. Everyone's time in the wilderness is different.

Moses was placed in the desert by circumstance. As we look at the life of Moses, we can see God used the desert to prepare him for his future vocation. He would eventually lead the Israelites on their forty-year journey through the wilderness. However, first he had to endure a desert of his own. Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest.⁴⁶ He was then given the task of tending his father-in-law's flock. This was a humbling experience, yet necessary for Moses, as becoming a shepherd was a sign of leadership. He would eventually be one of the most powerful leaders in the Bible, but for the time being he was tending sheep, and not even his own--as the sheep belonged to another man's flock.

Moses received his call to serve and lead in Exodus 3, while he was shepherding his father-in-law Jethro's sheep.⁴⁷ It is notable that he refused this call five times, all of which occurred while Moses was deep in the desert, alone. The desert caused him to rethink his purpose and even the amount of trust he had in God to assist him in following God's leading. It is important to understand that if Moses had not accepted the call in his personal wilderness, he would not have been prepared or equipped to lead the Israelite's

⁴⁶ Stuart Brisco, *The Communicators Commentary*, vol. 2 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 59.

⁴⁷ Fox, 268-269.

through theirs. Similarly, we can choose to see the value of our deserts as they are connected to the bigger picture of God's plan.

During this time, the desert was very real to Moses. Not only did he live in the desert, he also experienced a sense of abandonment and removal from all the things familiar to him. For Moses, this particular desert experience was a transition. He was beginning something new in life that seemed relatively ordinary, yet it was necessary. Moses needed this desert experience to prepare him for leading others. His desert was his job. God transformed him through his position as shepherd. He was humbled, broken, and alone. God spoke to Moses *during his daily routine* and the same can be true for ministers today. God can speak to us through our ministry positions or through our daily disappointments. God seeks us out and in turn we must learn to listen.

Moses spent forty years in the desert and then led the Israelites through another forty. This seems like a long time to be in the desert, but Moses' purpose was greater than he expected. God wanted to use him to lead others into their own desert experience.

Deuteronomy 8:2-10 states Moses' reminder to the Israelites about their journey:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

Moses reminded the Israelites that the entire purpose for the wilderness experience was to be focused on God. Moses continued to remind them to “not forget the Lord your God.” He helped them see that this experience was valuable, but would only be so if they continued to remember what God had done for them. So also, we must not let our wilderness experience be a waste by forgetting the One who led us there and who brought us out.

When God spoke to Moses in Exodus 3:1-6, Moses was going about his new daily routine, alone.⁴⁸ As we mentioned earlier, this was a new life for him, as he was now a son-in-law and part of the family. He now had the same responsibilities that were assigned to his new sisters. I am sure this was a humbling experience for him. However, his menial daily tasks were preparation for him to become shepherd of Israel. He did not realize how his new life, consistently lived in the desert, would open up opportunities for him to hear from God. Moses’ new life provided many opportunities for divine revelation, as he was in solitude most of the day. At this time, it was understood that God would only speak to people while they were alone.⁴⁹

Most of us miss out on what God is communicating to us because we are not paying attention to God’s presence in our life. The desert could be staring us in the face and we may never notice. Moses had a desert experience one afternoon during his ordinary life. He was lonely and doing what he would consider a menial daily task. God spoke to Moses and at that moment he experienced an internal desert. We sometimes live

⁴⁸ Maxie D. Dunnam and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, ed., *The Communicators Commentary*, vol. 2 (Word, 1987), 59.

⁴⁹ Benno Jacob and Walter Jacob, trans., *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1992), 48.

our lives unaware of our deserts and are unable to see the impact they can have on our life. We must learn how to embrace the desert moments found in our daily life. They can and will provide us with direction and calling, as well as refreshment and renewal, if we will choose to pay attention.

My entire life I have heard the term “burning bush experience” and understood this to be a transformational moment where God speaks in a clear way with no ambiguity. It seems as though we promote this concept as something out of the ordinary. Yet, Moses heard from God during his ordinary life. It appears as though Moses was caught off guard by God’s attempt to speak to him. Moses did not expect God to speak to him that day, yet when God spoke he gladly adjusted his life and prepared to listen.⁵⁰

God used the “burning bush” to get Moses’ attention, just as God uses situations in our life to get our attention today. Unfortunately, it often takes something dramatic to shake us to the point of changing our life’s direction. We do not want to see God in the ordinary, or it could be that we are so focused on our life that we miss God in our everyday routine. God spoke to Moses in broad daylight. There was no dream or possibility of missing out on God’s message. He was wide-awake just as we are in our everyday life.⁵¹

God did not leave the Israelites while they were in the desert. Deuteronomy 32:10 indicates that God sustained, shielded, and guarded Moses as the “apple of his eye.” It was in the desert that Moses was given the opportunity to remember how important he was to God. The desert was not a place of abandonment by God; rather it was a reminder

⁵⁰ Nolan B. Harmon, editor, *The Interpreter's Bible vol. 1: General and Old Testament Articles, Genesis and Exodus* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 871.

⁵¹ Jacob and Jacob, 60-61.

of God's presence. It becomes apparent that God wanted Moses to know that all of his needs would be met and he would be protected through this experience. We too can choose to recognize God's presence with us wherever we go.

The Israelites

The desert experience depicted in Exodus 15:22-18:27 has great impact and meaning as we explore Old Testament desert experiences. Throughout this passage, we see individuals who complained to God about not meeting their needs and not protecting them from hostile neighbors. God initiated a process, which removed the Israelites from their normal surroundings in an attempt to seek transformation. The process discussed in the Torah has been utilized with great success in anthropological circles. Anthropologists indicate that "the desert is the site of liminality par excellence: it is a harsh place that contains none of the succoring elements of human civilization, yet at the same time it leads the wanderer into truer communication with nature and the divine, metacultural forces of the universe."⁵² Therefore, the desert becomes a place of intimate connection with our surroundings and God's divine interactions with us. Often distancing ourselves from the immediate provides a truer, objective view. Removal from the familiar is a vital part of the desert process and is ultimately what leads one toward transformation. As we experience this transformation we will see our need to depend on God. In the Israelite wanderings, we see this through the element of food and water; God provided food and water to meet their needs.

Scripture describes the Israelite response to their desert experience by using the word "grumble." As we explore Exodus 15-17, we find three very specific accounts of

⁵² Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 341-342.

grumbling. First, we see the Israelites in need of drinkable water. Second, they find themselves in need of food or “manna.” As the passage continues, we see a greater connection forming between “grumbling” and “commandments,” which indicates the Israelites were experiencing a form of testing. “Manna” was important because it was an indication of God’s nurturance and ultimately God’s provision for humankind, which was what the Israelites expected from God. Finally, in the third “grumbling” account, we see the Israelites arguing with Moses and testing God. Scripture states, “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness...for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”⁵³ Throughout this passage,⁵⁴ we see God testing the Israelites to see if they trust God to meet their needs.

Exodus 16:10 indicates that God drew the Israelites attention to the desert and it was during this communion that Moses was able to bring his complaint before God.⁵⁵ We see here that the Israelites were led to the desert. While there, we see Moses, along with the Israelites, complaining about the lack of manna. The idea of grumbling or complaining is necessary to point out, because they were unwilling to trust that God would meet their needs. The Israelites believed there was a shortage of food and water in the desert and knew that without these two vital elements they would surely die. Earlier in this passage (v. 2-5) we see God providing food a day at a time, so it isn’t as if they haven’t had prior experience with God meeting their needs. It is believed that “by providing food for only a day at a time Yahweh will test the people to see if they will live

⁵³ Exodus: 16:2-3.

⁵⁴ Exodus 15-17.

⁵⁵ *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 951.

by faith in his power and deliverance.”⁵⁶ Here we see God utilizing the desert as a way of meeting needs, which indicates Divine presence and desire to remain with us in there.

We are able to observe God’s presence throughout the entire experience, especially as we observe the cloud leading them toward the unknown. The cloud helped the Israelites to put their faith into action, believing that God would be present through their entire journey. They looked toward the desert and observed, what they believed to be, the glory of the Lord.⁵⁷ As we have mentioned, the Israelites were primarily concerned with their need for food and water, which led them to complain loudly to God, Moses, and each other. Eventually, God spoke to Moses⁵⁸ indicating their complaints had been heard and God would meet their needs. That evening quails arrived, which during the Old Testament were a sign of “manna” and in the morning God provided the Israelites with bread.⁵⁹

Both the Israelites and Moses are vital components of this wilderness story, and together they provide a foundational understanding of the desert. Moses describes the Israelite’s desert experience “as a test of faith in Yahweh and covenant loyalty.”⁶⁰ He indicates “the purpose of Yahweh’s testing was to humble the Israelites so that they might learn total dependence on him, teach obedience to his commandments, and show them the true condition of their hearts.”⁶¹ The Israelites tested God through their need for

⁵⁶ Ibid., 950.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 951.

⁵⁸ Exodus 16:12.

⁵⁹ *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1, 952.

⁶⁰ Hill and Walton, 125.

⁶¹ Ibid., 125.

food and water, while God tested the Israelites with the removal of the two very things they depended on for life. Perhaps the main purpose of the desert experience is testing. It is through this type of testing that we are able to see where our dependence lies, on ourselves or on God. It sometimes takes a desert experience to remind us of our need for God. God's testing is intended to move us closer toward God⁶²

Elijah

In 1 Kings 19, we see the powerful prophet, Elijah, in the desert, fleeing from his reality. Elijah decided to journey to Mt. Horeb out of spiritual necessity. Ministry became too much for Elijah to handle. He felt as though he had exhausted all of his options and could no longer manage the stress of his circumstances. God had chosen Elijah for a specific purpose and eventually the calling was not enough. He was at the end of his rope and thought that Jezebel was arranging for his death when in reality, she did not have the power to do so.⁶³ Regardless, Elijah set off on a day's journey into the desert and eventually prayed that God would take his life. God came to him at that moment by way of an angel and prepared him for his trek with food and drink. Elijah made it to Mt. Horeb, not by his own strength, but by the strength provided for him by way of the angel.⁶⁴

In 1 Kings 19, we see that God used the desert to rescue Elijah from himself and provide him with the strength to proceed with his journey to Mt. Horeb. Elijah's intent in

⁶² Ibid., 126.

⁶³ *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), 160.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 162.

travelling to the mountain was to make a complaint to Yahweh.⁶⁵ When he arrived at Mt. Horeb he may have expected to encounter God in the same way Moses had when he received the Ten Commandments. However, when God asked Elijah the following question: "What are you doing here?" Elijah responded by complaining about Israel's lack of faithfulness and use of violence. This question and response sequence was repeated several times and eventually God granted his request and appointed Elisha as his successor.⁶⁶

Elijah could no longer handle the position to which he had been appointed, so God granted his wish. We encounter similar difficulties in ministry today. It could be that we are no longer passionate about our ministry position. In most instances, we are led to such a desert-like place in life and ministry by our own choices. This is primarily because we begin doing things on our own and leaving God out of the picture.

Elijah's wilderness experiences were quite different from Moses. Elijah "was the most wanted man in the land."⁶⁷ He listened to God when he was instructed to hide at the brook Cherith. Elijah did just that, only to experience months and years with no communication at all. He was stuck in a period of waiting, like many of us today. When his period of waiting was over, he received the message to "Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth." Three years earlier God said there would be a drought, and here we see rain was promised. God made it evident to Elijah that if he chose to follow, other people would benefit. It appeared as though God was preparing Elijah to share his

⁶⁵ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. and Roland E. Murphy, O. CARM., Ed. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), 172.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 172.

⁶⁷ Charles R. Swindoll, *Elijah: A Man of Heroism and Humility* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), 75.

experience with others. Elijah had a lot at stake, yet it appeared as though he heard from God and wanted to partake in God's plan for him. However, he felt unprepared to remain in the leadership position God had placed him in.

We may need a reminder that God is present to us in our desert. Everyone's desert experience can and will look different. The stories of others will intersect and may hold similar themes. However, our deserts are uniquely designed for us. Our time spent in the desert is meant to mold and shape us for God's purpose. We must embrace this reality in order to truly grasp God's purpose for our life.

New Testament Desert Experiences

As we explore the New Testament, we will focus on Jesus' time in the desert. His experience in the desert is quite different than what we see lived out in the Old Testament, yet it provides a tremendous connection between the Old and New Testament. Fred Craddock explains, "The New Testament brings the wilderness trials of Israel forward not only into the life of Jesus but also into the life of the church."⁶⁸ Therefore, we see Jesus' desert experience as a connecting point for understanding the value of our desert experiences today.

There are three accounts of Jesus' desert experience and in all three we observe Jesus being led to the desert specifically to face temptation and testing.⁶⁹ Mark's account is the only one to indicate that Jesus was driven to the desert, by the Spirit.⁷⁰ This story, while extremely short, places tremendous emphasis on the wilderness component of Jesus' experience, while the others focus on the temptation. This emphasis is what

⁶⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 54.

⁶⁹ The biblical accounts are found in Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.

⁷⁰ Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Interpretation: Mark* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1983), 36.

connects Jesus experience with the forty-day struggles of Moses and Elijah, as well as the Israelites forty years in the wilderness. As we explore Jesus' wilderness experience, it is important that we understand the following:

The wilderness is the dwelling place of forces hostile to God, the residue of the primeval chaos that menaces human life. Despite appearances and feelings, God is present in the wilderness in the Old Testament traditions (Deut. 2:7: 32:10) and in the Marcan Gospel accounts (e.g. 1:2-4, 35; 6:31-44). The discovery of this presence and this providence, however, grows out of struggle and testing. In the Old Testament, Israel tests God in the wilderness; in Mark, Satan tests Jesus in the wilderness.⁷¹

In Jesus' experience, we are able to catch a glimpse of his ability to overcome the temptation by remaining focused on God's purpose for his life.⁷² His temptations were intended to be a connecting point in God's story, where Jesus proves he is a vital part of God's message as indicated in the Old Testament. Jesus' testing in the desert has a threefold purpose: to indicate Jesus is the true Messiah who is capable of overcoming the forces of evil, for Jesus to experience the ability of overcoming self (especially the evil side, which is difficult for all humans), and to set up a model for the church to utilize when struggling with temptation.⁷³ Aldolfe Monod connects the Old and New Testaments desert experiences in this way:

It is because he sees a secret parallel between himself, Son of God, preparing for the foundation of his kingdom by forty days' fast and temptation in the wilderness of Judah, and Israel, that other son of God, prepared for the conquest of Canaan by forty years' privations and trials in the great desert of Arabia. Israel, who is presented to us as a type of New Testament Church, is also the type of Jesus, the head of that Church, in whom it is complete: therefore Jesus instructs and

⁷¹ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. and Roland E. Murphy, O. CARM., Ed. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), 387.

⁷² W. F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Matthew* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 36-37.

⁷³ Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1987), 50.

strengthens himself by what is written for Israel. Admirable connection of the Scriptures! Wonderful unity of spirit in both Testaments!⁷⁴

As we move through the three accounts of Jesus' temptation, we are reminded of how Jesus connects God's story. This is primarily emphasized when Jesus is tempted to turn the stone into bread. As we consider Jesus' temptation, we see it in direct correlation with the children of Israel testing God to provide "manna."⁷⁵ We also see Jesus continuing this connection in his life and ministry as he shares, "Give us this day our daily bread" as a core component in his Sermon on the Mount.⁷⁶

As we gain greater understanding of Jesus' experience in the desert, we are reminded of the connections made to the Israelites desert experience, which ultimately leads to our understanding of the desert today. As we explore our personal deserts we must remember, writes Douglas R. A. Hare, "We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread, but we are constantly tempted to mistrust God's readiness to empower us to face our trials. None of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping from a cliff, but we are frequently tempted to question God's helpfulness when things go awry."⁷⁷

Adolphe Monod provides guidance on understanding both Jesus' and our own desert experiences in this way, "In order, then, rightly to appreciate the nature of temptation, we should ascertain not only what it is in itself, but also what it is for him

⁷⁴ Adolphe Monod, *Jesus: Tempted in the Wilderness* (London: Partridge and Co., Paternoster Row, 1854), 81.

⁷⁵ Lachs, 51.

⁷⁶ Matthew 6:11.

⁷⁷ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 26.

who is exposed to it.”⁷⁸ Monod points out how we need the desert, as our exposure to temptations are meant to make us stronger. He continues, “The true standard of temptation lies not in its external conditions, but in the internal dispositions of him whom it visits.”⁷⁹ In this regard, the desert is not about what is going on around us, rather it is the internal struggle to respond to temptations as they appear.

As we evaluate Jesus’ time in the desert, we are reminded of the purpose and reason for our personal deserts. Monod believes, “It was necessary that Jesus should be tempted. The temptation was no mere accident in his life; it was useful, essential to it.”⁸⁰ Our deserts are essential to our spiritual life. The loneliness of the desert and the inability to predict when it will end presents us with a form of testing, which can only be overcome through connection with God. From seeking to understand the value of desert experiences held in the past we must now move on to and gain a greater understanding of how they can be experienced today.

Monastic Desert Experiences

We are able to gain value and insight about the desert through the lives of monks and hermits of the early church (400 A.D. and prior). Through their life, we can observe how they embraced the desert life and, in doing so, began a movement we refer to today as the “monastic movement.” A publication surfaced with a number of sayings from these individuals. The following statements were in regards to the desert:

⁷⁸ Monod, 7.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 24.

90. An old man was asked, 'How can I find God?' He said, "In fasting, in watching, in labours, in devotion, and above all, in discernment."⁸¹

107. One of the Fathers said, 'If the interior man is watchful, he can preserve the exterior man also; if this is not the case, let us guard our tongue as much as we can.'⁸²

108. The same old man said, 'Spiritual work is essential, it is for this we have come to the desert. It is very hard to teach with the mouth that which one does not practice in the body.'⁸³

They believed time in the desert would provide opportunities to go deep within one's soul or center. It was not a place to simply exist. There was work to be done. Monks referred to this work as spiritual work and it was essential. The primary reason people went to the desert was to change, and to do so, on the inside.

We are not all given the opportunity, nor calling, to serve as Monks and live in monastic communities. However, we are in need of internal evaluation, which is something the desert is quick to provide. We must embrace the desert of the past in order to help us value our current desert experiences. It is important to see the desert as a place of transformation.

Modern Day Deserts

"Deserts", in our lives today, come by God's leading through our circumstances or by our conscious decision to seek God. Many of us experience the desert for the first time when we are broken and in need. It is during our time of weakness that we are reminded of God's strength. However, we will not always enter the desert because of

⁸¹ Translated by Sister Benedicta Ward, SLG. *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: The 'Apophthegmata Patrum'* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1975), 29.

⁸² Ibid., 33.

⁸³ Ibid.

brokenness. We can also seek the desert for refreshment and renewal on a consistent basis. Our prior desert experiences serve as reminders of why we need the desert. In the desert, we learn to value the unknown and that God's intent for the desert is to use the unknown for the purpose of transformation. The desert experiences of the past serve as reminders for us to value the desert today.

Many of us envision the desert as a long period of time away from everything familiar. We must consider what a desert might look like today. Most ministers have never been to Israel, let alone been stranded in a desert. It would also be safe to assume that for most of us a desert is not even within driving distance. What does that mean for those of us who are in need of a desert experience? Could it be possible for the desert to exist amidst our daily lives?

How do we enter the desert today? Those of us in ministry can eventually find ourselves with a lack of passion for our current position, burnout, financial difficulties, loss of a loved one, etc. All of these examples could lead us into a modern day desert? We can also experience the desert through situations that are out of our control. Monod addresses uncontrollable circumstances with this description, "You have hitherto earned with difficulty your own bread and that of your family: but suddenly employment fails, or your healthy gives way, or your usual resources vanish."⁸⁴ It is possible that situations like Monod describes could lead us to the desert. We must learn to look for and value modern day desert experiences as they present themselves. It could be that our small desert experience (lack of passion, loneliness, apathy, etc.) could lead to a longer desert experience. All elements of the desert are different for everyone, especially the time spent there and the message received.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 84.

Length of the Desert

Paul Miller, in his book, *A Praying Life*, believes that “the hardest part of being in the desert is that there is no way out. You don’t know when it will end. There is no relief in sight.”⁸⁵ Here we see the desert is intended to be difficult and is designed to lead us toward our need for God. Understanding, of course, that deserts are different for everyone and, “God takes everyone he loves through a desert.”⁸⁶ We must find comfort in the reality that God takes us through deserts because God loves us. Miller describes a modern day desert as a process that begins by experiencing the death of things we love. The desert provides a way for God to lead us to our authentic self and has a way of changing us.

Scripture supports the concept of an extended desert experience. We see the use of forty years and forty days. Historically speaking, God has spoken to people during a period of removal. This important concept is something ministers need to understand and value. Our removal from ministry, by choice or circumstances out of our control, can lead us to the desert. As we evaluate the desert experiences of our fore-fathers and mothers we are reminded that desert experiences take time. We cannot simply encounter God one day and consider that to be our desert experience. Historically, we see significance in the number forty. However, this does not indicate that all people will have a desert experience connected to the number forty. As we take a closer look at the lives of those who visited the desert, we will begin to see that each had a different length of time, different response and a different purpose for their desert experiences.

⁸⁵ Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2009), 184.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Today, we see Christians attempting to emulate this experience by participating in forty-day fasts from daily necessities, especially during the Lenten season. There are also those who choose to spend an extended amount of time on a silent retreat in the quest for a modern day desert experience. I have yet to see someone engage in a forty-year commitment to the desert other than modern day monks and mystics. We must not be afraid of a commitment to the desert, nor must we expect that our deserts will have a time limit.

Gift of the Desert

Miller explains, “the best gift of the desert is God’s presence”⁸⁷ yet, “...when we are in the middle of the desert, we feel like God is absent.”⁸⁸ The desert is lonely and in many ways out of our control and many of us do not want to admit we are there. Our deserts can leave us feeling lost, confused, and in most cases alone. Charles Swindoll describes the feeling of the desert in this way:

In that lonely place, you find yourself stripped of all the things you hang on to for comfort—all the stuff you felt you needed through life but really didn’t need at all. It gets very quiet in those wide, sandy wastes—so quiet that you can hear your pulse pound in your ears, so quiet you can hear the voice of God.⁸⁹

Our desert experience can be filled with people and feelings of loneliness remain.

Swindoll emphasizes, “isolation is always part of the wilderness experience.”⁹⁰ The feelings of loneliness are necessary in order to show us what we need from the desert.

When we embrace the desert experiences in our daily lives we come to understand that as

⁸⁷ Miller, 185.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 189.

⁸⁹ Swindoll, 73.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 73.

they lead us toward loneliness we find a greater connection with God. Miller suggests “when we suffer, we long for God to speak clearly, to tell us the end of the story and, most of all, to show himself. But if he showed himself fully and immediately, if he answered all the questions, we’d never grow; we’d never emerge from our chrysalis because we’d be forever dependent.”⁹¹ We expect God to correct any difficulty in our life and the intent of the desert is not for God to fix, but for a deep communion with God to be formed. The purpose of the desert is to become a place of transformation and growth, and most importantly, a place where we become aware of God’s presence.

For some reason, those of us in ministry today are slow to look for God in the middle of our ordinary lives. We expect a major event, which will shift our thinking and our priorities. In many cases, it takes a major event to catch our attention. We use examples in Scripture as examples of how we should look for God today. Moses was literally in a desert, tending sheep. As he was taking care of the sheep, he looked to the hillside and saw a bush that had caught on fire. He was caught off guard, yet he embraced what was happening at that moment and moved toward the bush. Eventually, Moses became aware of God’s presence, took off his shoes, and watched expectantly as the bush burned. What most intrigued him was the fact that the flame remained.⁹² Moses was reminded of God’s presence through this experience and we must expect the same as we embrace our personal deserts.

⁹¹ Ibid., 194.

⁹² Dunnam and Ogilvie, 60.

The Result of the Desert

God can and will use our time in the desert to prepare us for our present and future ministries. Therefore, we can walk forward confident of God's sovereign plan. God's intent was for the desert to become a place of reflection and renewal. Scripture reminds us of this purpose as we evaluate the desert experiences of those in the past. We cannot enter the desert with the hope of receiving anything we have observed in the desert experiences of others. Our desert experiences are a reminder for us to embrace our spiritual journey in a new and fresh way and to seek God as we experience unexpected hardships or transitions.

The desert, as a picture of depravity, is what guides our understanding of God. We are led to a place, which has nothing, to provide opportunity for God to be everything. There is something to the desert, something that draws us to this place of unknown. It could be our desire for transformation or the desire to experience something new and different. We might want to go there to simply be alone, away from the troubles of our normal life, or we may arrive there as we attempt to leave our present struggles. We have the opportunity to look back over the course of Christian history and see what happens in the lives of people as they enter and exit the desert. Yet, something keeps us from willingly going there. From mere observation, it would appear as though we should all seek the desert, for this was where people encountered God.

We must learn to resonate with the stories of life in the desert, realizing that the desert exists today. As we will see through our life, there will be seasons where we choose to go into the desert and others when we are placed there by our circumstances.

As we see the temptations of Jesus, we are reminded of our temptations while in the desert. We must learn to embrace these possibilities as truth and learn to value the desert as a place of healing and spiritual transformation. In the next chapter we will explore the gifts of silence and solitude as they lead us toward listening while in the desert.

Chapter 3

THE DESERT: A TIME TO LISTEN

“God is the friend of silence.”⁹³

The desert increases the awareness of our need for silence and solitude, as well as provides us with many opportunities to listen, reflect, and be silent. It is when we are silent and alone that we are able to hear from God. Mother Teresa understood this concept and emphasized that God can and will be found in silence. Our spiritual deserts are where we hear and experience God in new ways, and this happens when we engage with silence and solitude.⁹⁴ Embracing solitude during our desert will help us see and value where we are today and help us envision what must happen to move forward in transformation.

God speaks to us when we are quiet and aware. Silence is what reminds us of God’s presence in our life. As we move through this study, our goal is to gain a greater understanding of the value that our desert experience has on our daily lives. In doing so, we will become aware of God’s connection to silence. The desert can have a tremendous impact on our life, both personally and spiritually, if we can learn to take advantage of the gifts it has to offer. We will focus on three gifts of the desert that we must understand and evaluate as we learn to value our spiritual deserts. These gifts are: 1) silence [and solitude], 2) awareness, and 3) discernment. Silence and solitude work together in our

⁹³ Kolodiejchuk, Brian, *Jesus Is My All in All: Praying with the "Saint of Calcutta"* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 16.

⁹⁴ We will see and understand as we move forward that silence and solitude work together, so we will use the two terms interchangeably.

desert experience, which is why they are connected and is where our focus will be for the remainder of this chapter.

Understanding Silence in the Desert

We listen best when we are quiet. The monastic life teaches a lot about embracing the silence. It is “in the silence and simplicity of their lives” where “monks learn to listen to the persistent voice of discontent within themselves.”⁹⁵ Monks learn to value silence when they are quiet and alone. We cannot truly hear God or ourselves without the space silence provides. Monks lived with the enjoyment of leaving the distractions to obtain a closer relationship with God. It was believed that,

By abandoning worldly distractions, by assuming a conversion of manners, their newly structured life forced them to an intimate and growing relationship with their inner voice. Their absorption with this voice, their heightened listening powers, is not usually possible in the distracting environment of the world. Their various vows help cultivate and strengthen a deep posture of inner awareness.⁹⁶

The monastic value of silence’s intent was to move toward a deeper connection with God, which leads us closer toward the purpose of the desert.

Brendan Freeman, in his book, *Come and See: The Monastic Way for Today*, emphasizes our need to learn how to communicate in times of silence. His observation of monastic communities has led him to a greater understanding of what silence can do for community and individual spiritual growth. He describes the importance of silence in this way:

It fosters mindfulness of God. It opens the mind to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It favors attentiveness of heart and solitary prayer to God. There is almost a

⁹⁵ Marsha Sinetar, *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics: Lifestyles for Self-discovery* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 27.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

casual sequence in these statements. Attentiveness of heart leads to mindfulness of God. Mindfulness of God opens the mind to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which brings us into solitary prayer to God. Solitary prayer to God is the blossom, the fruit that is nourished in the soil of silence.⁹⁷

The desert can provide adequate opportunity for silence and if we intentionally use our time there we can hear God and ourselves in a new way. Our desert can and should lead us away from the distraction of people in our everyday lives. We do not have to move into a monastery to create this type of silence, but we must leave the noise brought into our lives by people. We can do this daily by taking a walk, going on a bike ride, or driving away from the distractions of our life. It is important that we find some way to move away from distractions and into silence.

Others, besides monks, have discovered that silence is of great value to our spiritual life. Silence is a large part of Quaker Spirituality and Christopher Holdsworth, a Quaker from England, explains their experience of silence in this way:

Something can happen, when we are silent. We notice, first, perhaps, the sounds in the room where we sit—the crackling of logs on the fire, the ticking of the clock, the wind at the window. Then we may hear ourselves—the gentle hiss of our breaths, in and out, the rumbling of our digestive system, the beating of our heart, a sound which may be particularly frightening as we grow old. But gradually, if we persist in the quiet, in the exploration of inner space, the strains may fall away, and we become aware of something which we may recognize as a sense of the presence of God, or to which we may give another name, but which is at the time, somehow alive with a silent word for us.⁹⁸

In the silence of the desert we notice new things and we hear new sounds. It is in silence that we are able to explore God and ourselves in a new way. Silence provides space for us

⁹⁷ Brendan Freeman, *Come and See: The Monastic Way for Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 87.

⁹⁸ Christopher Holdsworth, *Steps in a Large Room: a Quaker explores the monastic tradition* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1985), 55.

to intimately experience our surroundings. Most importantly, we are able to stop and listen. It is in silence that we are able to explore God and ourselves in a new way.

Silence provides a foundation for our desert experience, yet there appears to be some confusion in the area of silence and listening. Richard Foster, the well-known and well-loved Quaker who gave the Church *Celebration of Discipline*, explains, “If we are silent when we should speak, we are not living the Discipline of silence. If we speak when we are to be silent, we again miss the mark.”⁹⁹ Therefore, we not only need to be silent, we also need to know when to speak. Listening while in the desert requires our complete attention and we must learn to pay attention to where our desert is leading. This is only possible when we engage in silence and solitude. Foster continues, “only when we learn to be truly silent are we able to speak the word that is needed when it is needed.”¹⁰⁰ We must understand silence as a valuable part of our desert experience and utilize it as integral part of our desert experience.

Understanding Solitude in the Desert

As we experience solitude while in the desert we must remember it can be transformational to ourselves, as well as our communities. Henri J.M. Nouwen writes, “Solitude is not a private space over against the public space of community, nor is it merely a healing space in which we restore ourselves for community life. Solitude and community belong together; each requires the other as do the center and circumference of

⁹⁹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 99.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 102.

a circle. Solitude without community leads us to loneliness and despair.”¹⁰¹ Solitude is what prepares us for community. Nouwen teaches, “When we pray alone, study, read, write or simply spend quiet time away from the places where we interact with each other directly, we are in fact participating fully in the growth of community.”¹⁰² This is an important reality for ministers to embrace as our ability to engage in solitude will affect the communities where we minister. We cannot allow solitude to become “a place in which we can hide out”¹⁰³ to avoid issues in life. Rather, it should be a place where we actively wait and seek transformation.

Solitude and Loneliness

Richard Foster explains, “Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude.”¹⁰⁴ The desert is lonely both physically and emotionally and this loneliness is what leads us toward solitude. Foster further states:

Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness. It is quite possible to be a desert hermit and never experience solitude. But if we possess inward solitude we do not fear being alone, for we know that we are not alone. Neither do we fear being with others, for they do not control us. In the midst of noise and confusion we are settled into a deep inner silence. Whether alone or among people, we always carry with us a portable sanctuary of the heart.¹⁰⁵

Our ability to embrace solitude while we are in the desert will impact our ability to engage with the desert in our daily life. However, first, let us understand what solitude

¹⁰¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, “Solitude and Community”, *Worship* 52, no 1 (January 1978): 13-23, 17.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Foster, 96.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

has to offer our everyday lives. Foster's insight on solitude supports this need for solitude in our daily lives and especially during our desert experiences.

Christopher C. Moore introduces the concept that our fear of solitude is what retains us from intentionally seeking to be alone.¹⁰⁶ In Scripture, we see "the wilderness" as a time of solitude, but also a time of temptation and a place of danger. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness.¹⁰⁷ Many Israelites experienced the wilderness as a form of exile and one of the worst forms of punishment. These instances of exile were not of anyone's personal choice, yet the outcome was transformation. Likely, we will consider our time in the desert to be one of the most difficult periods in our life and ministry. Yet we must learn to view these periods as opportunities for transformation, just as we have seen in the desert experiences of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus.

Moore references our entrance into solitude as something that most often comes to us in ways that are out of our control. He asserts, "It is often not because we have intentionally entered into it but rather because we have been driven into it, either by life circumstances or by emotional and spiritual forces beyond our control."¹⁰⁸ In many ways, we have been driven into our desert because of circumstances out of our control, and it is likely that we have no idea how to respond. Solitude is a gift of the desert that we must embrace as we go through our deserts, regardless of how difficult they may be.

Solitude carries a tremendous amount of risk. Dallas Willard explains, "In solitude, we confront our own soul with its obscure forces and conflicts that escape our

¹⁰⁶ Christopher C. Moore, *Solitude: A Neglected Path to God* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 2001), 22-23.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 4:1-10.

¹⁰⁸ Moore, 44.

attention when we are interacting with others.”¹⁰⁹ Solitude helps us go deep within ourselves to evaluate what needs to change and how our desert experience can help. This is primarily what our deserts are about. As we move forward, we will see that solitude can and will provide a foundation for our desert experience.

Solitude and Distractions

Our understanding of solitude is extremely important as we attempt to address the new distractions we face with technology. We spend time each day responding to emails, updating our Facebook status, tweeting, texting, etc. We are no longer required to be in the presence of people for life or ministry, which should lead us closer to solitude, but it does not. A 2010 survey of indicates social media is more of a distraction than a helpful resource for interacting with people. The survey results indicate that “more than half of U.S. workers waste an hour or more a day on interruptions: 60 % come from electronic devices and e-mails, while the other 40% come from traditional sources, such as phone calls or chats with colleagues. 45% of workers say they can't go more than 15 minutes, on average, without an interruption.”¹¹⁰ We are no longer required to be in the presence of people, which theoretically should lead us closer to solitude, but instead it seems as though social media is leading us away from people, and also farther away from solitude.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 161.

¹¹⁰ Tim Mullaney, “Tech Distractions for Workers Add Up”, http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2011-05-18-social-media-worker-distractions_n.htm (accessed July 14, 2011).

¹¹¹ I see this as a personal distraction in life and ministry as the unwritten need to keep up with what has been posted on Facebook.

Today we face new challenges in the area of sustaining our ministries, as well as our own spiritual life. This is especially true since it is possible to be “virtually” busy for the entire day. We must understand solitude to be the gift of the desert it was intended to be. Solitude is vital while we are in the desert and is something we need to embrace as we come out.

Dallas Willard explains solitude in this way:

In solitude, we purposefully abstain from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our conscious interaction with others. We close ourselves away; we go to the ocean, to the desert, the wilderness, or to the anonymity of the urban crowd. This is not just rest or refreshment from nature, though that too can contribute to our spiritual well-being. Solitude is choosing to be alone and to dwell on our experience of isolation from other human beings.¹¹²

Willard advocates that we must choose solitude. It is not simply about us being alone. We must also be aware of our need to leave, whatever it may be, and engage in deep communion with God. This may mean shutting off our computers, phones, reading devices, etc. in order to engage in true solitude. Removal has always been a part of the Christian experience; and while we may not physically leave, we can remove the distractions and be alone with God.

Solitude as a Rhythm of Life

Jesus held tremendous value for solitude and even begins his ministry by engaging in forty days of desert living where he was tempted by the devil.¹¹³ Throughout the Gospels, Jesus shows us the rhythm of ministry in the way he retreated, encountered God, and then re-engaged with the multitudes. We observe Jesus spending the night alone

¹¹² Willard, 161.

¹¹³ Matthew 4:1-11.

before selecting the disciples¹¹⁴ and he removes himself after feeding the five thousand.¹¹⁵ Jesus was intent on teaching his disciples the importance of solitude, and in doing so he instructed them to be alone when they returned from preaching and doing ministry.¹¹⁶ Jesus modeled this teaching by withdrawing after healing the leper.¹¹⁷ Throughout Scripture, we see Jesus embracing the need for solitude as a necessity for everyday life and we must learn to do the same. Our time in the desert reminds us of this need.

We see that Jesus understood the need to be alone and he also embraced the need for community. Throughout Scripture, we see Jesus “establishing a rhythm of public ministry and private time.”¹¹⁸ This rhythm is important for ministers, especially as we attempt to understand and value the desert. Jesus’ example is one we should follow in our daily lives and as we understand the importance of the desert. Jesus had community and yet “he continually found those ‘lonely places’ to be with God alone.”¹¹⁹ He knew being alone was important, and his need for solitude became a vital part of his life and ministry.

It is nearly impossible to drive to a physical desert on a daily basis in order to experience solitude. Therefore, when we talk about solitude, we are talking about being away from people and removing ourselves from our current situations. Our time spent in the desert can provide opportunities for understanding the value of solitude, as well as

¹¹⁴ Luke 6:12.

¹¹⁵ Matthew 14:23.

¹¹⁶ Mark 6:31.

¹¹⁷ Luke 5:16.

¹¹⁸ Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 47.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

ideas about how to begin incorporating it into our daily life. Morrow Lindbergh touches on the idea of balance between the business of life and the need for solitude. She addresses the issue in this way:

The solution for me, surely, is neither in total renunciation of the world, nor in total acceptance of it. I must find a balance somewhere, or an alternating rhythm between these two extremes; a swinging of the pendulum between solitude and communion, between retreat and return. In my periods of retreat, perhaps I can learn something to carry back into my worldly life.¹²⁰

We see here an argument for the necessity of solitude as part of our rhythm of life. However, I am unsure if many ministers understand the concept of a “rhythm of life.” Instead, we know how to be continually available to people in an extremely unhealthy way. As ministers, it is important that we learn how to maintain a rhythm of life. This is a vital lesson of the desert and one that can save us from our ministries and ourselves.

Throughout Scripture, we are able to evaluate Jesus maintaining a “rhythm of life,” which provides us with a healthy example of this practice. Mark 1:35 states, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” Here we see Jesus embracing solitude as a part of his rhythm of life. Jesus presents us with an example of our need for removal from people and the business of life for periods of time.

It is apparent that we have a continual need for solitude in our life. We need removal from our worldly duties of pastor, husband/wife, mom/dad, etc. Many of us acknowledge this need and take periodic sabbaticals and retreats. However, many

¹²⁰ Morrow Lindbergh and Carl H. Pforzheimer, *Gift from the Sea* (New York: Pantheon, 1955), 30.

ministers who actively engage in periods of solitude return to the same unhealthy patterns of life. Moore indicates:

Solitude, however, needs to be perceived as more than a way to recharge our batteries so that we can return to the same assumptions and the same lifestyle that have brought us to the point of exhaustion and depletion in the first place. The practice of solitude presents an opportunity to challenge these very assumptions and lifestyle issues. Thus, in the largest sense, solitude is a path of repentance, of “turning again” on the way to embracing a healthier and more balanced life expression that is aware of the presence of God.¹²¹

Our time spent in the desert can become a wake up call to changing our life. We can decide to live differently, as a new person, and can move toward developing a healthy “rhythm of life.”

Solitude: Exterior and Interior

Thomas Merton supported the reality that solitude can be found while in the presence of others. If we are to experience consistent solitude in today’s world, we must learn how to find and experience this type of solitude. Merton advocated for the importance of silence and community by encouraging his readers to seek silence and solitude “not in isolation but in constant reference to the community.”¹²² He described a difference between “exterior” solitude and “interior” solitude. Exterior solitude is when we physically remove ourselves from everything. Merton would argue that “interior” solitude is more important because it is directly focused on our soul. Our understanding and value for “interior” solitude can come as a result of our desert experience and can provide us a daily space for retreat.

¹²¹ Moore, 16-17.

¹²² John F. Teahan, “Solitude: A Central Motif in Thomas Merton’s Life and Writings,” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no 4D 1982, (p 521-538), 522.

John F. Teahan explains, “Interior solitude fosters selflessness, deepens recognition of finitude, assists in recovering the authentic self, thus preparing the soul for mystical union with God.”¹²³ Here we see Teahan advocating for the desert as a place for deeper connection with God, accomplished through solitude. This understanding helps us see and value “interior” solitude as an important component of daily spiritual life.

Quakers refer to interior solitude as “finding your center.” Thomas R. Kelly explains the reality of this concept when he writes:

Life from the Centre is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. He is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well.¹²⁴

Solitude leads us to our center where we find our true self. It takes no effort, yet it takes all of us.

Most individuals imagine solitude to be a departure from all things present. However, when thinking of solitude as an internal journey, this changes our understanding and helps us take a deeper look at our spiritual journey. As we experience internal solitude, we are reminded of our ability to have consistent experiences of time alone. It would appear as though Merton viewed solitude as a both/and. We must be willing to remove ourselves, but we must also be willing to look deep within ourselves. Our removal will do us no good, unless we are willing to explore the issues, which are deep within our soul.

¹²³ Ibid., 524.

¹²⁴ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 124.

Teahan supports Merton's argument that "the integrity of any true community rest on its respect for solitude and that those seeking solitude should first come to terms with their community."¹²⁵ Thus, solitude should never become an escape from our problems, yet it can and will provide healing during our time in the desert. We should understand that "the loneliness, suffering, and dread of the solitary life are not, of course, without purpose, a purpose Merton saw as mystical in its ultimate significance."¹²⁶ Merton believed "that the suffering wrought by solitude is necessary to liberate the true self."¹²⁷ At the end of his life he concluded that problems in real life are never actually solved. They are simply endured. He created a paradox between the union with and separation from our struggles in life. Our deserts provide us with this opportunity.

The Desert Fathers valued the desert because they believed it to be the place where they would meet God. Yet, many of us are unwilling to embrace the desert in the same way today. The difficulty we face in our understanding of solitude has been explained in this way:

But I wonder whether the difficulty we experience in imagining such an experience is due in part to our habit of moving past that moment in Jesus' life too quickly. I wonder whether here as elsewhere we have been too quick to imagine we know the meaning of the experience—namely that Jesus' temptations in the desert were a necessary, but largely symbolic, part of his preparation for what was him in his baptism. Have we underestimated, I wonder, the degree to which Jesus himself struggled in that place?¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Ibid., 526.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 527.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Work of Loneliness: Solitude, Emptiness, and Compassion", *Anglican Theological Review*, 88 no 1, (Winter 2006): (25-45) 35.

We must understand that Jesus' experience in the desert was intended for present day Christians. Also, we must value this example of a desert experience and understand the elements of temptation that will exist as we have a personal journey in this place. We must understand that our deserts are necessary and can be used to prepare us for whatever is next in life.

Solitude as a Spiritual Discipline

Richard Foster indicates, "Without silence there is no solitude."¹²⁹ This is important as we explore greater ways of listening. The desert is intended to be a time where we listen to what God is saying through our life, and listening is what leads us towards our next steps. Our ability to embrace silence and solitude will impact our ability to listen to God during our desert. Silence is powerful, and "we must come to understand and experience the transforming power of silence if we are to know solitude."¹³⁰ Silence is what leads us to solitude. Foster explains, "the purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear."¹³¹ This is what we need from our desert experience.

Foster writes on the concept of solitude as a spiritual discipline, something we can learn to embrace while in the desert. In his popular book *Celebration of Discipline*, Foster makes many suggestions as to how we can incorporate solitude into daily life. However, our need for solitude while in the desert is quite different. Our personal deserts have a way of making us avoid solitude. Therefore, we must be intentional about how, when and why we are engaging in solitude.

¹²⁹ Foster, 98.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Ministers need opportunities to embrace solitude as part of their daily life. Foster indicates there is a need for space to engage in solitude on a daily basis. He indicates churches are quick to build large buildings for worship, yet there are few spaces created specifically for solitude. If, in fact, this was a primary component of Jesus' life and ministry, should it not become a vital part of the church?

While Foster's book is focused on solitude as a spiritual discipline, his advice is still valuable for our desert experiences, especially as we understand how the desert holds value in daily life. One of his helpful suggestions is to set aside time for moments of solitude throughout the day. This is helpful for a desert experience, because we are intentionally setting aside time to work through our desert, whatever it may be. He also advises that we create a space specifically for solitude, somewhere we know we can visit often, without interruption. We need space and time in the desert. We see this in the lives of Moses, Elijah, and especially Jesus.

Solitude as a New Environment

Anthony Storr explains, "The capacity to be alone is a valuable resource when changes of mental attitude are required."¹³² Our deserts are meant to assist us in making positive changes, including our attitudes; solitude assists in this process. Storr arrives at this conclusion by observing a psychologist's evaluation of individuals undergoing periods of mourning and stress. Storr believes that "after major alterations in circumstances, fundamental reappraisal of the significance and meaning of existence may be needed."¹³³ We should expect nothing less than a need for re-evaluation as we move

¹³² Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 29.

¹³³ Ibid.

through the desert. Solitude provides a foundation for this reappraisal to occur and moves us toward a deeper understanding of where we have been and where we are going. The conclusion of Storr's research leads him to believe that solitude and sleep are the primary needs of anyone going through a difficult time.¹³⁴ This will also be true for someone experiencing the desert. We need to find spaces in life to rest and be alone.

The outcome of Storr's research was intended to produce change in his clients. He was aware that "changes of attitude take time because our ways of thinking about life and ourselves so easily become habitual."¹³⁵ In the past it was believed by many psychologists that change was more difficult for individuals fifty and over. However, research has indicated that solitude can transform people, regardless of age. Storr explains, "Whether in young or old, changes of attitude are facilitated by solitude and often by change of environment as well. This is because habitual attitudes and behavior often receive reinforcement from external circumstances."¹³⁶ If we intend to move out of our desert, we must be willing to explore new environments and learn to consistently engage in solitude, regardless of where we are in life and ministry.

Retreats are great ways to work through desert experiences. The word "retreat" has become known as a word of healing. The concept of retreat was formulated for religious purposes of meditation and worship. It is interesting to learn that "The Retreat" was given to a British mental hospital founded by Samuel Tuke in 1772.¹³⁷ The hospital

¹³⁴ We see this especially in Elijah's experience.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 33.

existed under the premise of tolerance, kindness, and minimum restraint. Tuke created a safe space that was hoped to provide a change for the mentally ill.

My argument is not for ministers to evaluate their mental illness, nor am I indicating ministers are mentally ill. Rather, it is to support the concept of removal as a form of healing. Our deserts, regardless of cause, provide a source of stress to our life, which moves us toward an unhealthy state, leaving us in need of healing. In some cases, we even experience an element of grief. Therefore, we need to take the concept of removal and intentional solitude seriously. Storr believes “removing oneself voluntarily from one’s habitual environment promotes self-understanding.”¹³⁸ Our deserts can be a form of voluntary removal and can lead to healing, as well as transformation.

Solitude as the Lost Gift of the Church

In many ways solitude is no longer existent in the church. Moore believes solitude to be a lost gift within the church. He states, “Solitude promises to renew in us that sense of really seeing things, really noticing things. How different this is from the way most of us spend our days, constantly rushing from one thing to another, ‘getting things done,’”¹³⁹ As viewed in this way it would seem as though solitude is vital for understanding the desert. This can best be accomplished while we are alone, experiencing times of intentional reflection. Solitude is the greatest gift of the desert and “the greatest gift of solitude is an awareness of the presence of God.”¹⁴⁰ This is our primary purpose for engaging in the desert, one that we must not forget.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹³⁹ Moore, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.

We should find comfort when we hear, “Be still and know that I am God.”¹⁴¹ In this verse, God is calling us into solitude and an awareness of God’s presence. Our times in the desert are simply reminders for us to be alone with God. It appears as though solitude was of great value throughout Christian history. Moore indicates that “if solitude in fact leads us toward attentiveness, personal healing, insight, clarity, and an experience of the presence of God, then we would expect many individuals to be hungry for the gifts of solitude in our own day.”¹⁴² However, true solitude is not valued or embraced in everyday life, and we must change this reality.

As we evaluate what was modeled in the desert experiences of the past, we see quite the opposite. The early ascetics spent time in the desert “because they believed that there they could find God, and learn to love and serve him effectively.”¹⁴³ They were surrounded by desert and valued their time there because Jesus had spent time there. It was apparent that people throughout Christian history sought God in the desert, as experienced through Moses and Elijah. Today, “many of us live at such a pace, where we almost boast that we never have a spare moment, that we can go for long periods without ever having time for solitude and the challenges which it brings.”¹⁴⁴ Time in solitude provides opportunities for self-evaluation, to allow areas in need of growth to surface.

¹⁴¹ Psalm 46:10.

¹⁴² Ibid., 14.

¹⁴³ Christopher Holdsworth, *Steps in a Large Room: a Quaker explores the monastic tradition* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1985), 48.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 50.

The Results of Silence and Solitude

As we engage in a deeper understanding of silence and solitude, we see how silence makes solitude effective. The two work together to move us closer toward understanding the desert. Willard explains that silence “reminds us of death, which will cut us off from this world and leave only us and God.”¹⁴⁵ This space we arrive in, where we are alone with God, is the goal of the desert. The desert is focused on our relationship with God and is intended to move us away from people. Our ability to be silent in this space with God is what makes solitude possible. Willard suggests that engaging in the practice of not speaking can assist in our understanding of God, others, and even ourselves, which is what the desert is intended to teach us.

Listening

The outcome of our desert experience is dependent upon how we listen. It is easy for us to justify our desert as something we need to “snap out of.”¹⁴⁶ We may not be able to justify what is going on in life, but we must remember that it has purpose. Our ability to recognize this purpose can be what helps us embrace our desert and allow it to become the transforming agent it should be. We must get to the point in life where we seek out desert experiences as a way of listening to God. We can accomplish this through solitude and we must seek and search for solitude and not assume it will appear.

Jesus states, “Let anyone with ears listen!”¹⁴⁷ Jesus makes this statement several times throughout the New Testament. He believed that listening was important and an

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 163.

¹⁴⁶ Other people may feel the need to interject what they believe our desert experiences are teaching us and even why they have occurred in our life. Therefore, we must intentionally seek out opportunities to listen for what God is teaching us during this period of time in our life.

¹⁴⁷ Matthew 13:9.

essential part of the Christian life.¹⁴⁸ Listening is a vital part of our spiritual life, especially while we spend time in the desert. The desert is filled with opportunities to listen and our ability to listen is what helps us move through it. However, we can only listen when we embrace the practice of solitude and silence.

Listening to God

Christ followers have been attempting to hear from God and master techniques for many centuries. This has occurred both in and out of the desert. Thomas Merton understood the individual need to listen to God. He put tremendous value on listening and truly hearing God's voice while experiencing solitude. However, he spent a significant amount of time leading retreats and discussions on spiritual growth. Merton's life is a good example of how our desert experiences can be used for others. He believed that what separates individuals from God is not worldly distractions, rather the piles of stuff we collect within our soul.¹⁴⁹ Our inability to work through our own "stuff" is what keeps us from listening to God.

The mystics have a great deal to say about listening to God. Brother Lawrence believed one could remain in God's presence by continuing to converse with him throughout each day. He believed it was possible to live in the presence of God and that it was God's intent for us to do so.¹⁵⁰ Brother Lawrence writes, "Thus I continued some years, applying my mind carefully the rest of the day, and even in the midst of my

¹⁴⁸ This was especially true since Jesus challenged the view of religious leadership up to this point.

¹⁴⁹ Richard H. Schmidt, *God Seekers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 316.

¹⁵⁰ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2004), 12.

business, to the presence of God, whom I considered always as with me.”¹⁵¹ Here we see how Brother Lawrence applied a desert practice to his daily life. He passionately believed in the necessity of acknowledging God’s consistent presence in our lives.

In *The Confessions of St. Augustine* we see that everyone is faced with their own share of deserts. They are a part of life. Many of us can probably relate to question of St. Augustine: “And how shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord, since, when I call for Him, I shall be calling Him to myself?”¹⁵² Even Augustine was having trouble deciphering God’s voice from his own. In this question, we see the realization of our need to listen and discern during our desert. We will see the connection between listening and discernment in Chapter Five. We are to listen for our voice and for God’s. We must realize that everyone struggles when attempting to hear God’s voice. Becoming aware of our need to listen is the first part, and actually listening comes later.

Richard Rohr takes a different approach to listening to God. However, I would venture to say that his end goal is the same as those of the past: to form a deep union with God. In his book, *Everything Belongs*, the author explains the value of contemplative prayer. He believes it is “in the silence of contemplation, that we will observe the process whereby we actively choose and create what we pay attention to.”¹⁵³ We must intentionally make space in our desert for listening to occur. As we create space, we must learn how to pay attention and evaluate to see if we are allowing listening to occur. Rohr believes that while we experience times in the desert, we must choose to do the things

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 37-38.

¹⁵² *The Treasury of Christian Spiritual Classics: Complete and Unabridged with Contemporary Introductions* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 11.

¹⁵³ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (Spring Valley, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 108.

that will bring us closer to God. It is our choosing to listen that helps us hear. We have to choose to use the desert to go deep within ourselves and to connect with God. Our life can and will speak to us if we will only listen.

Rhor encourages the concept of choice in relation to listening. He does so by creating a connection between religious and secular freedom by stating, “Secular freedom is having to do what you want to do. Religious freedom is wanting to do what you have to do.”¹⁵⁴ We should want to create space in our lives to be alone with God. This is important for ministers and for Christians in general. If we are living for God, we must learn how to create space for God in our life, and the desert may be the place for us to learn how. We can walk out of our desert with a greater value for listening and an understanding of our need to listen in daily practice. As Rhor indicates, we should want to listen, as it is a gift of our religious freedom.

Listening to Self

Listening is difficult, and even more so when it is forced. It seems as though desert times provide us with more than enough time to listen. Silence is a huge component to listening. We are not truly listening unless we are silent. Henri Nouwen believes that silence is valuable to our lives and in many ways we crave it. This is true for most of us, “but when we enter into silence we encounter a lot of inner noise, often so disturbing that a busy and distracting life seems preferable to a time of silence.”¹⁵⁵ Most of us agree the best way to handle difficult situations is to stay busy. This is especially

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 33.

true for anyone who is living in a time of uncertainty. We want to avoid our problems, but the desert allows us time to work through issues in our inner self.

Merton also believes that solitude was necessary and could be what teaches us to value who we are as individuals. He believes “when we have abandoned our pretensions and illusions and have nothing left to prove, peace becomes possible, both within us and in the world at large.”¹⁵⁶ At the heart of our desert experience is our need to find ourselves, be real, which will lead us toward transformation. We should take our time in the desert to help us find what is at our core.

Our desert experiences should remind us of the daily importance of embracing solitude in silence as a way of communing with God. As we have discussed above, we must learn to listen to our own life. Parker Palmer, a well-known Quaker author, believes that our vocation comes from listening. The root word for vocation in Latin is “voice.”¹⁵⁷ Therefore, it would make sense for your vocation to be the voice for who you are. This is no different in ministry. A vocational minister should be able to find their voice within their ministry position. Our deserts provide us with opportunities to listen and evaluate if we have found our voice in our current ministry position.

Dwight Judy said, “We really lose nothing and perhaps gain everything if we trust that through listening well to the longings of our hearts, we may actually be listening for divine guidance.”¹⁵⁸ There is a connection between our hearts and God’s spirit. However,

¹⁵⁶ Schmidt, 316.

¹⁵⁷ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.

¹⁵⁸ Dwight H. Judy. *Discerning Life Transitions: Listening Together in Spiritual Direction* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), 38.

we must be mindful to determine when they are in unison. Most of us live as though this is extremely difficult, yet it appears as though this was God's intent all along.

There is a temptation to only listen to our own voice and this can and will be dangerous to our spiritual health. We must allow God to be the primary voice we listen to while in the desert. Even when we feel distant from God, we must not let this distance be what keeps us from listening for God's voice. Our understanding of solitude and silence provides a foundational understanding for the importance of listening to both God and self.

Listening Through Prayer

We also listen to God when we pray. Time spent in prayer is how we communicate with God. God hears us, and we are supposed to hear God. However, most of our examples in Scripture focus on the plea to God rather than listening to God. Let us consider the following verses:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.¹⁵⁹

Here we see the Psalmist asking God to help him while he was in the desert. These verses place tremendous focus on God's listening to us, rather than us listening to God. Prayer is meant to be time spent with God, not time for us to complain about what God is not doing or where God is not. Our time in the desert is meant for us to engage God in such a way that we hear God's voice. We have removed ourselves, we are alone, and we are

¹⁵⁹ Psalm 77:1-2.

prepared to hear God's voice. When we walk through the desert believing solitude and silence will lead us to God, only then will we hear God. We must be quiet and learn to listen.

Prayer is a conversation, but "more than anything, prayer is primarily listening and waiting."¹⁶⁰ Henri Nouwen states it this way:

The truth is prayer is more than feeling, speaking, thinking, and conversing with God. To pray also means to be quiet and listen, whether or not we feel God is speaking to us.... We listen for God in an attitude of openness of heart, humility of spirit, and quietness of soul. We let our mind descent into our heart and there stand in the presence of God.¹⁶¹

Our time spent in prayer becomes how we know God. It is during this time, if we truly listen, we will know the purpose of our desert. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and we must believe there is a reason for our desert experience. Just as David indicates in Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

The question we may need to ask is, "Do we believe that God knows us?" In this passage, David is acknowledging that God knows him completely, and God is present to all of his situations.¹⁶² David's acknowledgement of God's constant presence in his life should provide comfort to us as we spend time in the desert waiting. The desert can be a

¹⁶⁰ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 63.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² <http://www.psalms-139-commentary.com/commentary.html> (accessed May 6, 2011).

reminder that God is already present to our situation; we must simply listen for God's voice.

Some have found that contemplative prayer is a way of deeply connecting with God. It provides an excellent space for listening and would not exist without solitude and silence. Contemplative prayer is what keeps us rooted and safe. This deep sense of prayer reminds us that we are loved and cherished. This is key for ministers, especially since we are leading others along their spiritual journey. Nouwen states,

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word, and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?¹⁶³

If we, as ministers, cannot commit to spending intentional time listening to God, then we must force ourselves to evaluate our intention for ministry in the future. Desert times can become a reminder of our need to listen. Our ability to listen to God will help us hear for our own life, as well as for those with whom we minister.

Our desert experience can provide us with an opportunity to explore solitude and silence in new ways and truly learn to listen to God. As we learn to listen, only then can we move through the desert, embracing all it has to offer. In the following chapter, we will explore the concept of awareness as another gift of the desert that leads toward a greater understanding of God's faithful presence.

¹⁶³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 43.

CHAPTER 4

THE DESERT: A TIME TO EXPLORE

*“Inwardness is the great and silent witness to the magnificence of God.”*¹⁶⁴

Understanding Awareness in the Desert

As we walk through the desert, we must envision a journey toward something of significance. This journey is not taken in our physical bodies. Instead, it is an inward movement toward our soul. This inward journey is intended to lead us toward a greater understanding of God and ourselves. Marcus Aurelius states, “People try to get away from it all—to the country, to the beach, to the mountains. You always wish you could too. Which is idiotic: you can get away from it anytime you like. By going within.”¹⁶⁵ Awareness is what enables us to pay attention to our deserts and experience them in their totality. Maintaining a sense of awareness can help us gain a value for inwardness and incorporate it into our everyday life.

Awareness can be defined as “having knowledge of.”¹⁶⁶ When we “have knowledge of” something we have a greater understanding of its capabilities and desires. Our knowledge helps us pay attention. In the desert, we learn to pay attention to God and ourselves. Therefore, awareness is vital for our desert experience as it leads us toward gaining knowledge of our self and of God. This type of knowledge is what assists us in

¹⁶⁴ Calvin Miller, *The Table of Inwardness* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 14.

¹⁶⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *Getting Away from it All*, Inward and Outward, <http://www.inwardoutward.org/2011/07/16/getting-away-it-all> (accessed July 16, 2011).

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definitions/awareness?cx=partner-pub-0939450753529744%3Av0qd01-tdlq&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8&q=awareness&sa=Search#922> (accessed August 16, 2011).

our desert experiences and can be found in direct correlation with the concept of attentiveness.

Charles M. Wood and Ellen Blue explain that “there are two situations in which our attentiveness is itself likely to require a higher degree of attention: when we are learning to pay attention in the first place, or working on improving our attentiveness; and when we are facing a problem or situation that for some reason requires more deliberate scrutiny.”¹⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that the desert provides us the opportunity to do both. For many of us, the desert is our first experience in paying attention to life in relation to ministry, and it provides us with a difficult situation where we are in need of guidance. Our ability to pay attention, or to become aware, during our desert experience moves us toward a greater knowledge of what God desires to accomplish in and through our life.

Inward and Outward Awareness

Calvin Miller leads us toward an understanding of awareness through his focus on outwardness and inwardness. He believes an understanding of both outward and inward awareness is necessary for developing a healthy spiritual life. Miller understands our lives to be filled with many opportunities for expression of outwardness and inwardness. For example, in ministry, we spend the majority of our time focusing on outwardness as we are present to the needs of others, so much so, that we often become consumed by what we are accomplishing in our outward lives, and we begin to neglect our need for inward awareness. In doing so, he states:

Outwardness bandages the suffering in the clear sight of all who will behold compassion. It goes to church, lifts the communion wafer, holds hymnals, bends

¹⁶⁷ Charles M. Wood and Ellen Blue, *Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 9.

knees, traces crosses in the air. It drops coins in offering boxes, posts its public pledges, listens, sermonizes, sings, prays, witnesses, and works its way from prison to hospital...Soon outwardness, which first served Christ alone, finds ways to serve itself while it serves Christ. At last it moves away from Christ altogether and finds a godlike glory in its own interests.¹⁶⁸

Outwardness is found in the life of every minister as expressions of how we “do” ministry, which as we described earlier, can lead us into the desert. Our ability to balance the two extremes is what leads us toward a healthy ministry. Miller explains outwardness and inwardness as “the poles of spirituality as north and south poles are the earth’s geography.”¹⁶⁹ Awareness leads us toward knowledge of our need for both as a vital part of our life in ministry.

Inward awareness leads us toward a greater understanding of ourselves and of God. The desert’s intent is for us to focus on inwardness and it provides an excellent environment to do so. When we focus our attention inward, we are reminded of our need to connect with God. Inwardness is how we create space in our life to acknowledge God and God’s activity in our life. Inwardness is necessary and is where our attention must focus as we engage with the desert.

¹⁶⁸ Miller, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Awareness as a Stage

Others have attempted to understand our individual development of awareness. The following chart was created by M. Robert Mullholland, as a four-stage explanation for what he calls the “Classical Christian Pilgrimage”¹⁷⁰:

The Stages	Their Aspects
Awakening	Encounter with God Encounter with Self Comfort Threat
Purgation	Renunciation of blatant sins Renunciation of willful disobedience Unconscious sins and omissions Deep-seated structures of being and behavior Coming to trust
Illumination	Total consecration to God in love God experienced within Integration of being Unceasing prayer Increasing social concern
Union	Abandonment to Grace Prayer of quietness Dark night of the senses Full union/ecstatic union Dark night of the spirit

This chart indicates that awareness is a vital part of our spiritual journey. We see this especially during the stage of Awakening where we experience an encounter with God and self.

As we walk through our desert, we find ourselves revisiting the stage of Awakening, which is really an experience of increased awareness. We are in desperate

¹⁷⁰ M. Robert Mullholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 81.

need for an encounter with God, yet we are unsure what that will mean. Also, we need to meet ourselves in a new and fresh way. According to Mulholland's chart, encountering God and self occur at the same time. This is something many of us miss as we are taught through popular Christian thought to primarily focus on connecting better with God when life is difficult. While this connection is tremendously important for spiritual growth, we also have a deep and vital need to connect in a greater way with ourselves and to be in touch with who we truly are. The Stage of Awakening can feel comfortable because we are growing into a greater understanding of who we are. The possibility of a threat arrives when we realize that God is present and we cannot make changes without God's help. This is exactly what happens in our desert experiences. As we encounter God we realize that God is present, we are in need of God, and we need to make some changes in order to move out of the desert.

All four stages of the "Classical Christian Pilgrimage" have the same goal in mind, "Union with God." This seems like an ideal goal for anyone seeking a spiritual connection and should be what we seek as we move through our desert. For example, a member of my current congregation experienced burnout while serving as a lay leader in his prior congregation. When he and his wife began their transition into retirement, he was not in a place where he was ready to be involved in church. So, he took some time to reflect and heal before finding a church community. The feeling of burnout led him to the desert where he gained greater awareness of self and God. He and his wife are now in a better place personally and spiritually because of his decision. He did not intentionally seek to enter the stage of Awakening, yet as he stepped away from church life he began to understand his need to gain a greater understanding of God and himself.

As we explore awareness, we are reminded that we must begin where we are. For some, this might be in the desert and for others we may simply need time to refocus.

Regardless, we are all in need of awakening, whether we realize it or not. Mulholland comments:

The Christian's identity and value do not reside in the fragile order and tenuous control that she or he imposes upon life. Identity and value are found in a vital and living relationship with Christ as Lord. This relationship liberates Christians from dependence upon their little systems of order and fragile structures of control. Not that believers live without order or control, but they are liberated from dependency on those systems and structures for their sense of self.¹⁷¹

We cannot find our happiness or sense of purpose in what we do. Instead, it should come from whom we are in relation to—Christ. The stage of Awakening helps us to see this reality that the One who created us, wants us to know who we are. It will be difficult to move forward without understanding who we are at our core and how tightly woven this is with our relationship with Christ.

Mulholland believes that lack of trust is what keeps us from living out our full potential. We only allow God to have the parts of us that are under our control.¹⁷² This leaves us in charge of our life rather than God. It is only when we truly trust God with our whole life that we are able to move into a greater understanding of what God would have for our life. If we look back at our chart, we can see this is the only way we can move closer to union with God. We must choose to step into the stage of Awakening and trust that God's best for us will emerge on the other side.

Mulholland's emphasis on knowing self during the stage of Awakening is supported by Anthony DeMello who believes self-awareness is what allows us to truly

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 89.

¹⁷² Ibid., 92-3.

understand who we are and is what helps us move forward in life. He says, “You can have a man go on a thirty-day retreat and come out all aflame with the love of Christ, yet without the slightest bit of self-awareness.”¹⁷³ DeMello emphasizes our need to be aware of both God and of self. As we learn about awareness, we must understand how these two experiences work together. We will begin by exploring our awareness of God.

Awareness of God

God remains present to our lives, even when we feel as though God is not there. The desert elders were “convinced that God is not only in the middle of our struggle, but that God is always there. God is never absent, never far away.”¹⁷⁴ Therefore, we need to develop a healthy awareness of God’s presence in all circumstance, and especially as we walk through our desert experiences. This is primarily accomplished through prayer. Prayer is an important part of the spiritual journey, yet it seems as though “most of us have little conscious awareness of our relationship with God until something takes place that causes us to experience our own limited nature, or until something happens to make us realize that life is not something we can control.”¹⁷⁵ We gain a greater understanding of this reality as we experience our personal deserts. When this occurs we begin experiencing a “conscious awareness of God’s presence.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Anthony DeMello, *Awareness*, Edited by J. Francis Stroud, S.J. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 14.

¹⁷⁴ John Chryssavgia, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 104.

¹⁷⁵ Joann Nesser, *Contemplative Prayer: Praying When the Well Runs Dry* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 2007), 19.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Being present is an important part of the desert as it is how we acknowledge what the desert means to our life and ministry. Awareness is what leads us towards being present to life, regardless of how difficult that might be. Marjorie J. Thompson makes reference to the idea of being present in *Soul Feast*, her book on Christian formation. Her belief is that God is always present to us, so we should be “present to God with conscious awareness.”¹⁷⁷ Conscious awareness allows us to be attentive to God’s presence in all moments of life, and it also assists in our ability to remain present to our deserts. This type of awareness reminds us of God’s presence and reminds us of our responsibility to remain present as well.

Our conscious awareness can be assisted by the ancient spiritual discipline of “practicing the presence of God” and learning to notice God’s presence in our everyday lives.¹⁷⁸ In other words, prayer becomes a part of everything we do. A Carmelite monk by the name of Brother Lawrence shared in his writings how he practiced God’s presence as he prepared meals for those living in the monastery.¹⁷⁹ In doing so, he said he was more aware of God’s presence while serving others than he was during ordinary worship. Another practice that can assist us in becoming more aware of the presence of God is to pray the “Jesus Prayer, a spiritual legacy of the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries: ‘Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.’”¹⁸⁰

As we explore this need for a conscious awareness of God, we are constantly reminded that God is present whether we are in an oasis or in a dry and barren desert.

¹⁷⁷ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 35.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷⁹ Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2004).

¹⁸⁰ Nesser, 51.

People throughout all periods in history have struggled with being aware of God's presence in their life. St. John of the Cross refers to his desert as the "dark night" and believes the purpose of the darkness or desert is to set us free from something in our life. As we become more aware of God in our desert, we must be aware of the privilege we have to meet with God in this way. St. John expresses his awareness of God in this way:

O guiding night!
 O night more lovely than the dawn!
 O night that has united
 The Lover with His beloved,
 Transforming the beloved in her Lover.¹⁸¹

St. John acknowledges the transforming power of the desert comes from being in direct connection with our awareness of God. Our "dark night" leads us towards this awareness, allowing the desert to transform our lives. As we gain more awareness we will begin to see that our "dark night" or "desert" has purpose and value for our life.

Amy Wilson Carmichael (1867-1951) was a missionary to India and founder of the Dohnavur Fellowship which served neglected and ill-treated children. She did not always believe her life was important. As a child born in Ireland, she had always wished to have blue eyes. Amy was given brown eyes and tried many times to pray away the brown. Surprisingly, her eyes never changed. As Amy grew older and began serving others, she began to find her purpose in life. When she arrived in India for her first missionary assignment she died her skin with coffee and dressed in Indian clothes. It was during this time in her life that she realized why God had given her brown eyes. The color of her eyes paved the way for her in India. If her eyes were blue everyone would have known she was an outsider. It took most of Amy's life for her to realize why God

¹⁸¹ Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans., St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 296.

had made her different.¹⁸² Through this experience she learned to look deeper into her life to find true meaning.

The Jesuit Priest Jean-Pierre de Caussade authored the book, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. Caussade was convinced that God speaks to us through every moment. He believed that all events are purposeful and used by God, and understanding this is what brings true happiness.¹⁸³ Therefore, it is important to embrace the present moment and live as though it is God's communication with us. Caussade writes:

God's activity runs through the universe. It wells up and around and through every created thing. Where they are, there it is also. It precedes them, accompanies them, follows them. They need merely to allow its waves to carry them on. If kings and their ministers, princes of the church and of the world, priests, soldiers, and ordinary people knew this, they could easily become very holy! They would need do nothing more than faithfully carry out the simple duties of Christianity and those called for by their station in life, cheerfully accept all the troubles that come their way, and submit to God's will in all they do and suffer (but of course without seeking any kind of trouble for themselves)...This is the true spirituality, valid everywhere and for everybody....It is the ready acceptance of all that comes to us at each moment in our lives.¹⁸⁴

God is present to and with us in every situation we face. We simply need to become aware of God's presence in every moment of our life.

When we embrace every moment as a gift we are more likely to see and feel God's presence in our lives. Caussade would argue that this is the only way to experience true happiness. He makes emphasis of "what God arranges for us to experience at each moment is the best and holiest thing that could happen to us."¹⁸⁵ We must learn to be

¹⁸² <http://www.tlogical.net/biocarmichael.htm> (accessed May 10, 2011).

¹⁸³ Richard H. Schmidt, *God Seekers: Twenty Centuries of Christian Spiritualities* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008), 213-15.

¹⁸⁴ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *L'abandon à la Divine Providence* (Paris, 1966), 1.3.

¹⁸⁵ Caussade, 1.4.

present to the suffering and sadness, as much as we are present to joy and celebration. It seems as though we quickly move toward a belief that God has abandoned us, especially when we arrive in the desert through the difficulty of our circumstance. The desert can be a reminder to us of God's consistent presence in our life. Our ability to acknowledge God's presence in all situations can help us see purpose and meaning in our deserts and can lead us to a greater awareness of God in our life.

I had to face this painful reality early on in ministry. During seminary I had the opportunity to work as a campus ministry intern at a community college near the seminary I was attending. This was a great experience, but I wanted to experience a variety of campus ministry settings. There just happened to be an opening for a College and Career Minister at a church in Mobile, AL. The church was a two-hour commute from seminary, but it seemed worth the drive since I wanted a different college ministry experience in my final year of seminary.

Mobile appeared to be the ideal location to live, as this was where my ministry with the church would take place. This made sense in theory. The church had offered a small salary for 30 hours a week to build the College and Career ministry at the church, or so I thought. My desire in ministry was to connect more local churches with the campus ministry. Having been on the other side of the coin, I knew the difficulty campus ministers felt in relation to church-based college ministry. It appeared as though things were going well. New students were being introduced to the ministry and numbers were increasing, which is what the church wanted. However, a year later, in my final semester of seminary, the budget for my position was significantly decreased without prior notification. The amount would not pay the rent for the apartment I had rented, much less

the gas to drive to seminary. We were not in a recession and the church finances were not struggling. Someone had decided to spend the money elsewhere.

This experience left me with no desire to work in church ministry. I sought wise counsel from a seminary professor, for whom I had a great respect. He advised me to be thankful to have such an experience early on in ministry. He said most people do not experience this type of hurt in ministry until later in life. Finally, he thought the best thing would be to give my resignation, thank them for the experience, and move on. Unfortunately, I did not give my resignation at that time. I suffered through a few more months and then resigned.

A great reminder of God's consistent presence in our life can be found in the prayer of St. Patrick. He guides in our understanding of conscientious awareness by stating:

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
 God be in my eyes, and in my looking;
 God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
 God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
 God be at my end, and at my departing.¹⁸⁶

St. Patrick reminds us of our need to be aware of God's presence in our life. God's leading while in the desert will prompt us to explore new areas, all of which have potential to lead us into a greater connection with God. St. Patrick's prayer serves as a reminder of how we become aware of God's presence. It is also a consistent way for us to refocus our life to remain present to God as God remains presence to us. For us to truly know and understand God's purpose for our desert, we must become aware of God's

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 49.

presence, and we must invite God to be a part of our desert experience with confidence that God is already there.

As I reflect on my church experience, I am reminded of how God used that experience to prepare me for today.¹⁸⁷ Looking back, I now realize that I needed the desert at that moment in my life to help me to take a deeper look at my own life. I am now able to look back at this past experience and see how it holds value today. My awareness of the good and the bad were the primary teaching elements to my desert experience.

Awareness of Self

In many ways, the desert leaves us feeling deserted, away from comfort, stability, and resources. The desert has been described in this way, “Your very existence is, therefore, threatened. In the desert you will find no one and no thing. In the desert, you can only face up to yourself and to every aspect of your self, to your temptations, and to your reality. You confront your own heart, and your heart’s deepest desires, without any scapegoat, without any hiding place.”¹⁸⁸ One of the greatest values the desert holds is gaining self-awareness. We feel abandoned and alone, yet we are able to stand face to face with ourselves.

¹⁸⁷ At the time, I had no idea the value this experience held to my life and ministry. However, as I learn more about my need for awareness, I am reminded that God was present, despite the difficult circumstances in this ministry. St. Patrick’s prayer helps us remain focused on God’s presence. It also asks us to invite God to remain.

¹⁸⁸ Chrysavgis, 33.

Self-Awareness and our True Self

Self-awareness is primarily about the “knowledge of self.” Therefore, it is imperative to take a deep look at who we are in order to truly become self-aware. Marsha Sinetar believes gaining self-knowledge is the best way for a person to lay a healthy foundation for desert living. However, she says it takes great courage and is usually resisted, and this type of knowledge looks different for everyone. It can “mean letting go of the idealized image their intellect (and perhaps family or friends) think they ‘should’ be. For these people, living out the real self may mean living quite unspectacular lives. For others, knowing the truth of their being may mean stretching into untried, frighteningly difficult arenas.”¹⁸⁹

Our deserts can become a time of self-awareness, a time where God reveals who we truly are. Knowledge of ourselves teaches us to be who God created us to be. Miller believes “inwardness draws us to that unseen reality.”¹⁹⁰ We can easily live out who we think we are and miss out on what God has created for us. Miller makes a great observation when he indicates, “we are the keepers of inwardness and we tend it alone.”¹⁹¹ We must make a decision to look deep within ourselves as we encounter the desert. Looking back in Chapter Two, we can evaluate Elijah’s desert experience. He entered the desert not knowing what to expect. However, God used the desert to help him look deep within himself. Elijah ultimately became self-aware through the experience, and he made important life decisions as a result. His desert experience led him to step down from his position of leadership.

¹⁸⁹ Marsha Sinetar, *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics*, (Paulist Press: New York, 1986), 14.

¹⁹⁰ Miller, 17.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

Self-Awareness and the Desert Fathers and Mothers

Studying the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers explains why they were “comfortable talking about darkness and about the struggle through the darkness. They are not ashamed of their darkness or of talking about their darkest thoughts.”¹⁹² Those who have gone before us have acknowledged that God is God and they are not, recognizing the purpose of the desert is to highlight this concept. Therefore, we should not be ashamed of our desert experiences. Instead, we should embrace them as the transforming agents they are intended to be, understanding this awareness as a primary purpose for our desert experiences. It is apparent by their life that these individual valued awareness as a part of life and practice.

Dr. Carol Spencer¹⁹³ believes we have set unrealistic expectations on the spiritual journey for individuals. In turn, this leaves us with an unhealthy experience in our Christian life and unaware of what the desert has to offer our spiritual life today. Part of being ourselves comes from our ability to recognize our desert as an integral part of our life. Dr. Spencer explains that in order to recover this vital element of our spirituality, we must take a closer look at the Early Church Fathers and Mothers. They were completely aware of the value the desert had on their personal lives. For this very reason, they were able to find joy in their desert experiences, regardless of how difficult they might have been. Their experience has been explained in this way: “The desert dwellers can be joyful because they know that they are human and that failure comes with the territory of being

¹⁹² Ibid., 105.

¹⁹³ Dr. Carol Spencer is an adjunct professor for George Fox Evangelical Seminary’s Doctor of Ministry Program. She was a teaching professor upon my entrance into the seminary in Fall of 2009. Her class on Christian Spirituality provided an excellent foundation for our understanding our need to explore the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. My background is Southern Baptist, so this class made me personally aware of our need for this exploration and ultimately what lead me to my dissertation topic.

human... They know they are not God; and they know that it is only through God that all things are possible... The desert elders knew that perfection rests with the divinity; and certainly not in our frailty or in any ability that we may imagine that we have to negotiate with the divinity about our virtues and our vices.”¹⁹⁴ This understanding of the desert provides for a greater understanding of ourselves and of God, realizing we each have a role in the desert. Here we see an awareness of God and self as a vital part of our journey through the desert as experienced by those who have gone before us.

Later in Christian history, Osuna, a Franciscan monk, taught the concept of recollection. His desire was for the world to experience God’s glory. Noel O’Donoghue also connects the concept of recollection to awareness. She defines recollection as “a kind of silent inner attention to God which ascended upwards on the two wings of self-knowledge and knowledge of God in Christ.”¹⁹⁵ Our ability to participate in recollection will assist in our incorporation of awareness into our desert experience and eventually into daily practice. O’Donoghue further emphasizes the importance of this practice by stating, “Prayer in the sense of silent or ‘mental’ prayer was seen as the centre of life and even as the whole of life.”¹⁹⁶

We see a similar concept with Catherine of Siena as she made reference to the “cell or house of self-knowledge,” which supports the idea of a daily desert experience.¹⁹⁷ This cell leads one to an inner experience, which will reveal the truth about oneself and

¹⁹⁴ Chrysavgis, 105.

¹⁹⁵ Noel O’Donoghue, *Adventures in Prayer* (New York: Burns and Oates, 2004), 4.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Diana L. Villegas *Discernment in Catherine of Siena*. (March, 1997), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb6404/is_n1_v58/ai_n28685217/pg_13.html (accessed April 22, 2011), 3.

about God's love. Spending time in the cell in continuous prayer is how one learns the reality of God's love, how to live out this love to our neighbors and to God, and how to make decisions. The cell of self-knowledge led Catherine to a greater awareness of God, self, and others. Catherine believed a greater self-knowledge "involves coming to an honest appraisal of one's selfishness and acquiring the felt consciousness that this is the root cause of disordered desires and behaviors. In the cell of self-knowledge we learn our vulnerability to sin and disordered behavior, and we recognize our incapacity to change merely through will power."¹⁹⁸ Therefore, it is our recognition of our need for God, which leads us to delve into self-knowledge, and most importantly, desert living. Our brokenness is what leads us into this "cell" that Catherine refers to. Catherine beautifully states,

And so the soul is inebriated and set on fire and sated with holy longing, finding herself filled completely with love of me (God) and of her neighbors. Where did the soul learn this? In the house of self-knowledge...Every perfection and every virtue proceeds from charity...To attain charity you must dwell constantly in the cell of self-knowledge.¹⁹⁹

Catherine makes reference to several metaphors: a tree and light. A person is a tree, which is rooted in knowledge of self and God. All elements of life stem from the roots of the tree and are nurtured by knowledge of God's love. Light is how we "see" elements in our life that need to change or grow. The "light" has different levels and is brighter for those who have connected on a deeper level with God. Her goal was for

¹⁹⁸ Villegas, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

people to achieve “perfect light,” which will lead to the deepest understandings of God’s purpose for their lives.²⁰⁰

Catherine of Siena’s value of self-knowledge led her to understand how “her lively faith had enabled her to see that whatever happened to her, or to anyone else, came from God, not through any ill-will he might bear his creatures, but from his overwhelming love.”²⁰¹ Catherine “put all her hope and trust in divine providence, since she knew divine providence was a wonderful thing, and that it would never disappoint those who placed their trust in it.”²⁰² She believed God’s presence was constant and real. We must learn to be aware of God’s constant presence, especially as we embrace our deserts. Our ability to maintain a constant awareness of God’s presence in our life will impact our spiritual journey, as well as the individual journey of those we minister to on a daily basis. Gaining a proper value of awareness can transform the way we see God at work in the lives of others and our own.

Self-Awareness and Spiritual Benefits

When we walk through our deserts with an understanding of the value of self-awareness, we are reminded of how “our spiritual struggle enables us first to see, then to understand, and finally to embrace our limitations and failures.”²⁰³ We cannot fully comprehend all the desert has to offer without gaining an understanding of who we are and why we have arrived at this moment. As we gain awareness, we are reminded that

²⁰⁰ Villegas, 8-9.

²⁰¹ Margery Kempe, *The Cell of Self-Knowledge: Early English Mystical Treatises* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 37.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid., 38.

our deserts do hold purpose to our life. Without a proper self-awareness, we would likely fail to experience the totality of our desert experience.

Frederick Buechner compiled a devotional filled with excerpts from his previous writings. The daily readings connect an aspect of his life. The goal being to help the reader see and understand the value of their personal life. In his first reading, entitled “Life Itself is Grace” he writes,

If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.²⁰⁴

It is encouraging to observe a man at the end of his life, encouraging others to embrace and cherish everything. All moments are valuable and all are part of who we are. It is important that we see the value of every moment as we live through our desert experiences, even if some of those moments are hard to understand.

Parker Palmer addresses the real need to live out the Quaker saying of, “Let your life speak,” by encouraging the evaluation of life before moving forward. He emphasizes this point by saying, “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”²⁰⁵ If we truly are to let our life speak, we must learn to evaluate and observe everything about it, the good and the bad, especially while we are in our deserts.

²⁰⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 2.

²⁰⁵ Palmer, 3.

Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser point out the importance of self-awareness for ministers saying, “The leader is the one fundamentally responsible for what happens inside of himself or herself.”²⁰⁶ In a sense, we are in charge of our own spiritual experiences and for ministers this is a vital component of our life, especially as we walk beside others. Our spiritual deserts allow us opportunities to evaluate ourselves in life and ministry. They are intended to provide us with an opportunity for reflection and evaluation. Shawchuck and Heuser state it this way:

To be led by the Spirit into the wilderness, there to do business with the temptations that are peculiar to Christian leadership, is the inescapable path to freedom from those temptations. To remain true to our call, we must continuously examine our inner motivations and desires.²⁰⁷

As part of his teaching on self-awareness Dr. Dan Brunner includes a session on the need for “ballast.” He explains the temptation of the minister is to only focus on what people can see, rather than the parts that keeps it afloat. In sailing, ballast is the ability to maintain balance below the water. As ministers, we have a temptation to avoid maintaining healthy ballast and Brunner believes this is partly because ministers are unwilling to embrace their humanity and states, “Christian formation has to begin with an unrelenting fearlessness to see the truth, to stay human, to not try to project something other than who we are.”²⁰⁸ This would not be possible without awareness. The Doctor of Ministry program focused on Leadership and Spiritual Formation track, intentionally

²⁰⁶ Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving the People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 28.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁰⁸ Dan Brunner, “On Ballast and Character,” (class lecture, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, October 22, 2009).

addresses this issue. Throughout the program, you spend time doing self-work and evaluation. This allows for a greater understanding of ourselves, as people first, and then ministers. Brunner believes the Myers-Briggs Personality Test to be a foundational component of this process. He indicates that by understanding our temperament, we will gain a greater self-understanding, which will assist us in spiritual leadership and growth.²⁰⁹

Self-Awareness in Everyday Life

Anthony DeMello believes self-awareness to be an important part of everyday life. He explains the importance of self-observation, “To watch everything in you and around you as far as possible and watch it as if it were happening to someone else...It means that you look at things as if you have no connection with them whatsoever.”²¹⁰ DeMello believes that when we personalize everything, we impede our ability to make healthy observations. Instead, we must look at our life as if it were not our own, understanding that our ability to develop a sense of self-awareness during our deserts can and will impact our daily life.

Utilizing self-awareness in this way will allow us to see ourselves in a different light. If we are purposeful with self-awareness, we will walk out of our deserts with a new perspective on ourselves and of God. DeMello encourages his clients to use observation as a tool of measurement. As ministers, it seems as though we place this unneeded pressure of perfection on ourselves that sometimes does not allow for humanity to exist. The thought and reality of this is harmful to ourselves, as well as those to whom

²⁰⁹ Dan Brunner, Class Lecture “Personality Types,” (George Fox Evangelical Seminary, October 26, 2009).

²¹⁰ Anthony DeMello, S.J. and J. Francis Stroud, S.J., Ed., *Awareness* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 19.

we minister. We must learn how to work on ourselves before we can lead others in their spiritual journey.

Knowing yourself can be what brings the most happiness in life. No one can teach you how to be aware, just as you cannot teach someone else. There is no technique to be followed. DeMello states the following in regards to awareness, “You only change what you understand. What you do not understand and are not aware of, you repress. You don’t change. But when you understand it, it changes.”²¹¹ Our ability to know and understand ourselves can drastically impact how we see and interact with others. We learn that most of the times we are upset are directly related to something in our own life of which we are not aware. All of our issues are essentially related to awareness. When we grasp the reality of this issue everything changes and we are able to move forward as a healthy human being.

As we mentioned in the introduction to the desert, many of us enter ministry unprepared and unaware of our need to balance our personal spiritual life with that of our congregation or ministry. Our seminary training did not equip us for what we have encountered in life and ministry. Self-awareness is what reminds us of this need, and once acknowledged, it can lead us toward a healthy life and ministry.

The hardest part about self-awareness is that we are responsible for making it happen. We have to address our need for self-awareness as we experience the desert or we will not gain all that the desert has to offer. As we explore our deserts, we must realize our need for self-awareness and allow it to be a part of our desert experience. We must value self-awareness as it leads us closer to God and assists us as we make ourselves available to others.

²¹¹ Ibid., 28.

The Results of Awareness

Value for the Desert

Awareness helps us find value in our desert experience, which is something many of us miss as we walk through the difficulty of our deserts. The desert provides us with an opportunity to utilize awareness as a source of transformation and renewal in our spiritual life and ministry. As we encounter the desert, we are able to learn how to look at each moment of the desert and see how it adds to our life. Gaining a greater understanding of awareness in relation to God and self will lead us toward an understanding of our need to be present, especially while in the desert.

Quakers emphasize awareness with their famous saying, “Let your life speak.”²¹² In order for our life to speak, we must learn to value ALL of life. As we evaluate life and ministry while in the desert, we must learn to become aware of what God is saying to us through our life. This seems like an easy concept to embrace, but the reality remains that we tend to only allow great moments in our life to hold value. We would rather forget those moments of pain or regret. However, these moments hold value to who we are today. If we are to truly let our life speak, we must be willing to take a deep look at those moments as we embrace the desert.

As ministers, we must be willing to look at ourselves and embrace who we are, before we are able to lead others. However, in most instances this is not the case. A proper self-awareness can lead us toward understanding what the desert can offer our lives today and in the future. Furthermore, our ability to take a deeper look at ourselves will determine what impact the desert will have on our life. The present moment is all about where we have placed ourselves in relation to God. Thomas Merton believes,

²¹² Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 2.

In order to find God in ourselves, we must stop looking at ourselves, stop checking and verifying ourselves in the mirror of our own futility, and be content to be in Him and to do whatever He wills, according to our own limitations, judging our acts not in the light of our own illusions, but in the light of His reality which is all around us in the things and people we live with.²¹³

Merton emphasizes God should remain at the core of who we are. Self-awareness is not about elevating self. It is about understanding who we are in relation to God and realizing the important connection which exists between God and self. This can only occur as we become aware of God's presence in our life. As we experience the desert, we are reminded of our need for both as we journey forward.

Purpose for the Desert

Our acknowledgement of God's presence is what leads us to our purpose for our desert. Marsha Sinetar believes people grow by evaluating self-knowledge and having the ability to live out of this knowledge.²¹⁴ The desert provides us with the opportunity to explore who we are and how that is incorporated into our desert experience. Our understanding of God's presence in our life and design are all tied into the concept of self-awareness. This will lead us to understand and value our individuality and uniqueness.

God's presence in the desert leads us to pray alongside Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always

²¹³ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (San Diego: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1955), 120.

²¹⁴ Marsha Sinetar, *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 14.

though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.²¹⁵

Merton presents the beauty of our connection to God as we become aware of God's presence in our life. If we truly believe God is present, we make a conscious decision to allow our deserts to lead us toward an awareness of God. Awareness "takes us to a place where we want to know more."²¹⁶ It is how we get the most out of our desert experience and without awareness we would simply experience the desert and move on with life, never knowing exactly why our deserts occurred. We may experience some form of transformation, but we will not be able to experience the fullness of what the desert has to offer.

We must learn to be aware of God's constant presence, especially as we embrace our deserts. Our ability to maintain a constant awareness of God's presence in our life will impact our spiritual journey, as well as the individual journeys of those we minister beside on a daily basis. Gaining a proper value of awareness can transform the way we see God at work in our lives and in those around us.

As we spend time evaluating our desert experiences we must be reminded of the Oscar Wilde quote which states, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken".²¹⁷ Wilde was not an expert in religion or spirituality. His writings on the human condition were inspired at the height of the Victorian Era in London. He wrote many short stories and

²¹⁵ Thomas Merton
http://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/adorations/my_lord_god_i_have_no_idea.html (accessed May 13, 2011).

²¹⁶ Nesser, 50.

²¹⁷ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/be_yourself-everyone_else_is_already_taken/341131.html (accessed May 11, 2011).

poems that are still impacting people today.²¹⁸ Wilde believed that looking and understanding who we are is at the core of the human condition and can be what helps us find true happiness in life. His statement was not intended for individuals in the desert. However, we can find value in his words for our deserts today. In the process of establishing self-awareness we must remember that God has a purpose for our life. The difficulty of our deserts may make us doubt this purpose, yet when we are aware of who we are, and aware of God's presence in our life, we can move through our deserts with confidence.

Those who have gone before us have acknowledged that God is God and they are not, recognizing the purpose of the desert is to highlight this concept. Therefore, we should not be ashamed of our desert experiences. Instead, we should embrace them as the transforming agents they are intended to be, understanding this awareness as a primary purpose for our desert experiences. In the following chapter, we will discuss discernment as a process for decision making while in the desert.

²¹⁸ <http://www.cmgww.com/historic/wilde/> (accessed May 11, 2011).

CHAPTER 5

THE DESERT: A TIME FOR DECISIONS

We want a map. We want specified direction. We want security. And what God gives instead is an adventure in which we have the opportunity to know more fully who God is, what human life is, and who we ourselves are. We only get the assurance that God will be “along the pathway” with us when we undertake such an adventure. What we get is a relationship with God and self rather than a clear-cut answer. Even if it is filled with insecurity, isn’t that answer of relationship with God ultimately much more fulfilling than a specific onetime answer would be?²¹⁹

Understanding Discernment

As we observed in the previous chapters, the desert was, and continues to be, a place intended to bring people closer to God. We find the need for removal through our engagement with silence and solitude, which in turn, moves us toward a greater awareness of God and self. Our next step is to discover what our time in the desert can direct us toward and this comes through the process of discernment. When we enter the desert, we often do so with the expectation that God will instantly provide us with a way out. We may never understand why we have been led to this place. As we engage in the desert we are constantly reminded of God’s desire to connect with human beings, not for the purpose of domination, but unity so together we can live out our purpose.

²¹⁹ Dwight H. Judy, *Discerning Life Transitions: Listening Together in Spiritual Direction*, (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), 25-26.

As we engage desert living, we must learn to value what the desert provides for our daily life and ministry. Throughout this chapter, we will gain a greater understanding of discernment and begin to see it as a valuable decision-making process. We will take a closer look at methods of discernment utilized by those in the past, with the intent of gaining insight for using discernment today. As we explore the past, we will define discernment, as well as take a deeper look at how it is lived out in desert encounters from the past. Our goal is to gain a greater understanding of how discernment can be used in our personal desert experiences.

In the last chapter we discussed the need for awareness while in the desert and the importance of learning how to pay attention. When we pay attention in the desert we are able to see how everything works together.²²⁰ Discernment is the result of our awareness. It helps us pay attention to our past and begin focusing on our future. Discernment requires the knowledge of God and self, as well as our mind, heart, and spirit.²²¹ We learn that as we become present to our desert experiences, God remains present to us, which in turn, leads us toward a proper understanding of the next steps in life.

The term “discernment” is primarily used in the context of religious discussions. However, everyone has used discernment in decision-making, without the same terminology. Discernment developed as a desert practice many years ago. The concept of discernment is a “process that allows a person to see, without confusion and ambiguity, what differentiates things.”²²² When used as a verb, discern means “to separate, to

²²⁰ Charles M. Wood and Ellen Blue, *Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 16.

²²¹ Ibid., 19.

²²² Pierre Wolff, *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*, (Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1993), 3.

distinguish accurately one object from another.”²²³ It should be immediately obvious that this “process is necessary for making a choice.”²²⁴ Therefore, we are all in need of proper discernment as we encounter the desert.

We must understand the following as we engage discernment:

Anyone who hopes to detect the mind of God, to hear him, to learn his way and to probe his will must expect to be surprised, even to be contradicted. Most of us would expect the way to the mind of infinite Truth is diligent study, a searching out of wisdom, ancient and new. This is a way, but it is not the way. The first condition for detecting the divine mind is just what we would not expect: smallness, unpretentiousness, apparent weakness.²²⁵

Our desert experiences leave us weak, vulnerable, and in need. This is where we are most ready to hear from God. Our weakness makes us desire God’s help and, in many ways, is what allows us to recognize our need for God. Thomas Dubay explains, “Humility is a condition for discernment not only because the simple see, that is, because there is a readiness in their very persons.”²²⁶ Therefore, our deserts prepare us for encountering God. The Apostle Paul writes, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”²²⁷ We must learn to see our time of weakness as a time of strength, understanding that our strength comes from God. We will come to understand this as we learn to value discernment in the desert. Our strength comes from dependence

²²³ Ibid., 3.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Thomas Dubay, S.M. *Authenticity: A Biblical Theology of Discernment* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 125.

²²⁶ Ibid., 127.

²²⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

on God through decisions we make in the desert. Our weakness leads us to an understanding that God is our light as we make decisions. We hear the Psalmist's desire for God to guide their way by saying, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord, Lead me in your truth, and teach me."²²⁸ Our deserts allow us to experience God in such a way that we desire God to be a part of the decisions we make.

We value discernment as a vital part of our desert experience. It is what gives us the confidence necessary to move out of our desert and take steps forward in our spiritual journey. As we examine the use of discernment we will see that it referred to in three forms throughout history: individual discernment, communal discernment, and discernment of spirits. We will examine "discernment of spirits" as seen in early periods of Christian history. Individual and communal discernment will be discussed as we evaluate the results discernment.

Discernment is the third valuable gift of the desert. Intentional discernment can transform our lives as we move forward into the future and can bring the gifts of silence/solitude and awareness together. Therefore, we must be present to our desert experience and utilize our time to understand the value discernment can hold for our life.

Jim Elliott, in his missionary journey's, coined the phrase: "Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt in every situation you believe to be the will of God."²²⁹ As we are present to our deserts, God will remain present to us and we will use discernment with its true intent—to lead, guide, and direct our life.

²²⁸ Psalm 25:4-5.

²²⁹ Elizabeth Elliott, Ed. *The Journals of Jim Elliott*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1983), 278.

Historical Use of Discernment

New Testament Use of Discernment

Throughout the Old Testament, we see individuals such as Moses and Elijah spending time in the desert to commune with God. Yet, this communion was not considered to be discernment. Therefore, gaining a greater understanding of traditions in the early church is a necessity for understanding how discernment evolved over the years. As we evaluate Scripture and the history of discernment, we find that discernment, as a practice was not utilized until the New Testament.

The Synoptics introduce three core concepts: *metanoia* (repentance), the desert, and purity of heart. These components are what lay the foundation for Christian spirituality, which allows it to remain connected to its Jewish roots.²³⁰ In the Gospel of John, we see the concept of light verses darkness being a vital part of his message. This gives us the need for a decision making process which will help us know one from the other. Again, we see our need for discernment. The New Testament also points to Christ as providing our primary access to God and by the Spirit, Paul says, we “have the mind of Christ.” Discernment is what helps us make decisions involving Christ. The process of discernment in the New Testament is the same process we use today. Viewing Scripture in this way allows us to understand discernment as a part of the life of every believer.

Throughout the Old Testament we see wisdom as something necessary to gain. However, the New Testament introduces the importance of love. We must now determine how these two will work together. Some argue, “the goal of the spiritual life is not *gnosis*

²³⁰ Urban T. Holmes III, *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analysis and Introduction*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 18.

(wisdom), but *agape* (love)”²³¹ and that “in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries knowledge will prevail, in the eleventh through the fourteenth love will take over.”²³² Scripture instructs that we are in need of both love and wisdom. Discernment brings these two valuable components of the Christian life together and is what provides a connection between the Old and New Testaments.

As we are driven to the desert through our circumstances, we are reminded of God’s love for us. Ultimately, love is what we find in the desert. If we begin making decisions based on the love we have for God, then our decisions will lead us closer to God’s intended purpose for our life. Jesus emphasizes our need for discernment in Matthew 7:17 when he says, “In the same way, every good tree bears good fruits. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.”

Jesus recognizes our need for a method to determine the effectiveness of our decisions. He also introduces a way to measure our discernment process. Wolff believes, “if we work with a systematic method of discernment, we abandon a kind of magical behavior that puts too much trust in what is sometimes called instinct or spontaneity, sometimes even inspiration.”²³³ Discernment provides us with purpose in the desert. As we engage in a discernment process, we are reminded of God’s presence in our desert. In turn, as we begin to expect God to be present in the desert, and we find ourselves desiring to meet God there for guidance in life.

The term “discernment of spirits” was first used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11:

²³¹ Holmes, 20.

²³² Ibid., 21.

²³³ Wolff, 14.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Paul indicates this kind of discernment as a gift given by the Spirit. This particular gift is what is used to determine what is of God and what is not. Discernment of spirits is used today to reconcile “quarreling over opinions,”²³⁴ to “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart”²³⁵ and to “distinguish good from evil,”²³⁶ and to “test the spirits”²³⁷ to see if they are from God. It is safe to say that “discernment of spirits” as explained by Paul was primarily valuable to the early church.

Discernment in Christian History

Patristic commentaries on 1 Corinthians are a great resource for understanding Paul’s teaching out of monastic circles. John Chrysostom (344/54-407) wrote the oldest commentary from this era, concerning this form of discernment. At that time he was a presbyter at Antioch. Chrysostom used the method of Antiochene exegesis to help his hearers understand the discernment. He believed “discernment of spirits” was used to identify if truth was being spoken and helped believers discern if the message was from a prophet or deceiver. This gift also helped determine if a person was of the spirit or not.²³⁸

²³⁴ Romans 14:1.

²³⁵ Hebrews 4:12.

²³⁶ Hebrews 5:14.

²³⁷ 1 John 4:1.

²³⁸ Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., Marquette University, *ON “DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS” IN THE EARLY CHURCH*, 509-510.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus (ca. 393-ca. 458) was trained in Antioch, as was Chrysostom. He also asks his readers to evaluate what this could have meant for the people of Corinth during the time of Paul. However, his understanding of “discernment of spirits” was more focused on demon possession. Theodoret made no attempt to distinguish between the person and the spirit.²³⁹ Many Greek commentators simply rephrased the teachings of Chrysostom and Theodoret.

Latin commentators chose a different direction for their interpretation. They believed this gift was given to those who held office in the church. There is nothing to suggest that “discernment of spirits” is a gift given to all Christians.²⁴⁰ Therefore, this gift was only found in those individuals holding leadership positions.

Origen (ca. 185-254)²⁴¹ developed his thoughts on the doctrine of discernment of spirits by referencing 1 Corinthians 2:6-7:

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Origen associates wisdom with discernment. He believes “from this we learn to discern clearly when the soul is moved by the presence of a spirit of the better kind, namely, when it suffers no mental disturbance or aberration whatsoever as a result of the immediate inspiration and does not lose the free judgment of the will. Such, for example, were the prophets and apostles, who attended upon the divine oracles without any mental

²³⁹ Ibid., 510.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 511.

²⁴¹ Origen was a Greek philosopher who developed his own thoughts on discernment during the Patristic Era.

disturbance.”²⁴² The connection that Origen makes with wisdom is what connects discernment with the desert. We can use our desert to evaluate changes that need to occur within ourselves, and others.

One of the most important works written during the Patristic era was *Athanasius’ Vita Antonii (The Life of Anthony)*. *Vita Antonii* was so impacting that two young men, after reading it, were compelled to convert to the monastic life. This story is an excellent example of how the desert connects with discernment. According to this work, Anthony was converted to the ascetical life sometime in his late teens to early twenty’s. He lived in solitude for fifteen years; “then, at the age of thirty-five, he went to the cemetery and spent some time there shut in a tomb.”²⁴³ He continued through his life, living in solitude for a total of thirty-five years. At the end of this time in solitude, Anthony decided it was time for him to invest in the lives of others.

Evaluation of Anthony’s life, as depicted in Athanasius’ work, would indicate that solitude is an important part of the discernment process, as well as a key component of the desert. We also see that when the desert is understood, others are compelled to seek out desert living on their own. Our desert journey is primarily a solitary experience, but it becomes transformational when shared with others.

Athanasius explains Anthony’s understanding of “discernment of spirits” by stating the following:

A man has need of much prayer and self-discipline that he may receive from the Spirit the gift of discerning spirits and be able to know their characteristics—

²⁴² Lienhard, 512.

²⁴³ Ibid., 515.

which of them are less evil, which more; what is the nature of the special pursuit of each of them, and how each of them is overcome and cast out.²⁴⁴

Anthony believed his time spent in solitude was necessary preparation for obtaining this gift, which could be learned with the proper discipline and focus. He also proposed a way for the reader to recognize the work of demons because he believed those in the desert were the most likely to be distracted by such demons. For him, they begin with evil thoughts and lead to fear, which would keep us from pursuing the desert. Demons distracted individuals from living in the desert because they knew the transforming power of the desert experience.

Origen and Athanasius both believe discernment to be a gift and useful for the Christian's journey. Origen thought discernment was a gift, for specific individuals, that enabled them to distinguish between good and evil spirits. Athanasius believed discernment to be primarily focused on an individual's battle with their inner demon, which would distract them from entering the desert. Athanasius introduces an idea of discernment that advocates for desert living. He explains the importance of the desert and advocates for desert living and discernment as a desert practice.²⁴⁵

Greek monastic literature gradually begins to lose use of the term "discernment of spirits" shortly after the *Vita Antonii*. A new work, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, was written in ca. 400. It is the story of a group who set out from Jerusalem with the hope to visit some of the monastic groups in Egypt. In the story, Anthony's successor, Pityrion, gave a message on discernment specifically to the children. The message was "whoever wishes to drive out the demons, must first conquer his passions. For whichever passion he

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 517.

masters, he also drives out its demon.”²⁴⁶ Here we see the continued concept of an inner demon. Pityrion continues to hold the belief that “spirits” is a reference to evil spirits. However, he makes the connection between demons and passions. He believed the ability to overcome our personal demons is the way we will find our true passions.

Here we see the value of solitude, combined with overcoming demons, leading to a pursuit of our passions. Greek monastic literature teaches that we must work to overcome our fears, demons, etc. in order to pursue what we truly love in life. This was a valuable component of desert living in the past, which still holds value for the future. It is our time spent in the desert that allows us the opportunity to evaluate what is most important. Our time spent discerning our inner passions will help us move out of our desert experience in a positive way.

At this point in history a shift in thought begins to take place. A variety of understandings about discernment and its benefits for individuals develop. In the later half of the fifth century an unknown author composed the *Apophthegmata partum*. This was a collection of narratives focused on the desert fathers. One notable saying comes from Anthony 8, “Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God.”²⁴⁷ Here we see discernment as something to bring us closer to God. Discernment also becomes a key component of a life connected to God.

The *Apophthegmata partum* supports the concept of discernment as a tool used by the monks. More importantly, “discernment is also a kind of superior insight, an ability to

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 518.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 521.

see beyond single rules and practices and comprehend the total effect of an action.”²⁴⁸ It appears that though it was during this period discernment was considered to be a process of reflection on and evaluation on life. It was for everyone and not simply those in religious leadership. Discernment was embraced and valued as a Christian practice.

Over the course of the next few centuries, there continued to be a significant amount of discussion on the topic of discernment in relation to all believers. The most successful preacher in Constantinople was Evagrius Ponticus. He also made the most significant contributions to monastic theory for the Eastern Church. In his concept of discernment he associated was evil spirits with the eight capital sins: gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride. However, he never formally addressed the idea of discernment. It was his disciple, Bishop Diadochus of Photice, who wrote more focused work on discernment. There was also concern about his connection with Messalianism, which was the teaching that a demon dwells in an individual’s soul after baptism and can only be driven out by intensive prayer.²⁴⁹ Diadochus’ explanation of the mental experience necessary for the discernment process to take place is enlightening. He believed that we must be aware of the process occurring before the effects can take place. Diadochus believes “There are two kinds of souls: those always mindful of God are sensitive to even the smallest evil, while those blinded by love of the world disregard even the most heinous sins.”²⁵⁰ Thus, if we are mindful of God, we will

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 521.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 523.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 524.

engage with God during any major life decisions. We must want discernment to be a part of our life, regardless of if we are focusing on sin or life decisions.

The Western monastic movement learned from that of the East, but was compelled to establish characteristics of its own. John Cassian was the first of this movement to write in Latin. He was also a disciple of Evagrius Ponticus. His writings indicate he believed discernment to be a gift, but did not consider the “spirits” to be demons. Instead, he believed the spirits to have come from within the monk. Cassian thought discernment to be an acquired virtue.²⁵¹

Finally, the Rule of St. Benedict has indicated *discretio* to be the common Benedictine virtue. The Rule indicates “anyone who wishes to know more about his life²⁵² and character can discover in his Rule exactly what he was like as an abbot, for his life could not have differed from his teaching.” Benedict believed this virtue to be the key to other virtues. Discernment is what “allows the abbot to guide them and foster their growth without straining them or letting them become lax.”²⁵³

Discernment and the Mystics

The lives of the mystics provide us with an opportunity to evaluate those who engaged God with their life. These individuals took discernment as a spiritual practice seriously. While their individual understanding of discernment varied, it is evident that all of the mystics valued communion with God and wanted God to remain a part of their decision making processes as they lived their daily lives.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 525.

²⁵² Benedict encouraged one’s teaching to emulate one’s life and vice versa.

²⁵³ Ibid., 527-528.

As we explore the life of the mystics, we will primarily focus on the discernment practices of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). During 14th century the dominant centers of spirituality experienced a shift. This shift moved from “the Latin to the Germanic countries where the Rhineland school of speculative mysticism flourished with writers such as Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, and Henry Suso.”²⁵⁴ However, Catherine was not a part of either of these schools of spirituality. In her historical tradition of spirituality women became influential in politics and the lives of church officials because of their mystical experiences.

Catherine became known as Doctor of the Church due to her great understanding of the mystical union or what she would call “a love with God,” which was possible between an individual and God. She believed this to be possible due to the effect a proper understanding of discernment has on an individual’s life. Catherine’s teachings on discernment are “inextricably connected to her teaching about growth in charity, which involves both growth in union with God and growth in the capacity to practice unselfish care for self, others, and created reality. Capacity for discernment depends on charity.”²⁵⁵

It is believed that Catherine’s wisdom on the subject of discernment came straight from God. She was not a trained theologian, and living in the “14th-century as a lay woman, she had little education.”²⁵⁶ Her writing style is similar to that of a novelist or poet, which has caused difficulty in interpretation. However, Catherine’s work has been considered tremendously valuable to the church. Her teaching on discernment is

²⁵⁴ Diana L. Villegas *Discernment in Catherine of Siena*. (March, 1997), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb6404/is_n1_v58/ai_n28685217/pg_13/.html (accessed April 22, 2011), 1.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

primarily found in *The Dialogue*, which is her main work. She also includes elements of discernment in some of her letters.

Catherine believed discernment was a valuable part of an individual's life and taught the importance encountering a daily desert within oneself. Her "interior encounter with God and with self before God led to a transformation of her own desires and perceptions. The good of others and the good of the Church became consuming concerns for which she was willing to sacrifice herself."²⁵⁷ One could speculate that her personal experience is what led her to this belief.

Catherine's teaching on discernment can be summed up into one central theme "coming to know and live truth and love."²⁵⁸ She bridges the concept of wisdom and love that was discussed earlier in the section on discernment in the New Testament. Her teaching promotes an understanding of discernment that goes deeper than a gained virtue. It is a part of life, and when embraced, can help an individual function as God intended. Discernment, as Catherine understood it, was tied to an individual's conversion experience. She believed that knowledge of self, along with connection to God through prayer, is how an individual lives out the life God intended. Also, the more a person resembles Christ, the greater impact they can have on others.

She believed that self-knowledge and genuine connection to God is what increases an individual's capacity to discern. Catherine believed "the more the person comes to know the truth about God and herself, the more she seeks that

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

transformation.”²⁵⁹ Her reality was that an individual could not expand their capacity to love without these two realities. For her, knowledge of self and God were necessary for developing a person’s capacity to love. As we mentioned above, Catherine’s believed was that our ability to discern comes from charity and charity can only come from love. Love is only a reality when we gain a greater knowledge of self and God. This can be accomplished by engaging the desert life.

Although Catherine never mentions “the desert” as a way to achieve inner peace, and it appears as she valued the concepts of silence, solitude and awareness that are the desert’s gifts. She writes, “The more I enter, the more I find, and the more I find the more I seek of Thee. Thou art the Food that never satiates, for when the soul is satiated in Thine abyss it is not satiated, but ever continues to hunger and thirst for Thee.”²⁶⁰ Our experience of the desert can be what transforms our lives and leads us toward a proper discernment process.

The discernment of God’s providence was found in many of Catherine’s writings, as she believed God worked in and through all of life’s circumstances. She believed everything in life was connected and as we use discernment, we must realize God’s connection to every life decision. Awareness of this reality leads us to a greater knowledge of self and God, which are key to our understanding of discernment. When we think of discernment in this capacity it becomes a necessary and valuable asset of the desert.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.

²⁶⁰ Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: HiddenSpring, 2001), 85.

The desert elders believed this to be a necessity as they “are convinced that we cannot address our passions, we cannot know our heart, without the presence of at least one other person.”²⁶¹ They valued the voice of others and typically they sought direction from their *abba* or *amma*. Ignatius of Loyola emphasized discernment as a valuable part of the Christian experience. He developed *Spiritual Exercises*, which he continued to revise over the course of his life.²⁶² These Exercises were intended to emphasize God’s working in and through humanity. In doing so, he placed tremendous emphasis on the discernment of spirits, which led to a greater understanding of discernment. Ignatius believed proper discernment practice would contribute to the unifying of humanity with God’s intended purpose.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers valued the desert because “The desert seemed to place everyone on an identical level, on an equal footing in terms of accountability before one another and before God. Obedience was the great leveler, the ultimate equalizer or the common denominator in the desert. It served not so much to establish a hierarchical structure, but rather to unite the community. Everyone was bound, committed and accountable to the rule of obedience.”²⁶³ The desert reminds us of our humanity and of the fact that we are in need of guidance from God and others. Discernment will hold no value to our life if we are unwilling to recognize our need for help and the value other voices can have to our life. The desert provides a great space to make decisions, and we must learn to engage in a discernment process while we are in the desert.

²⁶¹ John Chryssavgis, *In the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 63.

²⁶² King, 146.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 65.

The Practice of Discernment

We must understand the level of importance that discernment has held in the past, and how valuable it is to our future, as we journey to the desert. As we explore the need for discernment there is much to be gained from people of the past. Everyone has a journey that will eventually lead into, and through, the desert. Our time in the desert is meant to help us see where we have been, understand where we are, and to know where we are going. While the desert is primarily about bringing us closer to God, it is also intended to teach us about ourselves. We have noted this as a continual theme of the desert, which continues as we gain an understanding of discernment.

Discernment for Life and Ministry

Brent J. Bill is a Quaker author who has focused most of his writing on spiritual discernment. He attempts to have his readers understand who they are in the process of decision-making. We all follow a sacred compass specific to our life. In his words,

None of us follows the exact same paths as any other person. None of us has the exact same talents—or failings—as any other person. And God does not use us in the exact same way as any other person. There was only one Pharaoh's court, one Mary the mother of Jesus, one Martin Luther, one Julian of Norwich, and one you.²⁶⁴

We are unique people with unique circumstances. Therefore, no one will fully understand where someone else has been or where they are going. People will walk alongside us on our journey, but never completely comprehend what we have been through. This makes it imperative for us to grasp an understanding of who we are as we move forward in our desert experiences. We should also find encouragement in this statement as no one can

²⁶⁴ Brent J. Bill, *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008), 157.

accomplish the same things we can and God will utilize discernment to assist us with decisions specific to our life.

Life is a journey that continues with or without our ability to make decisions. However, decisions are part of the journey. Bill states, “Decisions big and small are portions of our life of pilgrimage, but they are not the destination. Life with God is the destination.”²⁶⁵ Most of the time we become so wrapped up in making decisions that we miss the connection we have with God. We make the decisions more about us and less about God, when God’s desire is to make decisions with us. It is true that decisions made alone are much easier than those with others. Nonetheless, we were designed to remain in communion with God, which makes decision making an inclusive process between the Creator and the created.

In Scripture, we see God’s message to Abraham and Sarah was to leave their homeland.²⁶⁶ There were no specifics. Instead, they were told to join in the adventure. Our decision making process with God is a both/and, meaning God gives us the freedom to make decisions as we follow God’s leading, and we must use our opportunity to make decisions while in the desert. Discernment is what can, and will, lead us toward making positive changes in our life and ministry.

Dwight Judy believes the desert is a great place to make decisions and he encourages his readers to pay attention to where they are in life, especially to feelings. Judy especially thinks, “it is very important to listen carefully to our discontent.”²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁶⁶ Genesis 12:8-20.

²⁶⁷ Judy, 37.

Listening to this element of our life can assist us as we determine what the next steps will be. We see an example of this in Romans 8:26-28:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

God's spirit in our life is what assists us during our discernment process. We must learn to pay attention to where we are in life and ministry and why God has placed us there. God can and will use our desert for transformation and discernment is what assists us in the process.

Renee M. LaReau expounds on discernment as a form of listening in her article "How to Get Where You're Going." She states, "Discernment requires us to listen within the quiet of our hearts where our feelings are the deepest. We can take other people's voices to heart, but in the final stages of a decision we have to listen to ourselves. Sometimes, though, our own voice is the hardest to trust."²⁶⁸ As we gain an awareness of our need to be present with God in our desert experiences, we will learn that discernment involves our voice as well. Both Judy and LaReau use discernment as a way of bringing listening and awareness into the discernment process.

Discernment and Waiting

As we listen for God's voice in connection with our own, we must wait. Waiting is, and always has been, part of the discernment process and should not be taken lightly. Bill states, "When people rush into decisions, Quakers say they ran ahead of their leading—they outpaced the way God wanted them to go. Waiting, sometimes even long,

²⁶⁸ Renee M. LaReau, "How to Get Where You're Going," *U.S. Catholic*, (February 2004): 37.

painful periods of waiting, is needed to test a leader's integrity."²⁶⁹ If we are serious about discernment, we must become serious about looking, evaluating, and waiting for what God might be teaching you during this time in your life. God speaks to us when we are still. In our waiting, we are able to hear God's voice. Our deserts are filled with opportunities for waiting that sometimes feels as though will never end. However, they are the avenues that lead us to new beginnings and quite possibly toward new journeys that we never knew were possible.

We have determined that discernment can be a process and we must engage in this process while we are in the desert. Our time in the desert can provide us the opportunity to make many decisions. However, we could be in the desert for an uncertain period of time, which could make our process difficult. Most of us would agree, "One of the greatest difficulties in life discernment processes is learning to wait on God's timing."²⁷⁰ We live in an instant gratification type of world where we rarely, if ever, have to wait on anything. Most of us walk around with information at the tips of our fingers. If we want to go somewhere we simply consult our smart phone. We must not see our spiritual lives as something we can instantly solve or change.

Judy attributes this period of waiting "as a time to allow the Holy Spirit the opportunity to act on our behalf."²⁷¹ If we are unwilling to wait, we may never know what God wants to accomplish in and through our life. We would all agree that God's spirit resides in the lives of believers. However, it is possible to overlook God's activity in our

²⁶⁹ Bill, 56.

²⁷⁰ Judy, 9.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

life by way of our own personal distractions. Our unwillingness to wait and listen could be what keeps us from learning from our desert. Proper discernment takes time.

The desert is primarily about waiting. We are waiting for answers, for transformation to occur and for this difficult period in life to be over. “While it is extremely difficult to be in a position of “waiting,” there is also opportunity for a deeper stirring of God’s movement within.”²⁷² This is often a difficult process and can stir up an array of emotions. It is imperative for us to develop a support team to help us while we are in the desert.²⁷³ This team must be intent on keeping us focused on God’s presence in our discernment process. Judy indicates the necessity of consulting others as we wait by stating, “In the work of discernment we look to one another to maintain hopeful spirits, while we await clarity for our decisions.”²⁷⁴ Our need to consult others is what helps us discern what the next steps should be. Having others in our life to support us is vital for our spiritual and emotional health, especially in the desert. We are in need of encouragement and support as we walk through the unknown areas of the desert.

Discernment with Others

As we have mentioned, the desert is intended to be a space for transformation among individuals and groups. The process of discernment is a vital part of this transformation. We must remember that our times spent on this earth are shared. This dissertation places primary focus on the individual ministers. However, we must not

²⁷² Ibid., 39.

²⁷³ It has been interesting to observe the use of a *Spiritual Director* at the LSF Face to Face Retreats. David Nixon is a vital part of the DMIN program as he helps keep students focused on God and self in the discernment process. As I mentioned earlier, most ministers enter the program broken (not all, but most) and in the middle of the desert. GFES provide the proper environment for discernment to occur with the use of a *Spiritual Director* and cohort model.

²⁷⁴ Judy, 9.

forget the value our personal experiences hold for others. This includes our need for others to be a part of personal discernment in our life.

As we learn to incorporate discernment into life, by our personal practice, we will be able to provide greater guidance for others. It is important to understand the significance of decision-making in the desert and the value it holds for individuals and communities. Judy further explains discernment as an incorporation of three elements: removal from present obligations/responsibilities, asking questions, and engaging the inward life.²⁷⁵ There are parts of the discernment process that need to be accomplished alone. However, spiritual guidance along the way can be a valuable asset. Other people can help us see and address issues we may typically avoid or overlook. A therapist or spiritual director will be a good resource for a minister as they walk through their desert experiences, especially as they attempt to make decisions for themselves and the group of people they lead.²⁷⁶

Spiritual Direction can be a source of guidance during our desert experiences. My introduction²⁷⁷ to spiritual direction was with David Nixon²⁷⁸ in conjunction with the DMIN program at GFES. He was a great example of what this type of guidance should look like. It is important to understand a Spiritual Director is not a “tourist-guide, but a fellow traveler on the same path. They should never stand out, but always stand beside

²⁷⁵ Judy, 9.

²⁷⁶ John A. Sanford, *Ministry Burnout* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 72.

²⁷⁷ Experiencing *spiritual direction* from David Nixon for two years changed my life and ministry. I entered the program in the desert and he served as a guide who walked alongside me assisting me as I listened and discerned the next steps in life and ministry.

²⁷⁸ David Nixon serves as *Spiritual Director* for all cohorts in the DMIN Leadership and Spiritual Formation track at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. He and his wife Judy live in community with individuals as they journey through life at their home in the former convent of the St. Elizabeth Church parish. David is the founding pastor of Vineyard Central and also has established a school for *Spiritual Direction*. For more information visit <http://www.sustainablefaith.com>.

us.”²⁷⁹ We may experience the temptation to “idealize the process, expecting it to solve our problems.”²⁸⁰ Our ability to recognize the Spiritual Director as a person of assistance in our personal deserts will encourage others to do the same. Many of us are quick to help others make decisions without engaging in a practice of our own. The desert provides us the perfect opportunity to practice discernment personally, before we assist others in the process.

Discernment as a Process

As we have observed earlier in this chapter, discernment can be viewed as a gift and/or a process. The way we learn to understand the word will indicate the value it can have on our life.²⁸¹ Christians live out the form of discernment we most confidently believe in. John C. Futrell describes the goal of basic “discernment” to be arriving “at the choice of authentic Christian response to the word of God in each concrete situation in life.”²⁸² Futrell believes individuals should utilize personal discernment for the purpose of remaining connected to Christ through all of life decisions. He advocates for the use of discernment as it will help in choosing between good and evil and lead toward an understanding of God’s desire to be present in our desert. Futrell’s belief supports the concept that discernment is not a step we take, rather it is a process in which we engage. The process is ongoing, which keeps us aware of our constant communion with God.

As we learn how to engage the discernment process through any life experience, we must first learn how to embrace our own life. We must realize the importance of

²⁷⁹ Chryssavgis, 64-65.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Lienhard, 505.

²⁸² Ibid.

embracing our time in the desert and realize it will lead us into a greater understanding of ourselves and of God. If we can learn to embrace our desert, we can and will become more useful for God's work here on earth. The desert has much to offer if we would learn to listen.

We have seen the need for personal discernment, and there is a tremendous need for communal discernment as well. Churches across the globe have created a discernment process that has been useful in their congregation and across their denomination. Their desired outcome is to align individuals with what God has for them. For example, "Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity" is a Catholic missionary ministry out of Sliver Spring, MD. They believe discernment is different for each person. They support the concept that discernment, when viewed as a process, can help us move toward God's intended plan for our life. In this example we see discernment as a part of the discipleship process. The ministry mentioned above lists the following as a guide in their discernment process:

- Discernment is an ongoing attitude and practice of Christian spirituality.
- Specific, structured discernment processes are used to discern God's will at particular points of need in which we desire to align our lives and ministry more fully with God's purposes.
- Discerning what it is we need to discern is a critical part of the discernment process. Getting clear about the question is an important first step.
- Discernment does not take place in a neat, orderly, linear fashion. We may find ourselves being drawn back to scripture or pulled once more into silent prayer as we stay open to God during the discernment process.
- Discernment includes head, heart, spirit, and body work. We think and speak, we listen and wait, we feel and are moved, we have physical sensations and responses. It is a whole person process.

- Discernment is based on the trust that God is the Source of all we are and are trying to do. God is the One who already knows what we are seeking and wants to communicate with us. Letting God be larger, wiser, and greater than us is a key shift in our awareness. We think we know this and then find ourselves still trying to figure it out in our own minds or worrying about finding the one true solution.²⁸³

Throughout history, there is a constant rhythm in place between individual and communal discernment. As history has shown us, God works through individuals and communities. We see this in the lives of Moses and the Israelites. God intentionally used Moses' desert experience to lead the Israelites, and the discernment Moses used in his personal life benefitted the Israelites. In fact, it is the discerning work in individual lives, which allows corporate movement in a forward direction. Thus, it is tremendously valuable to take the time necessary to gain insight from God on an individual level before attempting to move others in a particular direction as a ministry leader.

The Result of Discernment

As we see discernment described in the above principles we are able to understand our need as ministers for an everyday desert. The desert is where we find space to hear God and where we connect with our inner selves and where we lay a foundation for leading and working with others in the future. This congregational approach fulfills the need for both the individual and the community experience when engaging in desert practice. Desert living provides the opportunity to have knowledge of self and God, which provides a foundation for communal discernment to occur. Viewing

²⁸³ Carolyn Brock, "What is Discernment?," <http://www.cofchrist.org/discernment/whatis.asp> (accessed June 14, 2011).

discernment as a process opens a pathway to the desert and allows us to see our need for God.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, discernment brings everything in our desert experience together so we are able to gain wisdom from God in regards to our future. In our final chapter, we will introduce the desert as a transforming agent for life and ministry. In doing so, we will evaluate a variety of methods to provide exposure to ministers about the desert.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION: RUN TO THE DESERT

Our lives are a result of what we have become in the depths of our being—what we call our spirit, will or heart. From there we see our world and interpret reality. From there we make choices, break forth in action, and try to change our world. That is why the greatest need of collective humanity is the renovation of our hearts.²⁸⁴

Our desert experiences have a way of changing us, yet change is only possible if we allow it to happen. We have seen the desert as a resource to be alone, gain a greater awareness of God and ourselves, and to use the process of discernment as a resource for decision making. In this final chapter, we will present ways to introduce the value of the desert to ministers today. In doing so, we will introduce four different ways of educating and experiencing the desert: a retreat, conference breakout session, a mentoring model, and a desert living blog. All four provide different ways for ministers to experience desert living in modern day ministry. Finally, we will state the findings gained from our four chapters of research on the desert as experienced in the past and how they led us toward an understanding of our need to embrace the desert today.

Summary of Findings

As we have discussed throughout this paper, ministers walk with people through these deserts on an everyday basis. Therefore, it is important for ministers to understand the value the desert as a sustaining factor in their life and ministry. God intended the desert to be a place of transformation, a place where we can go to work through our hurts, pains, and frustrations. We have learned that as we embrace our deserts, we become

²⁸⁴ Dallas Willard and Jan Johnson, *Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice*. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 15.

healthy people. The desert continues to hold value today and we must learn to use it for its intended purpose. In this process, we have understood there are many reasons why we encounter the desert.

In Chapter One, we introduced the problem, which was *to determine if the desert holds value for ministers today as a place of healing and spiritual transformation*. In doing so, we encountered several ministers who are in or have been in the desert, with no idea how to experience what it has to offer their life. In doing so, we observed statistics of ministers who were burned out and flailing because they have not set healthy boundaries in life or ministry. We also explored research among seminaries, which indicated a lack of emphasis on minister health, especially during life difficulties. This study, along with the statistics, indicated a need to equip ministers in their understanding of the desert and how to apply desert practices to their life.

Chapter Two provided a foundational understanding of the desert by exploring the desert as it was experienced in the past. We explored the desert experiences of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus to understand how ministers can experience the desert today. In this chapter, we also defined the term and learned the value the desert holds for our life, as well as others. We explore Moses' experience in the desert and how God used his personal desert experience for others as seen in the life of the Israelites.

As we learned more about the desert, we found three gifts received by those who experience what it has to offer. Those gifts are: silence and solitude, awareness, and discernment. We spent the remainder of the paper gaining an understanding of these three gifts and how they can hold value to our everyday life and ministry. As we explored the lives of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, we observed all three of them utilizing each of these

gifts while in the desert. In these three chapters we gained an understanding of the gifts and the result seen when exhibited in our life.

In Chapter Three, we moved forward in our understanding of these three gifts by exploring silence and solitude. All three of our foundational desert examples spent time in the desert alone. This was the context in which God communicated with them and they with God. We found the same it true for silence and solitude today, yet many of us schedule our lives in such a way that we leave no time for this desert practice.

Chapter Four introduces the term awareness and our need for awareness of both God and self. We learned that ministers have a tendency to neglect inner work due to the result of focus on outer work. Ministers become so focused on what they are “doing” that they fail to incorporate self-reflection. In other words, they become so focused on their role as minister that they neglect elements of their inner self, which leads them to the desert. The desert provides a great space for this to happen as we find ourselves with time specifically for ourselves and God.

In Chapter Five, we see all three of the gifts at work. Our value of silence and solitude and awareness leads us toward the process of discernment. It is through this process that we are able to make decisions in our life and ministry. The desert provides us opportunities to process where we have been, where we are and where we are going. It is through discernment that we are able to move out of our deserts to experience spiritual transformation.

Applications

Retreat

Retreats are a great space to introduce new concepts into a minister's life. In most instances, they provide time away to rest and reflect and most have a specific area of interest. Therefore, a retreat environment is a great way to introduce the concept of desert. The desert, as we have described, has a way of removing us from areas of life. This sense of removal is sometimes necessary for us to recognize that our life has led us to the desert. A retreat will teach the importance of the desert by providing space for: silence/solitude, awareness, and discernment. We have referred to these three important elements of the desert as gifts and a retreat is the perfect venue to actually practice them. Removal is our way of actually encountering a modern day desert experience and a retreat is the ultimate way to remove ourselves.

The "Desert Retreat for Modern Day Ministers" will be specifically designed for ministers who are in need of refreshment and renewal due to burnout, job loss, difficult life circumstances, etc. This particular retreat will spend ample time explaining the desert, the value it holds, and the need we have for such an encounter. In doing so, ministers will understand what they can gain from their experience and how they should incorporate silence and solitude, awareness, and discernment into their daily life and ministry.

On day one ministers will arrive at the retreat center and be introduced to the space they will encounter over the next three days. There will be a meditation garden, a forest trail, and a small beach area on a lake. The area for the retreat will be large enough for each minister to find space to be alone. The goal will be to learn how to experience

true silence and solitude, recognizing this as the only way to truly experience the desert.

“We must come to understand and experience the transforming power of silence if we are to know solitude.”²⁸⁵

Most retreats have an element of silence and solitude built in to them, yet with no understanding of the terms. After the terms have been explained, the participating ministers will be invited to experience the desert. This will occur during a specific time in a designated area. After experiencing a meal together, they will engage in an in-depth introduction to the desert as we experience it today. In doing so, ministers will be presented with the desert experiences of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. They will see how God used these three very different desert experiences to draw them closer to God’s self.

After the introductory session, ministers will be placed into community groups of three, where they will be able to share where they are in life and ministry. They will remain with these individuals throughout the entire retreat. Because the “desert” is a difficult place to experience, the retreat will be limited to twelve ministers. Each group will have a spiritual director assigned to them who will remain with them throughout the entire retreat. This spiritual director will lead them as a group, as well as individually, as they explore the desert. Each day will end with a reuniting of community groups to allow individuals to reflect on their experience. The spiritual director will serve as a guide during these gatherings.

Day two will begin by providing a greater understanding of the desert gift of silence and solitude. Ministers will have opportunities to be alone following this session and they will be encouraged to remain in silence until their community time that evening. They will have an afternoon session on awareness and time for spiritual direction.

²⁸⁵ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 98.

However, the only time they will be encouraged to speak is during their individual time in spiritual direction. The community time in the evening will provide opportunities for the ministers to discuss their experience in silence and also what God has communicated to them during the day.

On day three, ministers will gain a greater understanding of discernment as experienced in the desert. They will have ample time to spend in group and individual spiritual direction as they attempt to discern what God is communicating to them through their desert experience. The goal for this day will be for the ministers to make decisions and truly listen to what their life is telling them. The retreat will end in community spiritual direction.

The desert may hold a tremendous amount of value, however, some ministers may not truly understand the value without an experience. A retreat is also a great way to experience awareness. We cannot learn how to be aware of God or self, we must engage in an experience and that will teach us to be aware of God. DeMello reminds us that we are “surrounded by God and you don’t see God, because you ‘know’ about God... You miss God because you think you know.”²⁸⁶ A retreat setting provides us with the chance to look past what we “know” about God and learn to become aware of God’s constant presence in our life.

Opportunities to gain awareness will be built in throughout the retreat through personal time and spiritual direction. Awareness will best be accomplished in correlation with spiritual direction. Therefore, a spiritual director will remain with the ministers throughout the weekend, or period of time designated for the retreat. As we mentioned in our study of the desert, a spiritual director will walk alongside us during the retreat to

²⁸⁶ Anthony DeMello, S.J., J. Francis Stroud, S.J., Ed. *Awareness* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 45.

identify and define what we can gain from our desert experience. Spiritual directors are not meant to provide all of the answers. Instead, they will listen and help the ministers listen and focus their thoughts on God. Spiritual directors will assist them in their journey toward becoming aware of God and self.

Every minister will spend at least two hours in spiritual direction. As they experience the retreat they will have opportunity to utilize their time spent in silence and solitude and awareness as a guide toward discernment. The spiritual directors will assist as the ministers attempt to understand any decisions that need to be made. They will utilize the discernment process as mentioned in Chapter Five. Spiritual Directors will remind the ministers that discernment is: ongoing, structured, includes head, heart, spirit, and body work, and based on our trust in God.²⁸⁷

The “Desert Retreat for Modern Day Ministers” is intended to encourage and promote desert living in the daily lives of ministers. The intent is not for ministers to return to experience the same retreat multiple times. Rather, the goal is to teach ministers how to experience the desert today. We must experience and believe that desert living is available for us today and we need the desert and must learn to use it as a way of connecting with God.

Conference Breakout Session

Research indicated that seminaries do a great job equipping ministers to meet the needs of others, yet there are very few seminaries that prepare ministers to cope and manage their own difficulties. Therefore, a need exists to teach and equip ministers on how to manage their personal struggles while doing ministry. There are a number of

²⁸⁷ Carolyn Brock, “What is Discernment?”, <http://www.cofchrist.org/discernment/whatis.asp> (Accessed June 14, 2011).

conferences that could incorporate an element of desert living into their schedule. This breakout session will serve as an introduction to the desert.

Conferences typically focus on equipping ministers to better accomplish something more effectively in ministry, where retreats focus more on the spiritual care and (the) spiritual life of the minister. However, conferences can introduce the desert as a source of equipping if conference coordinators understand a need of this nature exists. Therefore, it would be imperative to invest time and energy into educating conference coordinators that this need does, in fact, exist.

During this breakout session, ministers will be provided with a foundational understanding of the desert, how it was valued in the past, and how they can engage with it today. The session will provide ministers with statistics to help them understand the need we have for the desert. The session will then move into the three gifts of the desert, how they were experienced, and how they can be experienced today.

Ministers will be asked to evaluate their past or present need for the desert. It is important to understand that there will be ministers in the session who have personally experienced the desert, as well as those who have not. Therefore, there will be time allotted for ministers to share their personal experiences with each other in small groups. It is imperative for ministers to understand that they are not alone in their desert journeys, as this will help them to embrace their need for the desert. This will be a brief time of sharing as it will be difficult to go deep into our deserts in the context of a conference.

The goal for the session will be for the desert to be presented and understood as a place of healing and spiritual transformation. The breakout session is primarily designed to introduce the topic. It would be difficult to expect any type of transformational desert

experience to occur during the context of a conference. Therefore, at the conclusion of the session, resources will be provided to assist ministers who are in need of a personal desert experience. Ministers who feel they are ready to embrace the desert will be encouraged to go on a retreat and/or find someone to mentor them in their ministry region.

Mentoring Model

Mentoring is a vital part of life and ministry. We see mentoring valued in the life of Jesus and it should be for us as well, especially as we work through our desert experiences. We need to have someone walking alongside us during our desert experience and we also need to share our desert experiences with others. We see this modeled in the life of Moses as he led the Israelites. When we walk with others through their desert experience, it can be instrumental in their life and ministry. Through this model, we are able to educate and gain value for the desert.

A mentoring relationship will look different for everyone. For ministers, confidentiality is sometimes a concern. Therefore, it is important to find someone trustworthy to share what has led you to the desert. Mentoring by someone who has walked through the desert before would be the most beneficial. A small group is also a great resource for ministers, as it can help us understand that others have been there before.

For example, Jim Connor, pastor of Expectation Baptist Church, could mentor/walk alongside Tom Watson, pastor of Eggshell Baptist Church. They live in the same area and minister in the same context. For the purpose of this example we will say that Jim acknowledged his need for the desert last year and has gained an understanding

and value for what it has to offer. Jim is now able to mentor Tom as he recently acknowledged his need for the desert. Together, they can experience the healing and spiritual transformation the desert has to offer. Jim and Tom²⁸⁸ will be able to continue this mentoring relationship as a source of accountability and support as they continue to serve as spiritual guides for others.

Desert Living Blog

Physical presence is not always an option for ministers, especially when attempting to find someone with similar circumstances. Therefore, maintaining a “Desert Living for Modern Day Ministers Blog” is a great way to create a space for pastor interaction. A blog will allow ministers from all over the globe to interact, share stories, and find encouragement. Ministers will be able to select who they will connect with and how they want to participate. This concept is the most practical way to address the need for desert in the daily lives of ministers.

Creating a space for ministers to interact in this way will allow the concept of desert living to be available to ministers everywhere. It will also create a central location to post resources and communicate. This blog space will serve as a source of centralization for desert materials such as when conferences and retreats will be held. The blog will be simple and informative and will allow for ministers to connect with specific desert experiences.²⁸⁹ The primary goal will be to inform ministers of the desert and allow them to find support and encouragement for their personal life and ministry.

²⁸⁸ This mentoring relationship is actually occurring between these two men, as Tom is now serving as an Ministry Associate at Jim’s church.

²⁸⁹ The site will not function as a website, as many websites become overrun with resources that distract from the site’s intent. The only reason to promote conferences and retreats are to offer personal interaction for those who desire face time for support and encouragement.

Our exploration into the necessity of the desert indicates the value it holds for our life and ministry. We must run to the desert believing that they deserts have purpose for our life in the present and future. James knew this as truth when he said, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”²⁹⁰

May it be so!

²⁹⁰ James 1:2-3.

APPENDIX A

Sample Retreat Schedule

Day 1

3:00 pm	Arrive at the Retreat Center□
4:00 p.m.	Introduction to the Desert Elements
5:30 pm	Evening meal□
6:30 pm	Intro to “The Desert”
8:00 pm	Community Time

Day 2□

7:45-8:30 am	Breakfast□
8:30-10:00 am	Silence and Solitude in the Desert
10:00-12:00 pm	Personal Experience with Silence and Solitude□
12:00-1:00 pm	Lunch□
1:15-2:30 pm	Awareness in the Desert (led by Spiritual Directors)□
2:30-5:30 pm	Personal Experience with Awareness/Time for Spiritual Direction
5:30-7:00 pm	Dinner□
7:00 pm	Community Time

Day 3

7:45 am	Breakfast□
8:30-10:00 am	Discernment in the Desert (led by Spiritual Directors)

10:00-10:15 am	Break
10:15-12:00 pm	Spiritual Direction□
12:00-1:00 pm	Lunch□
1:00-5:30 pm	Time to Experience the Elements
5:30-6:30 pm	Dinner□
7:00 p.m.	Community Time

Day 4

7:45 am	Breakfast
8:30 a.m.	Re-enter Life

APPENDIX B

Sample Conference Schedule

9:00 a.m. Introduction to the Desert

9:30 a.m. Breakout (groups of 3-4)

Questions (pick one question to answer so all can share):

What has been your most difficult period in life and ministry?

Have you experienced burnout? When? Why?

9:45 a.m. Gifts of the Desert: Silence/Solitude, Awareness, Discernment

10:30 a.m. Question and Answer

10:45 a.m. Dismiss

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