



Parkway Fellowship

Won't You Be My Neighbor? • When I Confuse The Desert With Deserted •
Jeremiah 29:10-14; Matthew 3:1-6; Matthew 4:1-11 • 10/14/2018

Main Point

When God allows you to enter lonely places and seasons, He wants you to listen to other believers, trust that there is a plan, and seek Him with your whole heart.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What in your life comes to mind when you hear the phrase, “...By any means necessary” (i.e., having your morning cup of coffee, watching your favorite team in the big game, taking a Sunday afternoon nap, getting the job you want, etc.)?

Does God ever operate that way, with a “by any means necessary” resolve? How have you benefited from His determination to accomplish His will in your life?

What would you say is God’s ultimate plan for your life? What are some means He uses to accomplish this?

The Bible is filled with examples of God using any means necessary to grow His people and get them where He wants them to go. In those cases, “any means necessary” often meant sending them to lonely, desert

places. God took Jesus to the desert to prepare Him for His earthly ministry and to face the Evil One. God took His people to the desert—to Babylon in exile—in the Book of Jeremiah and there promised them a hopeful future. God led John the Baptist into the desert to help Him clarify what was important—Jesus—to everyone who would listen. He does the same for us today. What we'll see in our study is that being in the desert is not the same thing as being deserted. When you're in a desert place, it's because God wants to teach you something. The desert is to prepare us, to purify us, and to clarify our priorities. To learn that, we must listen to other believers, trust that there is a plan, and seek Him with our whole heart.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Ask a volunteer to read Jeremiah 29:10-14.

Put yourself in the shoes of God's people who were being shackled and carted off to pagan Babylon. Would it have been hard for you to hear anything after verse 10? What conflict would you have in believing God's words in verse 11?

In your own words, why was God sending His people into exile for 70 years? Was God deserting them by allowing their captors to take them into exile?

By telling them what He was up to with His 70-year plan, what immediate outcome or response do you think God wanted from His people? When God sends you into difficult seasons, do you think it would help you or hurt you to know how long He plans to keep you there? Explain.

The Jewish people had been taken into captivity in a far-away pagan land, and their lives had turned out very different than the ones they dreamed about having when they were children. The Lord used the prophet Jeremiah to remind the Israelites that even though things were not as they had planned or hoped for, He was with them and was working in the midst of difficult days. God's plan was to do good things for them, and to restore their hope and futures in ways they'd only dreamed of as captives in a foreign land. In short, there was a method to the madness. God was at work purifying His people, and He sent them into exile to do it because their relationship with Him was far more important than any measure of earthly ease or comfort. The experience of Jeremiah and Israel reminds us that when we're tempted to feel deserted, God wants us to listen to other Christ followers, trust that there is a plan, and seek Him with our whole hearts.

| Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 3:1-6.

What do you think was Matthew's purpose in including John's wardrobe and diet in verse 4?

The exiles in Jeremiah 29 needed to be purified and to draw near to God. John, though, was not in the wilderness because of his sin. Why, then, do you think God pre-ordained the wilderness as John’s preaching venue? How does John’s story counter the modern American idea of successful ministry?

What was John’s message? How did people respond to that message?

God gave John the Baptist a message, and John preached it to the people. He called for people to repent of sins because the Messiah, Jesus, was coming. The desert (wilderness) played a big role in John’s life. The word “desert,” or “wilderness,” in the text described John’s location, helped point out John as the voice promised in Isaiah 40:3, and illustrated the difficult life God had called John to. Eventually, John’s “street preaching” landed him in prison (Luke 3:19-20). Like the exiles in Jeremiah 29, God sent John into both literal and figurative desert places. Unlike the exiles, God sent John there not to deal with his own sin, but to call others to repent of theirs. John trusted God had a plan and sought Him with his whole heart.

| Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 4:1-11.

From verse 1, why did Jesus go to the wilderness? In your own words, what was the Spirit’s purpose in leading Him there? What benefit could possibly come to Jesus by being tempted by Satan in the wilderness?

From verse 2, what other factors amplified the difficulty of being in that place of wilderness?

In what ways have you been tempted by your physical needs, pride, and power in “wilderness” places where your faith is tested? How does Jesus’ example here show you how to respond to those temptations?

From verse 11, what happened at the end of the time Jesus was in the wilderness? When have you seen God’s blessings after staying faithful through a difficult, “desert” season?

After His baptism in Matthew 3, Jesus left the Jordan River where John was baptizing to go into the desert alone. He was led there by the Spirit and fasted 40 days and nights. So Jesus was in the wilderness (desert) alone and hungry, and then the devil showed up to tempt Him. God was at work preparing Jesus and He sent Jesus to the wilderness because the salvation of humankind was far more important than Jesus’ comfort and ease of life. God prepares us, too, for temptations involving our physical longings (food, sex, appearance, etc.), pride (self-centeredness and not needing anyone), and desire for power (wanting to control and do things our own way). To face those well and to endure the desert seasons, we must prioritize the glory of God above our own worldly inclinations.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Name a situation where you have confused the desert with being deserted by God. What did you learn in that situation, or what are you learning now about God's plans? About seeking Him with your whole heart? About listening to other believers?

Based on your relationship with the Lord currently, what purpose do you imagine God might have in allowing you to face a difficult situation: to prepare you, to purify you, or to clarify your priorities? How can this group pray for you about that?

Is it easy or difficult for you to listen to other believers when you're experiencing lonely seasons? Who is a mature believer you could turn to?

Pray

Thank God that He always has good purposes, even in the times you feel deserted. Confess the resentment you feel in those seasons, and invite Him to help you listen to other believers, trust that there is a plan, and seek Him with your whole heart.

Commentary

| Jeremiah 29:11-14

God declared emphatically, “I know the plans I have for you.” He had orchestrated the subjugation of the promised land and the captivity of Judah’s citizens for a reason. In the people’s eyes, these events understandably were viewed as disastrous. From God’s perspective, however, the events were part of a greater, redemptive plan. They were orchestrated for His people’s welfare and to give them a future and a hope. One day a remnant of the exiles would return to spiritual faithfulness and would be restored to the promised land (see Isa. 10:20-22; Ezek. 39:25-29). Ultimately, God’s redemptive plans for His people would be fulfilled in the saving mission of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God has given believers “a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3).

God declared that the working out of His plan included the exiles turning to Him for help as they had stubbornly refused to do when they lived in Judah. To call to the Lord is to recognize that only He is the Source of help and deliverance. The exiles would come and pray to the Lord, and the Lord promised to listen to them. This promise was a reversal of a previous divine declaration to refuse to hear the people’s cries for help (see Jer. 11:11). The difference for the exiles would be the changed condition of their hearts toward God. The discipline of the exile was designed to propel the people toward genuine repentance. God promised that the people would find Him—that is, would be assured of His presence and power for living—when they

sought Him humbly and wholeheartedly. In Hebrew thought, the heart was the seat of human will and devotion. When people seek God with all their heart, they reject all other rivals for God's affection. They trust in no one or nothing else except the Lord. They hope only in Him for their future well-being.

| Matthew 3:1-6

3:1. "In those days" means "during the time of Jesus' residence in Nazareth." In OT usage, "in those days" often referred to a time of prophetic fulfillment. Matthew probably used the phrase in conjunction with his references to fulfilled prophecy to emphasize that God's promises were being fulfilled through Jesus and John the Baptist, herald and predecessor of Messiah.

3:2. John's message focused on repentance and the coming kingdom of heaven. Jesus emphasized the same from the outset of His ministry. The kingdom is defined as the rule that God exercises through the person, work, and teachings of Jesus. The call to repent means we must abandon sinful lifestyles and express sorrow for sins.

3:3. Matthew's application of Isaiah 40:3 to John the Baptist tells us as much about Jesus as it does about John. After all, in its original context the prophecy spoke of one who prepared the way for the coming of Yahweh, God Himself. Using a text about the coming of Yahweh to describe the coming of Jesus, Matthew proclaimed that Jesus is divine.

3:4. John's garment was similar to Elijah's, and his ministry and lifestyle paralleled Elijah's, including his residence in the Judean wilderness, his austere diet, his call for Israel to repent, and his confrontation with an evil king and his wife. Jesus explained the significance of these parallels in Matthew 11:14; 17:12-13.

3:6. Although Jews required Gentiles to immerse themselves in water in order to convert from paganism to Judaism, John demanded that repentant Jews be baptized as well. This bold move implied that Jews did not belong to God merely by virtue of their descent from Abraham. Like anyone else, ethnic Jews needed to repent in order to enter the coming kingdom. Unlike the repetitive ritual washings of other religious groups, John's baptism appears to have been a one-time event associated with a permanent repentance and a transformed life.

| Matthew 4:1-11

4:1-4. Jesus' temptation immediately followed His baptism. Many of God's people have faced strong temptations immediately after spiritual mountaintop experiences. Jesus' baptism has been viewed as the beginning of His public ministry. In His temptation, Jesus faced choices regarding how He would accomplish the mission God had given Him. Would He choose God's way or Satan's way?

At the beginning of these temptations, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert. Did the Spirit do the tempting? No, the tempter did. Although led by the Spirit into the desert, Jesus was tempted by the devil. An important note of difference between the work of the Spirit and the work of Satan is evident in this verse. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, but the devil was responsible for the temptation. This verse warns us that we must never blame God for temptation nor should we view Satan as having power equal to God's. The devil is always bound by what God permits.

Satan attempted to prove Jesus faithless. God permitted Jesus to be tested to demonstrate His faithfulness. Satan attempted to create division between God and His Son. The devil works against God's purposes and God's people. The temptations Jesus faced were real temptations. Yet He steadfastly and repeatedly resisted temptation (Heb. 4:15).

The temptations recorded in Matthew 4 happened after Jesus had fasted forty days and forty nights. After a 40-day fast, Jesus was hungry. Jesus was both God and man. As a man, Jesus experienced the same kinds of physical needs we experience. What did the devil mean by the phrase "if you are the Son of God"? The phrase also could be translated "since You are the Son of God." Satan tempted Jesus to use His power for selfish gain. Would Jesus base His kingdom on selfish desires or on service? The devil looked at the desert with its barren rocks and tempted Jesus to tell these stones to become bread. Jesus responded to the devil's temptations by quoting Scripture. In this instance He quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3 to remind him that man does not live on bread alone. Jesus knew that human beings need physical food. But He also recognized people's greater need for spiritual food. We need every word that comes from the mouth of God. God's Word can satisfy our deepest needs.

4:5-7. Satan took Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem and had Jesus stand on the highest point of the temple. Satan tempted Jesus to throw Himself down from the high point. The devil quoted the written Word of God in his attempt to convince Jesus to claim God's promise of protection. Satan quoted Psalm 91:11-12. These verses refer to God's protection of the faithful who remain committed to Him. As we might expect, he twisted the meaning of Scripture.

The psalm does not teach that God's people are free to abuse God's power to satisfy a personal whim. Why did Satan tempt Jesus to abuse God's power in this way? People are drawn to the spectacular. If Jesus jumped and was rescued in a supernatural way, He could gain followers. But He rejected the temptation to build His kingdom in this manner. Jesus again responded to temptation with the Word of God: Do not put the Lord your God to the test (see Deut. 6:16).

Jesus refused to abuse God's power. He refused to build His kingdom with spectacular displays of power. Jesus resisted the temptation to bypass the cross and His redemptive mission by refusing to yield to this temptation.

4:8-11. In this temptation Satan tried to tempt Jesus with instant power apart from the way of the cross. He tempted Jesus to use worldly methods to achieve His purposes. The setting was a very high mountain. The devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. The devil claimed the rule of the world and offered to resign his claim if Jesus would bow down and worship him. Jesus faced a clear choice. He could follow the will of the devil or that of God. Jesus would receive glory after His death and resurrection, but Satan tried to persuade Jesus to take the easy way and receive instant power, authority, and wealth apart from the way of the cross. Jesus knew, however, that the end does not justify the means. God's will cannot be accomplished by worldly methods. Note Jesus' firm response: Away from me, Satan! In this response to the devil, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only. God alone is worthy of worship. Jesus resolved to center His life on God's purpose. Jesus refused to resort to worldly methods to achieve God's purposes. Jesus knew that God's will cannot be done apart from doing things God's way.