

- The ideas for this series and some of the content were generated from a book by *Jeff Manion* called "The Land Between." A book that resonated with me to my very core, because the book challenged me about what happens when life is not so good. When things are at the bottom. When I am depressed and it doesn't seem like it will get better.
- The desert is the land where life is not as it once was, and where the future is in question.
- The desert is the land where everything normal is interrupted.
- John sits at his kitchen table. It is well after midnight but he cannot sleep. In fact, he has trouble sleeping most nights now. Two years ago his business was booming. He was doing more jobs than he could handle. He had hired extra crews. Now, there had been only 2 jobs in the last 3 months. It was down to just him and one employee and he is not sure he can keep that going. He wonders how long they can live off of their retirement savings before even more drastic measures have to be taken. His stomach is in knots and he feels like his health is starting to be affected. He looks at the bills and wonders what to do next. John is in the desert.
- Rachel is frustrated and close to tears again. Another day. Another fight. Their marriage has always been a little volatile but it has been so much worse lately. This last fight was a doozy. He husband had stormed out and yelled that maybe this time he wasn't coming back. She could feel panic creeping in from the edges. "What if he meant it? What would happen to the kids?" It was so overwhelming all she wanted to do was run as far as she could from it all.
- Rachel is in the desert.
- Have you ever been in the desert? Are you there now?
- The move into the desert can be very sudden.
- "Your position has been eliminated."
- "I don't love you anymore."
- "The tumor is malignant."
- "Mom, Dad, I'm pregnant."
- "Dad, uh . . . I'm at the police station."
- "We're moving."
- "Your mother and I are getting a divorce."
- We are suddenly thrown into a new place, with new vocabulary, learning things we never wanted to learn and knowing things we never wanted to know.
- Other times the move into the desert is a slow process.
- A gradual loss of our financial position.
- A child that drifts away from their parents and their faith.
- The slow erosion of a marriage over the years.
- Sudden or not, the landscape of the desert is very much the same.
- It not a place of logic. It often feels out of control. Smothering. Lonely. We are deeply hurt. Often disillusioned.
- That space, where we feel lonely, deeply hurt, that space is fertile ground.
- We don't think of the desert as fertile ground, but it is.
- It is a place where we can experience God's grace in new and amazing ways, where we can be challenged to higher levels of life and holiness. There are few places where we can experience such faith transformation as we can in the desert.
- It is also fertile ground for resentment, apathy, bitterness or anger to grow up. This can be where our faith can dry up and die if we are not watchful.
- So as we go into this series ahead, this is the truth I want you to hold on throughout the entire series.
- **THE DESERT IS FERTILE GROUND FOR TRANSFORMATION.**

- When we are in the desert, we just want to get it over with as fast as possible. We are trying to endure the best we can. If we close our eyes, grit our teeth and just try to do whatever we can to cope, we might miss what will make it worth it.
- The desert should not be viewed as something to be simply endured, but an opportunity to embrace.
- **THE DESERT IS FERTILE GROUND FOR TRANSFORMATION** . . . as long as we don't waste it.
- One of the best ways we can understand this together is in the travels and life of the early stages of the people of Israel as they leave Egypt and develop as a nation of people.
- God delivers them from their slavery in Egypt, and takes them to a place he had promised them. The journey goes through the desert.
- In the desert we see leadership on the edge of burnout, people spewing complaint, a people that were always disputatious and grumbling. We see God's grace, provision and mercy. We encounter his discipline.
- As we go on this journey together, we will, I believe, be challenged, encouraged and even rebuked.
- Let me be clear. The purpose of this is not to find the quickest off ramp from the desert. To find the easiest exit, the fastest fix.
- Rather, it's to use this desert time for transformation. Our response to God in the desert determines whether our journey will result in deep, positive spiritual growth or spiritual decline.
- It is a choice. When faced with the desert, we choose death or life.
- The heartache is not that we experience pain but that so much of our pain goes wasted when we refuse to learn from it.
- The journey begins in the middle of the wilderness where Moses has spent the better part of 4 decades taking care of sheep, living a nomadic existence, exiled far from his home and family of origin.

Exodus 3:1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up." 4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." 5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." 6 Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. 7 The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

- God is about to lead them out of Egypt and into the desert.
- There are some foundational principles we must remember if the desert is going to be the fertile ground for our faith that we desire.

I. God cares deeply about our desert.

- When we are in the desert, one of the things we question is whether God cares. Does he see? Is he paying attention? Why is he not doing anything?
- Let's back up a couple of verses before Moses' encounter with God.
Exodus 2:23 During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. 24 God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. 25 So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.
- "Heard" – to listen with interest. To understand.
- "Concerned about them" – is sometimes translated "knew", it is about a God who knows, who gets it, sometimes means to know by experience.
- In v7 he tells Moses he has "seen" – to watch, to observe, to give attention to what is going on.
- When things are not going well. When things are difficult. When stuff is not moving quickly, it feels like we've been abandoned.
- God cares deeply. He is never cavalier about your pain. He is not ignorant of your suffering. He is not too busy to feel your hurt with you.
- God was about to take them from Egypt. . . INTO the desert. They were not even in the desert yet.
- While Egypt is a place of slavery, it is also comfortable. It is lush. It is green, food is abundant. The land they are going to is also known for being this type of land.
- In between is a desert. This is the undesirable space between two more desirable spaces.
- God feels our pain alongside of us. If we don't believe God cares deeply, then the desert will be a place of dryness and difficulty. **THE DESERT IS FERTILE GROUND FOR TRANSFORMATION.** If we don't believe that God cares, then we will never trust him. Yet it is exactly here that God extends the invitation to trust.

II. The desert is an invitation to develop trust.

- God sees his people. He is concerned about them. He is going to do something about it.
7 The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.
- He is taking them "from" the hand of the Egyptians and "into" a land flowing with milk and honey – the Promised Land. Sounds wonderful.
- What there is no mention of is the amount of time this is going to take. It sounds like a short trip. It is not.
- In this journey from one state to the next, they were going to have to develop trust of him.
- It was not going to be quick. It was not going to be easy.
- As we are going to see, the Israelites did not fare well. It did not take much time to mistrust God and accuse him of not caring.
- The purpose of the desert is to forge a relationship of trust.
- It is easy to trust God when all is going according to plan. When all is well. When goals are being accomplished. When there is no conflict. When we get what we want. But what happens when dreams are dashed? When expectations are unmet?
- That's why before God told Moses that he was going to deliver the people, he told Moses who he was.

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- I am the God you had heard about. I am the God who has been around. I am the God who made promises to your ancestors. When Moses questions whether this is possible, God answers with: "I AM WHO I AM." I am the source of all. I have all power. Everything finds their beginning and end in me. Trust me!
- Let me say this again. The purpose of the desert is to forge a relationship of trust.
- The desert teaches us that we do not have complete control of our lives. We know this, but in the desert, it becomes very apparent.
- **THE DESERT IS FERTILE GROUND FOR TRANSFORMATION.**
- When we know and believe that he cares and cares deeply, then we can begin to trust him. And once we trust him we can let him transform us.

III. The desert requires cooperation for transformation.

- This is the reason that trust is so foundational. God wants to transform us into what he desires.
- We must trust that he has our best interest at heart.
- We must trust that he knows what he is doing.
- We must trust that he is working.
- We must trust that he is good.
- We must trust that he has not abandoned us.
- God is looking to transform us. To develop us into something amazing.
- At Hope Chapel, we invite people to come as they are and be changed. The emphasis is always on movement. Are you moving? It doesn't matter your current state – God is inviting you to something more.
- Israel was acclimated to the world of Egypt. A world of idolatry, multiple gods. It's what they knew. It's what they grew up with. They have been more formed by this than by the God of Abraham.
- The desert was going to be the space where they were supposed to be transformed from a people of slavery into the people of God.
- It's where they will gain their identity as a people and as a nation.
- It's where they will receive the 10 commandments and the law – the core of their covenant with God.
- It's where they will build a portable worship center – the tabernacle.
- The desert was not simply something to be crossed to get to the Promised Land.

Exodus 9:4 "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

- This transformation is important. It was necessary.
- They have no laws. They are an unruly mob of slaves. Resentful of Moses' leadership. They don't really know God, they are unprepared to enter the Promised Land.
- The desert is a place of preparation.
- They had to learn obedience.
- They had skills to learn.

- They had to set up systems and leaders.
- **THE DESERT IS FERTILE GROUND FOR TRANSFORMATION.**
- He cares so deeply about you. He is not unaware of your struggles not is he ignoring you. He feels with you.
- He is inviting you to trust him. Trust his character. Trust his goodness. Trust his leading. Trust his love for you.
- Cooperate with the transformation that he wants to bring about in you.
- On January 22, 2008, six months before the opening of the movie, "The Dark Knight", Heath Ledger, who played the villainous Joker, was found unconscious in his Manhattan apartment. The medical examiner reported that the 28-year-old had died from an accidental overdose of a lethal brew of prescription drugs.
- Reviewers lauded Ledger for his "electrifying" performance. Reviewers use the language of the supernatural, calling him "demonic" and "diabolical" – "a hound fresh out of hell," "a vivid, compelling picture of ... evil." Michael Caine, who plays Batman's butler Alfred, said that he found Ledger's performance so terrifying and disturbing that he sometimes forgot his lines.
- Reportedly, the Joker role had taken a decided toll on the actor's health. For weeks, he was unable to sleep, averaging only two hours a night. He told a New York Times reporter in November 2007 that even after taking two sleeping pills, "I couldn't stop thinking. My body was exhausted, and my mind was still going." He also told a reporter that "the only way that I can act" is to climb inside the skin of the person he was playing. For "The Dark Knight", he spent a month alone in a hotel room to work on his character and voice, perfecting an unhinged cackle that sends shivers up the audience's spine. But by immersing himself in the role of the Joker, Ledger might well have gazed too deeply into the abyss.
- Attorney Jay Gaskill in his review of The Dark Knight said: "I think the Joker killed Heath Ledger."
- The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster."
- When you are in the desert, you will change. You will be transformed. The desert never leaves anyone unchanged.
- **THE DESERT IS FERTILE GROUND FOR TRANSFORMATION.** It can be the ground that grows you in ways you never imagined . . . if you let it. The desert is a gift from God in your life. Don't waste it