

DESERTS REAL AND METAPHORICAL WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST IN THE DESERT



Interestingly the Bible makes it clear that in spite of all the lush green fields, rivers and natural beauty, life on Earth for us humans is difficult and is similar to living in a desert. The main characteristic of a desert is that it does not support life due to a lack of water. So deserts are to be avoided and certainly not the place for holidays! However our world does not lack water but it does lack knowledge of the truth and this is what makes it a difficult place in which to live along with the fact of our mortality.

The 5 months lock down, caused by the coronavirus has brought home the reality of the fact that life is like a desert by making us all feel vulnerable and germaphobic. Also the confusing way in which the government has responded to the pandemic is due to the fact that even the best scientists are finding it difficult to discover the truth about the virus. The 75th anniversary of the celebrations for the end of the war with Japan held last Sunday, a victory brought about by the first use of the atomic bomb, has further reminded us of the life threatening desert-like world in which we live.

So if deserts are to be avoided why do we read in our 2nd lesson “*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil?*” The Jewish people after being rescued by God from being slaves to the Egyptians also found themselves being led by God into the Sinai Desert on their way to the Promised Land. Once they reached Mt Sinai God gave them his commandments, for though God is not visible he is audible and therefore is able to tell us the truth in the words he speaks which are written in the Bible. God could have made us as robots locked into his 10 commandments in which case there would be no murder, stealing or lying. But because he wants us to respond to him in love he has given us the freedom to choose to obey him or not. So the purpose of being in a desert was that the people might learn that the only way to survive in our world is to choose to keep on trusting in God, in our Creator's love and care for us by obeying his words and the same is true for us today. This why God likens us to sheep who can only survive with the help of a shepherd in our hostile world and so he sends his Son to be the Good Shepherd to care us as we daily choose to follow him.



THE GOOD SHEPHERD KNOWS WHERE TO FIND WATER IN THE DESERT FOR HIS SHEEP

How then will Jesus choose to deal with being tempted or tested by the Devil in the desert. Will he zap him with his power as the Son of God or will it be possible for him to overcome the devil's temptations by acting merely as the carpenter from Nazareth or will he too like everybody else find Satan's clever temptations irresistible? So lets see how Jesus got on and what we can learn from him .



And the tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” For Christ, his temptations had unique significance. The purpose of the Evil one was to stop him carrying out his mission to rescue sinful mankind from our desert like world. If he were to use his divine power as the Son God and change stones into bread, he would be living as a divine super man not as God’s suffering servant. Mercifully Christ resisted the temptation to live as a divine super being and chose to live as a vulnerable human, capable of suffering death on the cross and so make it possible for us sinners to be forgiven and rescued from the judgment our sin deserves.

Turn these stones into bread. Here the temptation for us is to believe the lie that all we need for full satisfaction, fulfilment and happiness in life are material possessions. So we are bombarded in the press and the media with adverts for the latest clothes, sales of furniture, cars, get rich quick by betting, go on a cruise, have a face lift etc., all geared to pamper the body and satisfy our material needs. So the atheist believes that we are just a few chemicals in bags of skin, victims lost in space, frantically living on a speck of cosmic dust for 70 or 80 years or so till we become food for worms in a pointless and uncaring universe. Therefore eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we will die. In which case we are living in a desert with very little to support life. Is this true and from where do we discover the truth?

It is clear that Christ had just been reading Deuteronomy, the 5th book of the Old Testament, so he knew God's truth, the sword of the Spirit, by which to expose the Tempter’s lie. “**It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.**” It is from God’s word, the Bible, which is our Creator's hand book on how to live according to the way he designed us, that we discover the truth. It is here we find out the truth that we are not bags of skin living in a meaningless godless universe. The truth is we are created in the image of God so we are not just bodies with appetites to be satisfied but also with souls that need love and spirits that are thirsty for an everlasting relationship with our Creator who alone can satisfy our deepest longings. We must thank God that Christ defeated the devil, not with the supernatural powers which he alone had as Son of God, but with the same spiritual resources which we have to day – the truth of the Word of God in his mind and on his lips and the Holy Spirit in his heart – the Sword of the Spirit. So how does this work for us?



Imagine you are stranded in the desert, feeling very hungry and somebody comes and offers you a choice. “You can either have a Bible or a loaf of bread. Which will you choose?” So I hope you would start thinking remembering your knowledge of the truth of God's word – “If I take the bread I will live for may be 2 or 3 more days but if I take God's Word it will tell me the truth of how I can live for ever.” So you choose to take the Bible because it tells you the truth that you are not just a physical body but made in God's image with a soul and a spirit and that He loves you so much that **it is written** “God so loved the world that he sent his only Son into our world so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3:16 Truly Christ is the Bread of Life and so we must daily read his word to survive in our desert-like world to live according to God's truth and our design.

Temptation No 1 gives us the choice either to accept the lie that we are mere physical creatures OR to believe the truth that we are spiritual beings made in God's image and therefore must live according to the truth of his written word and so find real lasting satisfaction in him.



Then the Devil takes Jesus to the holy city and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple and said, *“If you are the Son of God throw yourself down for it is written, he will command his angels and they will lift you up lest you dash your foot against a stone.”*

For Christ the temptation here is to resist the natural desire to avoid the suffering on the cross that would be necessary to achieve our salvation. To abandon God’s plan to rescue us and use his supernatural power to jump down from the cross, as the crowd challenged him to do, and have an angel fly him away. Instead, he chose to be obedient to God’s will and, out of love for us sinners, to trust in the Holy Spirit to give him the strength to go through suffering and death and by the resurrection to walk out of his tomb triumphant, in order to bring about our complete salvation and rescue.

Here the temptation for us, is not only to ignore the law of gravity, but to believe that we do not live in a moral universe and that, to ignore God's laws, will have no serious consequences. Richard Dawkins says we live in a universe where there is no God, no design or purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference. If there is a time of plenty then there must be a time of plague or famine to reduce the world population. The coronavirus and the deaths it causes are simply atoms rearranging themselves. So God is seen as a delusion along with the Christian faith which is convenient to believe as it puts **me** in charge of my life – I am god. This is exactly the temptation that Adam and Eve fell for - they disobeyed God's instruction and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil having been told that they would become like gods. As a result, their relationship with God was broken and death entered the beautiful world God had made. This is why nature is both beautiful and ugly and why we have riots, wars and pandemics with our lives under threat as they would be in a desert. Truly to ignore God's instructions and laws brings consequences as his angels will not enable you to disobey God's laws and get away with it. However never has this been so achievable these days with computers and their fantasy worlds in which so many children and adults live, in addition to taking alcohol and drugs. The other day I saw a fellow walking along totally absorbed by looking into his Iphone so he failed to see a pool of mud and walked right into it. We can all be guilty of procrastination, of ignoring problems and day dreaming. Yet the truth is, *“It is written you shall not tempt the Lord your God.”* In other words to hope that God will suspend his laws, so I can do what I like, is not possible. The truth is we live in a created and designed universe in which there are real moral and physical boundaries, which we cannot ignore as to do so will bring serious consequences.

So we have a choice. No matter how clever we are at not getting caught or how realistic our fantasy worlds may be, in the end we only delude ourselves because we are living in God's world. One day we will have to stand before God our creator and judge who is the ultimate reality. Jesus taught that we will leave that encounter either to enjoy eternal life with him in a world made new or suffer eternal alienation from him in the ultimate desert.



As the Apostle Paul tells us **it is written** *“Don't be deceived you cannot ignore God and get away with it. What you sow you will reap.”* Galatians 6:7 However because Christ did not leap down from the cross but suffered to take our judgement on himself, we can sow in our hearts the truth of this amazing fact and reap a harvest of repentance, forgiveness, be born again and live forever as a child of God. Temptation No 2 gives us the choice either to live ignoring God's laws, believing the lie that there is no judgment, OR to live by the truth obeying God's Word, knowing he will save us from the judgement.



And the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour "I will give you all this," he said, "If you bow down and worship me."

Here Christ is being told that he, the Devil, claims to have the ultimate power and authority in our world. So he is offering Christ a bargain – worship me and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world. However Christ would conquer the devil, not by striking a bargain with him, but by striking him through the heart with the wood of the cross.

For us this is the temptation to doubt that God is ultimately in control of our world. When Moses seemed to have disappeared on top of Mt Sinai, while receiving the commandments, God's people, struggling to survive in the Sinai desert, thought that God had abandoned them and so fell to the temptation to worship a Golden Calf, instead of the God who had rescued them from being slaves in Egypt. So when we see all the evil and suffering in our world we naturally ask where is God in all this?

In Latin the word for a crown is corona and so it seems to day as if the corona virus is wearing the crown and evil is in charge. So if you want to be a winner you need to side with the one who has the control as it seems that crime pays, be ruthless and you will get away with it and you won't get caught as there are fewer police. Believe this and you will have wealth, influence and a greater chance to fulfil your ambition and potential. So is this true or is it a lie? Christ replied to Satan, "***It is written You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.***" When the disciples saw Christ's dead body taken down from the cross and buried, it seemed certain that wicked men had won and that Satan, evil and death are the ultimate forces in our world. But in 36 hours, as God's word had predicted, Christ rose again, walked out of his tomb alive and so conquered death thus proving that life, goodness and God's truth and beauty are the ultimate forces in the universe. Then he ascended into heaven where he reigns in his Kingdom and thus opened the door for us to heaven. Therefore it is logical to worship God, to love and to serve him and then we will become indestructable like Christ.

During World War 2 there was far more knowledge of God's truth so people flocked to churches and there were national days of prayer so there was less panic than there is today. As a child at Sunday School I learnt the chorus - "Safe am I in the hollow of His hand; With His love forever more. No ill can harm me, No foe alarm me, For He keeps me both day and night" based on Psalm 91 as our first lesson reminded us **it is written** *I will say of the Lord he is my refuge and my fortress my God in whom I trust therefore I will not fear the pestilence nor the arrow that flies by day. Those who love me, I will rescue them. I will protect them for they acknowledge my name. They will call upon me and I will answer. I will be with them in trouble. I will deliver them and with long life will I satisfy them.*" Psalm 91: 14 - 16 Looking at these verses, in the light of Christ's willingness to bring about God's plan of salvation through the suffering of the cross in spite of the Devil's temptations, we can see how Christ has rescued us and also the depth of his love for us.



First, even though he was sinless, he wore the crown of thorns and so was infected by our sin when he took our judgment on himself. This means that us sinners, through faith in Christ, we know that we will be forgiven at the judgment and wear the crown of eternal life. Secondly God by enabling Christ to go through his suffering and then to overcome the plans of wicked men by conquering Satan and

death by his resurrection and ascension into heaven proves that God alone is all powerful for he can wonderfully even use evil and the suffering it causes to his own good purpose. This means that through faith in Christ, we know that in this life, he will bring good out of our suffering, and that we will be delivered from death as we are now citizens of God's Kingdom and will go through death to live forever in a New perfect Earth. We can now infect others with this truth as we share the Gospel with them.

Thus we have a choice either to seek greatness through boosting our own egos and selfish ambition or to worship God, overcome our selfishness and use our talents in his service even though we may be ridiculed and suffer for it. Truly to humbly serve Christ is the way to true greatness as Paul tells us **it is written** *“Have the same attitude as Christ. Though he had power as the Son of God, he did not use it for his own advantage, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. And being found in appearance as a man humbled himself and became obedient to death – even the death on a cross. Therefore God has exalted him to the highest place that at the name of Jesus every knee in heaven and on earth should bow and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord.”* *Philippians 2: 6 - 10*
Temptation No 3 gives us the choice of believing the lie that Satan and evil are in charge of our world OR the truth that we are to worship Christ, who now wears the crown and will return in glory to judge the living and the dead as King of Kings, which means we are now on the winning side.

In conclusion a desert is a place where you discover your weaknesses and your need of the Good Shepherd if you are to survive. In this way our desert world becomes a gymnasium, with the Good Shepherd as our coach, we are made aware of our sinfulness and made weak by the challenges of life so that by trusting more in him we become strong and better able to serve him and add to the goodness in the world in all we do and say. Charles Colson became Richard Nixon's personal adviser in 1969 and commented that having an office next to the President of the USA gave him an amazing feeling of power. He was valuable to Nixon because he was ruthless and it was claimed that he would even run over his own grand mother to keep Nixon in power. However this led him to be involved in the Watergate scandal which resulted in him being imprisoned in 1974. A friend gave him CS Lewis's book *Mere Christianity* and this enabled him to come to Christ, ask for forgiveness and be born again to live a new life. Now on release from prison, and with Christ as his Lord and master, he became determined to use his talents in the service of others and set up Prison Fellowship which to day is America's largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. Interestingly he came over to see Jonathan Aitken, the British MP and cabinet minister who was convicted of perjury in 1999 and sent to prison, to help him to commit his life to Christ. In June of last year Jonathan was ordained in order to become a prison chaplain so he too could use his life in the service of others and tell of truth of how Christ had rescued him from his sinful ways as a result of believing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So just as Christ, by coming into our desert world, and by trusting in the truth of God's word conquered Satan evil and death, so we can conquer him too with the same Sword of the Spirit.



So when we are faced with the struggles of life and the temptation to doubt God's word we will remember that **it is written** *“Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross scorning its shame and is now seated at the right hand of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-2* In other words the same Holy Spirit who enabled Christ to go through crucifixion and death to heaven, will enable us to use the realities of the desert world in which we live to transform our lives so we can serve him and go through suffering and death to bring us to heaven.



HERE WE SEE HOW WATER BRINGS LIFE AND BEAUTY INTO THE DESERT AND SO AN OASIS IS A PICTURE OF THE TRUE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN OUR SINFUL WORLD

Until Christ returns in glory, provided Christians remain faithful servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Living Water, and obedient to the truth of his Word, we will be an oasis in the desert of this world from which the thirsty may come and drink. **It is written:** *Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in him or her a spring of water welling up into eternal life."* John 4: 13 -14

Finally, God has not given us a suit of pyjamas for sleeping but a suit of armour and the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, for fighting and conquering the evil in us and in the world around us so we can live our lives like Christ in the service of our Heavenly Father and bring his life to others.

Let us pray.

We thank you O God that your Son Jesus Christ triumphed over temptation and that we can do the same through trusting in your Word and through the power of your Holy Spirit. Grant that we may be delivered from the attraction of materialism, from the appeal of escaping from reality and from the seduction of power. Lead us therefore not into temptation but when we are tempted we thank you that you can deliver us from evil for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen