

IN THE SPIRIT OF THANKSGIVING



Life in the desert taught the Hebrews not to be independent, but that they were dependent upon God and upon each other.

Scripture:

Deuteronomy 30

Choose life

10. ...if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.
11. "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.
12. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'
13. Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'
14. But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.
15. "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil.
16. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it.
17. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them,
18. I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.
19. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; ***therefore choose life***, that you and your descendants may live,
20. loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."



WHY SHOULD IT TAKE SO LONG?

Following the Exodus from Egypt, Moses led the Hebrews across the Red Sea (archaeologists say the "Reed Swamp") and into the desert on their way back to Biblical Israel. There would be international borders to cross, but today, we could make that journey in about an hour by airplane, about a day by automobile, and about two weeks on foot. It took the Hebrews forty years.

Why should it take so long?

On the way, they stopped at Mt. Sinai and Moses was given the Ten Commandments. In fact

he was not given the commandments just one time, but twice, since he destroyed the first set of tablets in a rage when he saw the idolatry to which the Hebrews had reverted while he was on the mountain for forty days receiving the Ten Commandments from God. But even that only adds a few months to the journey. Not forty years.

THE BIBLE TELLS US WHY.

The Hebrews were rebellious against God and their spiritual leaders. They planned and plotted against them; they second guessed them; and mavericks arose who offered fragmentation and

special interest. For this rebellion, God sent them into the desert one year for each day that Moses was on the mountain with God. Moses was on Mount Sinai forty days. We can do the math.

Some of the rebels said that this journey through the desert was the worst thing that had ever happened to the Hebrews, and some of them demanded that they all return to slavery. They said slavery would be better than life in the Sinai desert.

THE HEBREWS LEARNED SOMETHING IN THE DESERT.

But what happened in those forty years? These four decades meant that the people who left Egypt as slaves were not the same individuals who fought to conquer the Holy Land. They were their children. They were children who were born in the desert. The children had different skills – they had survival skills, they had warrior skills which were different than the skills of the people who built the great monuments of Egypt, and worked in the homes of the Egyptians as domestiques of one kind or another.

So they left Egypt thinking that they wanted to become independent like their religious ancestors, but what they learned in the desert is that no one can survive in the brutal desert alone. You can not be independent in the desert, because you will die. The desert teaches you that you must become dependent – upon the resources God has provided, and upon each other for nourishment, protection and health.

DEPENDENT UPON GOD

**IN THE DESERT YOU LEARN TO
BECOME DEPENDENT UPON GOD,
AND UPON OTHER PEOPLE.
IF YOU DO NOT LEARN THAT IN THE DESERT,
YOU WILL NOT SURVIVE.**

But you don't have to be a Biblical Hebrew to learn that:

- They teach the same lesson in programs like Outward Bound.
- You learn that in a leadership retreat weekend.
- They teach that lesson to Hebrew and Palestinian children who are led into the desert together to survive together for two weeks hoping that this shared experience will prepare children to get along as adults.

- They teach that lesson in basic training.
- In our own way, our church teaches about the dependence we have upon each other.

Many of you know what I am talking about when I say that life can be so difficult sometimes that the only lesson we can learn is how very much we need each other.

MODERN RESTATEMENTS OF DESERT THEOLOGY

I discovered many restatements of this “learning survival in a spiritual desert” philosophy in the words of modern people:

- From a business prospective, Peter Drucker said, “Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision.”
- American novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was a rallying cry for the abolitionist movement wrote from her own experience, “When you get into a tight place and it seems that you can not go on, hold on – for that’s just the place and the time that the tide will turn.”
- American anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson, wrote about the process of self discovery in women and said, “We are not what we know, but what we are willing to learn.”
- Do you remember Norman Cousins and his famous book, *Anatomy of an Illness* in which his vision of healing and laughter literally saved his life? He said, “The capacity for hope is the most significant fact of life. It provides human beings with a sense of destination and the energy to get started.”

Courage, holding on, the willingness to learn new things, and the capacity for hope are all things that we learn in the spiritual deserts of life.

The Kingdom of God is not about a land; the Kingdom of God is not a book of laws; it is not what you wear; it is not the formulas you recite. The Kingdom of God is about your spirit – your courage, your willingness to grow, and the hope in your heart. The Kingdom of God is about the discovery that you are dependent upon God, and God’s children are dependent upon each other.

Let me repeat that. It is so important.

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DEPENDENT UPON EACH OTHER.**

I’ve said it twice because it is basic. This is the spiritual law behind every other spiritual law, and you must observe it every day of your life.

The enemy of the Kingdom of God is the iconoclast, the maverick, the one issue person. No one is more deceived than the person who says, “I did it all myself.” The Kingdom of God is a single story building. All of us stand shoulder to shoulder.

IN THE DESERT THE HEBREWS LEARNED DEPENDENCY.

The maverick is not only a danger to others, he is also a danger to himself.

The person who never has a kind word for you never has a kind word for anyone else either. But no church was ever built on cynicism, and when the Hebrews began to become cynical about the spiritual and communal life to which God had called them, God sent them back into the desert for another forty years until they got it right.

And it is with this symbolism in mind that Jesus said, “I am the living water” for thirsty people who dwell in the desert. I will bring you life if you will live by my words, and thrive with my blessing.

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday, and it begins a season of some very spiritual lessons and spiritual introspection. So I put to you the question of the Hebrews – when have you been in a spiritual desert, and were you able to learn about dependence there?

THE LORD SAID TO THE HEBREWS:

15. "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. ...
19. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; *therefore choose life*, that you and your descendants may live,

20. loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

CHOOSE LIFE.

Did you know that you *can* choose?

In a very modern context two doctors, three nurses, three hospital CEO’s, and the pilot of a rescue helicopter all told us to choose life:

- You can choose life by not smoking, losing weight, eating a balanced diet, getting exercise, being part of a wellness program, and maintaining a healthy social life.
- You should screen for cancer, and take active precautions against disease of the circulatory system.
- Wear a seat belt, wear a bicycle helmet, and get help when you do a difficult job so that you won’t have an accident.
- There are many ways for us to choose life, and I have just given you a top ten list.

This counsel should sound familiar to everyone here.

You can choose life by living in a balance of the needs of your body, your mind, and your spirit. You’ve heard it from your doctor, but it is important that you also hear it from your minister.

Life is not about growing more independent, it is about understanding that we are all dependent. We are partners in the important work – the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot exist in a spiritual desert without others. If we ask you to support that work from time to time, we do so without embarrassment. It is never wrong to ask someone to join you in doing a good thing. No one should give you a lecture and a rude comment. We know that we are dependent upon each other and we share our resources. If people don’t know that, then they did not learn the first lesson required of the Hebrews in the desert. It is in that spirit we dedicate our gifts to the Lord’s work in the year ahead.

A PROCLAMATION OF THANKSGIVING

The best ideas, the best communities, the very best people rise up during difficult times, and emerge from the most difficult of circumstances. If we did not have those circumstances, there would

be no need for the great insights that come from them.

Learning about dependence through adversity gave birth to the holiday of Thanksgiving in America. After the first Thanksgivings were celebrated by the Pilgrims, there was a period of time when the holiday lost its significance. But it did not lose significance to Abraham Lincoln who said that in the most difficult times the Union had ever experienced, it was more important than ever before to give thanks for life in the midst of hardship and death.

If I were going to add a few more chapters to Holy Scripture, this piece would be part of the words that I would select.

These are the words of Abraham Lincoln setting aside a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens, in the midst of the Civil War.

I hope you have heard them before.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S
THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATION
October 3, 1863
(edited for presentation)

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

...

They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American People.

I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday

of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.

And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, we commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.

It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord.



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