

- Recently, my wife and I had this conversation. Let me know if it sounds familiar to you.
 - Wife: The dishwasher is not running really well. It's leaving a lot of residue. Perhaps we should get it looked at.
 - Me: It's only a couple of years old. It shouldn't be causing us a problem.
 - Wife: I think it is more than a couple of years old. I think we bought it like 5 years ago.
 - Me: No way, we just got it. I still remember putting it in.
 - Wife: Actually, now that I think about it, it might be more like 10 years old.
 - Me: There is no way that is 10 years old.
 - Wife: Yeah it is – remember we got it when we switched colors in the kitchen. We got a better one so it would last longer.
 - Me: You're right – it really is old. When did that happen?
 - Time flies by faster than we imagine. When we look back, we are often surprised at how much time has passed and what has actually happened.
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- Once we get through the next week of Christmas morning, family gatherings (which may be stressful or relaxing or both), time off from work, too much food, our attention will turn towards the new year.
 - Occasionally we will look back on the past year and reflect on what has happened. We will consider events that happened.
 - When I do this, I sometimes get frustrated. Some things change but others seem to remain the same. This is especially true with my spiritual life. The struggles seem the same. The problems haven't changed. It feels like it's two steps forward and three back. It can be difficult to see change and growth.
 - When we are in the desert, this feeling is compounded. We find ourselves falling into the same sin patterns, we "feel" distant from God and others. We are frustrated.
 - It is easy to wonder, "What's the point of all this?"
 - We may not always know the specific details of what God is leading to, but there is a goal that God has for every person in the desert.
 - **THE DESERT IS MEANT TO STRENGTHEN OUR TRUST.**
 - We have spent the last 6 weeks looking at the Israelites and their wanderings in the desert.
 - If we were to sum them up, we would probably say it this way.
 - The Israelites wandered through a difficult time and place, but God provided. He put them in challenging circumstances to encourage them to trust him. He wanted them to become a people of trust.
 - Instead, they were a complaining people who did not learn from their mistakes. They were not like Moses who went to God in trust with his problems. As a result, they never reached the Promised Land. They wandered the desert for 40 years until they died and what they wanted more than anything never happened.
 - It seems to be a story of failure.
 - If you go through all the stories we have looked at and many more beside, the greatest failure of the Israelites in the desert was their failure to trust.

I. Trust is necessary for growth.

- God is always interested in our spiritual growth.
- He wants us to grow to be like him. Why do you think this was so critical for the Israelites? Why was trust such a large thing?

Deut 7:6 For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

Deut 14:2 for you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession.

- Multiple times, we are told that the Israelites were God's chosen people. What were they chosen for?
- The Israelites were going to be going into the Promised Land and their trusting relationship with God was critical to the people's ability to fulfill their destiny.
- Once they entered, they were to live differently than all the nations around them. They were supposed to live as God-reflectors. God's laws and commandments were to set them apart. The idea was that others would be drawn to Creator God through them. The God whose character is marked by faithfulness, truth, dependability, and honor.
- When traders traveling the caravan routes from Babylon to Egypt told stories of this nation, you can imagine them saying "You don't have to lock your door, because theft is virtually unheard of. We could sleep without fear of being attacked or plundered. There is a high level of respect and honor. They honor their parents, their neighbors, their promises. Husbands and wives do not betray their vows to each other. The hilltops are not dotted with altars. The blessing of God is obvious on their lives."
- God had chosen them to reflect the essence of God.
- The desert was their training ground to trust. It was supposed to develop them from a people of slavery into a people of God.
- Will you trust me when there is limited water? Will you trust me when food is in short supply? Will you trust me when you get tired of what I am providing?
- They were not going to grow unless they learned to trust in God.
- **THE DESERT IS MEANT TO STRENGTHEN OUR TRUST.**
- As we develop trust, we grow. There are two different ways we grow.

II. The desert can lead to transformational growth.

- We have said from the beginning that the desert is fertile ground for transformation. It is where some of the biggest leaps in growth can happen.
- Radical, sweeping, transformational change where we emerge radically different tends to happen under pressure. These leaps forward rarely happen outside of a desert experience.
- Transformational growth requires struggle, pressure and heat. That kind of character has to be forged.
- The original group of Israelites did not make it. They did not trust God. They were not transformed. They failed and wandered for 40 years in the desert as they waited for an entire generation of people to die.
- Their children learned better. Perhaps the parents taught their kids so they wouldn't make the same mistakes. Perhaps the children heard stories of the past. Maybe it's that the kids grew up having to depend on God for everything.
- Whichever, the next generation entered the Promised Land.

Joshua 5:3 So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth. 4 Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt—all the men of military age—died in the wilderness on the way after leaving Egypt. 5 All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the wilderness during the journey from Egypt had not. 6 The Israelites had moved about in the wilderness forty years until all the men who were of military age when they left Egypt had died, since they had not obeyed the LORD. For the LORD had sworn to them that they would not see the land he had solemnly promised their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. 7 So he raised up their sons in their place.

- A new generation that trusted in God.

10 On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. 11 The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. 12 The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.

- They had arrived. They were now in the Promised Land.
- The need to trust did not end. It shifted. They may have had food, but now they had military challenges, battles to fight, land to occupy, and the hard work had just begun.
- But they had developed a pattern of trust that lasted through most of this generation of people.
- **THE DESERT IS MEANT TO STRENGTHEN OUR TRUST.**
- The desert is often a detour in our lives. The detour of cancer. The detour of bankruptcy. The detour of a relationship gone sour, of divorce. The detour of a runaway daughter.
- In the midst of these desert detours, God provides. He even blesses. All the while asking us to trust and when we do, there are often amazing breakthroughs.
- How we emerge from the desert, with transformational growth, or bitterness and resentment, with more trust or less, is connected often a result of what happens BEFORE we even get into the desert.

III. We prepare for the desert through incremental growth.

- Incremental growth is simply steady movement in the right direction.
- It is the continual and ongoing alignment of our hearts with God's heart SO THAT we are more likely to respond in a redemptive way when thrown into a major life crisis.
- What's the difference? Incremental growth.
- Incremental growth comes generally when we are experiencing an uninterrupted life. There are good things and some things not so good, but in general, we are moving along.
- In this time, the consistent habits of personal and spiritual development are being implemented.
- In the movie Rocky, there is the training montage. "Gonna Fly Now" plays while we see Rocky jogging, doing one-handed pushups, speed boxing, in the meat locked hitting slabs of beef. We see his power and speed increase until it all culminates with the spring up the steps of the Art Museum, hands held high. It is showing us that he is being pushed, stretched and pounded in preparation for what is to come. This ongoing discipline is necessary for the story, not an interruption in it. The plotline: "Naturally gifted athlete does nothing particular demanding in preparation but easily wins the title" is just not that interesting.
- Incremental growth takes effort. We lay a spiritual foundation over time. Getting to know God. Reading his word. Prayer. Being with fellow Christ-followers. Building relationships with non-Christ-followers. They are disciplines. They are choices.
- When we live in daily obedience and trust, it establishes patterns that build the foundation needed for the desert.
- Saying yes to God again and again when there seems to be little at stake prepares our hearts to say yes when everything is at stake.

Judges 2:7 The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. 13 Do not rom death. . . 10 After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.

- They stopped. Life got good. Things were going OK. They had what they needed. And they lost their direction. Incremental growth stopped.
- The entire book of Judges is repeated accounts of God taking Israel through desert experience after desert experience to bring about transformation and growth.

Judges 21:25 In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

- **THE DESERT IS MEANT TO STRENGTHEN OUR TRUST.**
- If you are in the desert and you have not prepared. If you have not be engaged in developing trust with him. It is not too late. Just start where you are. Right now.
- Every one of us has gone through, is going through or will go through desert experiences.
- God will not waste these experiences.
- *“The very experiences we wish to avoid can grow the very crop we most desperately need. The land we least desire may produce the fruit we most desire – if we will let it.”* (Jeff Manion)
- **THE DESERT IS MEANT TO STRENGTHEN OUR TRUST.**
- If we get this, we can resist the spirit of complaint. We can cry out honestly to him. We can trust him to provide in ways we might not know to ask for. We can trust that he sees and cares. We can see that his discipline is meant as loving and transformational.
- God is in the business of change. So don't zone out, numb out or check out. You are in training and God is up to something good.