

The Desert and the Promise - Thoughts on Joshua

Sunday, 3rd April, 2011

Through our lives we are led by God through different seasons; some of them are easy and some of them are extremely difficult.

Sometimes we are led into Desert times – in order for God to work on our characters and train us to trust Him; and other times God moves us on to inherit His Promises.

Today I want to look at the two seasons we all go through, compare them and make some comments about them.

The aim of this is that we learn to follow God in good times and bad; through Deserts and Blessing – because God is in control through both of them, and He promises that He will work all of them for our good – as long as we love Him and are called according to His Purposes.

Because once we know that God is with us through every season, nothing can rock us

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 37-39)

And if we can know that God is working all things – even the bad ones, together for our good, then whether we are ‘conquering’ or not, whether we feel like we are storming the gates of Hell or it feels more like they are storming us(!) it doesn’t matter, because God is for us, and He is working everything for our good.

And if we’re in a Desert time, we’re in very good company:

Jesus spent time in the Desert before starting His public ministry:

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2)

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. (Luke 4:14)

And many other people in the Bible were led to the Desert to be prepared – Elijah was led the Kerith Ravine to be trained by God

And the Israelites, as we have seen over recent weeks, were led by God in the Desert for 40 years before entering into the Land God had promised them.

From our point of view, Deserts are hard, inhospitable places we want to get through as soon as possible; they are uncomfortable times where we realise how small we are and how small our resources are; but they are also times when we are meant to see how big God is and how totally dependent on Him we are.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you. (Deuteronomy 8:2-5)

But Deserts aren't where we're meant to live and die – they are normally routes towards something else.

If Deserts are time of preparation, by definition, they are preparing us for something else – and, following the story of Joshua, what they are preparing us for is to inherit God's Promises.

So today, I don't want to preach through a passage, as we would normally do; instead I want to try to sum up and draw some points out of the series we have

done looking at the Book of Joshua and look at how going into God's Promises compares with life in the Desert.

1. In the Desert we are led by the Cloud; in the Land we need to seek God

In the Desert, the Israelites were led every step of the way by the Pillar of Cloud by day and the Pillar of Fire by night.

Then, in the Land the Cloud went and they had to get into the habit of seeking God – asking Him to guide them.

Why? It's for our good; it's part of God growing us up and giving us responsibility. He is teaching us to walk by faith, not by sight.

We may think "How can it be good for us not to have the Cloud leading us?"

It's so Jesus will bless us:

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

There is never a point when it stops being about our good and becomes about the Mission; God always works for our good.

And He is there for us.

What God was doing with the Israelites was maturing them; and maturity doesn't mean managing on our own without God, but it means us choosing to seek Him and follow Him.

We've learned something more about prayer – especially over the last year; this is something we need to press into more and more; if we're going into the Land we need to go knowing God and His Will.

2. In the Desert they passed by the nations; in the Land they build a House of Prayer for all nations

During the time in the Desert, the Israelites were surrounded by the Nations, but the nations were the threat. Once they entered the Land, God's Plan was that they were to build the Temple – a House of Prayer for all nations

...And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD
to serve him,
to love the name of the LORD,
and to worship him,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.” (Isaiah 56:6-7)

This was a massive step for the Israelites, and on the whole, with a few exceptions, they never made it. Instead of living in hostility with the nations around them – seeing everyone else as ‘the enemy’, they were to bless the nations and welcome them into God's Presence, where, according to Isaiah, the nations would be welcomed by God.

Where Israel failed to do this, God passed on their commission to the Church

Through the years, some churches have been slow to take hold of this, and there has been racism and suspicion and people have kept hold of God's Blessing, rather than giving it away.

For us as a church, on the whole, I believe that we have worked hard to get rid of any racism and we have a vision for the nations; and God has blessed us and has gathered people from many nations; but we still need to go.

3. The Giants live in the Promised Land, not the Desert

We may think we've been wrestling with giants over the last few years as we've been going through the Desert – I don't think we have; I think that many of the things that have happened haven't been giants; they have been God's training. And it has been training for when we do meet the giants.

So for those of us who have lost jobs and struggled financially, that hasn't been the giant – it has been God's training to teach us to trust Him – and He has provided.

So when we meet a giant we will know that God will be there and provide.

Jesus said that He was sending His followers out like sheep among wolves (Matthew 10:16)

Why does He do this?

Because we need to trust our Good Shepherd

There used to be a cartoon called "It's the wolf!"

There was a cute sheep called "Lambsy"; a Wolf and a sheepdog.

Every episode, the lamb would frolic into the field without any cares, and the wolf would come and plan worse and worse ways to catch the lamb.

But just at the last minute, the lamb would shout "It's the wolf, it's the wolf!" and out of nowhere, at the last minute the sheepdog would appear, catch the wolf round the neck with its crook and throw it away into the distance.

We can be sheep among wolves as long as we know our Shepherd!

We can face giants as long as we know our God is with us.

In Birmingham there are some big, real giants that we have not met yet.

There are thousands of Kurdish men and women – and hardly any of them know the love of God and the forgiveness of Jesus – and hardly anyone is actively reaching them. That is a giant!

Similarly there are Pakistani Muslims, Somali people, Sikhs (we are next door to the biggest Gurdwara in Europe) Yemenis – all almost completely unreached by the Gospel, and hundreds of others who don't know Jesus.

There are two of the most notorious gangs in the country on our doorstep.

There are giants in the land. They are bigger, richer and stronger than us.

We need to know our Shepherd and know we can fully trust Him if we are going to face some of these – because they could kill us.

And we need to decide, are we going to just set up camp and live this side of the border, or are we going to go in and take their land?

But I believe that in our lifetime we can get the Yeast of God's Kingdom and the Gospel into these communities that God loves – and in our lifetime we can see this picture change.

And even if we don't, it's something worth giving the rest of our lives for and dying in the attempt.

4. In the Desert we live day to day; in the Promised Land we build something for future generations.

When we're going through hard times, sometimes all we can do is survive; In Ephesians 6 it says:

Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. (Ephesians 6:13)

Sometimes as we look back, all we can say is we're still here – we're still standing. And we shouldn't underestimate this – I think God values it a lot!

Just getting through life is close to miraculous – just relying on God to get us through one more day.

And that's what the Desert is like; the Israelites had to gather enough manna for the day – they weren't allowed to save any for the day after – every day was its own test of faith; each time they woke up and looked outside their

tents, if the manna wasn't there or if the water from the Rock dried up, they would die.

And then they came into the Land, and they had instructions to plough fields, plant crops and vineyards.

And all of a sudden they were looking forward to the future; the people who would drink the wine from the vineyards would be their children and grandchildren; how they cleared weeds and stones from the fields would affect how well their children ate and thrived.

So for us I believe that coming into a new season means that we need to start thinking again about what we are building for the future and what we want the children of the church to inherit in the future.

Is this going to be a church that lives as long as we do, has its heyday, then wanes and fizzles away? Or is it going to grow and mature and go from strength to strength?

Have we seen the Crown's best days or are they still to come?

If we want the Crown to keep on growing, then there's another thing we need to see;

In the Desert, you could say it was the story of Moses leading the Israelites; you could call the Conquest the story of Joshua's leadership

But the Promised Land was the story of everyone; about everyone inheriting and owning it.

This has never been 'Martin's church' and I hope no-one ever thinks of it that way, although when a church is planted, the leader is involved in everything. But as a church moves on, others need to take on more of the running – within the vision of the Church; we need Calebs to take responsibility for their parts of the Big vision.

A leader can get a church so far, but for a church to reach maturity the leaders still need to lead, but the church is more aware of being a Body – with everyone playing their part

What does the Land look like?

I've deliberately held off from describing it, because I believe that God will have been forming vision in some people.

Here's the big picture though:

The Nations of Birmingham → reproducing this in the Church in every multicultural city.

How? Style of preaching, power of the Holy Spirit, Community, Language, contextualisation; looking again at the Bible – understanding it in a deeper way when seen through more cultural eyes

Not through starting a mission, but by building Jesus' Church

If we can do it in Birmingham, we can help Leicester & Wolverhampton & Bradford and London (when we started this, I didn't know of any other UK example of how to do it.)

I've been asked to leave & have said no.

I'm planning to do this until I die – long term challenge

We must learn to reach the nations where we are – through that we will reach the Nations

If we can do this, then we can have a massive effect; we can change the Church

Gateway Project – South Africa → AIDS orphans, → project grew, got noticed → politician visited → “What you do is shaping the way we care for the poor in SA and what SA does, the rest of Africa takes notice of.”

God doesn't mind that we're small – He can work with Davids facing Goliaths; He can work with Grasshoppers facing giants; He can even work with tiny yeast and affect the whole batch of dough.

And that is the invitation I believe that God is putting before us again – I believe it's the same call He gave us as the church began; but He is inviting us to take hold of it.

I believe that as we come to this Border, it is a very significant time for the Church – we could choose to stay where we are, but we'll remain a nice church of about 80 people & will pastor each other through life, but never move on; the church we pass on to our children will look similar to this

Or we can cross the Border & take possession of these Promises (& all the individual ones that make up the whole)

If we go in, it will be hard; there are easier churches to be part of, and if you feel this is not for you, then God bless you as you go to find another church to be part of.

God's first words to Joshua – "Be strong and very courageous" – God says things like this for a reason!

But whatever the cost, I plan to cross the Border and I pray that as we're standing on Mount Nebo, looking over at how good the Land is, as a church, we'll go across together.