Leadership Letter 14
(Note: this is the 14th in a series of "Leadership Letters" that have been written in the last few months. You can read previous letters at our web-site. Go to www.GraceGlobalNetwork.org and look under the "encouragement" section.)

How God Uses the Desert

Our youngest child, Brooks, is sophomore in high school and a talented baseball player. He has begun to receive inquiries from colleges all around the country, inviting him to consider playing baseball for their school. It's an agonizing process ... brochures, phone calls, school visits, invitations to camps, disappointments, surprises and ultimately (about eighteen months from now) the final decision. Like I said, it's an agonizing process.

God has a school for us, too. Did you know that? There isn't anything *usual* about it. It doesn't have dormitories, science labs, or even athletic fields. It isn't listed in any catalog, magazine or website. The high school guidance counselor may know nothing about it. Yet it is one of the most profound institutions of learning you could ever attend.

I know. I've been there. Many times. Perhaps you've taken courses there as well. I am quite sure we'll be taking more in the future. And the tuition can be extremely high. I am referring to God's school in the desert, and I don't mean Arizona State in Tempe! There is nothing glamorous, colorful or attractive about this particular desert. It's the place of desolation that Moses found himself in for forty long years. That's f-o-r-t-y years. (Forty years ago, I was in *high school...!*) Moses had a four-decade course of study in the wilderness so that He might know how to lead a whole nation through a similar wilderness. The story begin in Exodus 2, right after Moses killed the Egyptian in his self-initiated attempt to deliver God's people from bondage.

Exodus 2:15-25 *15 When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. 16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock. 18 When they came to Reuel their father, he said, "Why have you come back so soon today?" 19 So they said, "An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock." 20 He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why is it that you have left the man behind? Invite him to have something to eat." 21 Moses was willing to dwell with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses. 22 Then she gave birth to a son, and he named him Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land."*
23 Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. 24 So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 25 God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.

Where is God in the Desert?

The Hebrew word for"desert" is *midbaar.* It comes from the word *dahbaar*, meaning

"to speak." From that root term I want to suggest that the desert is the place where God speaks, where He communicates some of His most important messages to us.

The first thing I want you to notice is that **God Is With Us in the Desert.** The Holy Spirit penned these words in Deuteronomy 32:10 – *He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye.* I have circled four verbs from that statement:

God *found* him
God *encircled* him
God *cared* for him
God *guarded* him

And if you read through verse eleven, you can add another one: God *carried* him

What a great picture of God's intimate involvement in our lives. How often you and I can begin to grumble when we find ourselves in the desert place! We cry out, "Where is God?" "Why is this happening to me?" "Doesn't God care about me anymore?" "Has God abandoned me?" The answers to those questions are emphatic. God says, "I am here with you. I care about you deeply. I haven't abandoned you. In fact, I am guiding you with My eye carefully fixed on you." I am particularly intrigued by a little word in verse 12, where God says, "*I* ***alone*** guided you." There's no one else to lead you through the desert. There are no sign-posts, no information kiosks, no maps with arrows that say, "You are here." As a matter of fact, you probably don't know *where* you are. You don't know *when* (or if) you'll ever leave that harsh wilderness. Yet the Bible tells us He alone will guide you. You are never safer than in the desert under the watchful care of a loving heavenly Father.

Not only is God with us in the desert, I also want you to notice that **God Reveals our Hearts in the Desert.** Deuteronomy 8:2 *You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not*. Why did God take Moses through the desert? To humble him, to test him, and to reveal the condition of his heart. The same is true for us. God desires to humble us and increase our dependence upon Him. He wants to test us, and to know what is in our hearts. Not that God doesn't already know our heart's condition (He already does), but he wants us to come to know it. There's nothing like the desert to help you discover the real you.

The classic hymn, *"How Firm a Foundation"* (1787), expresses this thought well. One of the stanzas in that hymn states:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply.
The flames shall not hurt thee, I only design,
Thy dross to consume, thy gold to refine.

God never puts us through the furnace to ruin us. He does it to refine us. You know almost immediately when you meet people who have been refined by God's desert process. They are some of the most secure, genuinely humble, gracious, honest individuals one can imagine. They don't have anything left to prove. They don't have anyone they need to impress. They don't have to trumpet their own accomplishments because they know who truly gets the credit for all that has been done. As the hymn states so eloquently, their dross has been consumed, and their gold has been refined.

There is one final truth about the activity of God. Not only is He with us in the desert, and that He reveals our hearts in the desert, but also **God Changes Us in the Desert.** Moses emerged a different man. Changed, refined, matured by the process. In one of his summary sermons before Israel entered the promised land, Moses said, "*Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.* (Deuteronomy 4:1).

God makes us ready for His greater work by taking us through the refining process. And that takes time. J. Oswald Sanders wisely stated, "*Time is no object with God, who demands quality at all costs. There is therefore no point in chafing under the discipline of the training years, or in endeavoring to take a shortcut. It will inevitably prove to be a cul-de-sac."*

What Did Moses Learn in the Desert?

1. The first thing Moses learned was the development of a servant's attitude. In Egypt, he was the big man on campus. Everybody knew him. He was the chosen one who had all the privileges that one could have. But he arrives in the obscurity of the desert, and no one knew his name. No one stopped to listen to his counsel. Instead of having servants waiting on him, he now had to fend for himself.

But it was there that Moses took on the heart of a servant. One of his first actions was to serve:

> **Exodus 2:16-17** *16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock.*

God was preparing him for true leadership. And Moses was learning his lessons.

2. Moses also learned the willingness to be obscure. Verses 18-22 set the stage for Moses becoming a shepherd. He signed up to shepherd the flock of his future father-in-law, Jethro. That just sounds humiliating.

Perhaps you identify with this situation. You're taking some course work in obscurity yourself. You find yourself struggling every day with the limitations you've had to endure. You have been forced by the very nature of the desert to give up many of the perks and privileges you once held most dear. Now you're "just getting by," subsisting on the basics of life. That's God's plan for you.

In the move *The Hiding Place* one scene portrays Corrie Ten Boom telling the Lord she wants Him to use her in whatever way He pleases, even if it means in obscurity. Soon after that, Corrie is taken prisoner by the Nazis, along with her father, from whom she is separated. Her father dies in the death camp, and then she is forcibly removed from her beloved sister. The Nazis shove Corrie into a cold, damp cell in Germany. As the scene closes, she is lying in a corner, shivering. And with tear-filled eyes she whispers to the Lord, "*But God, I didn't know I would have to be alone."*

We can handle almost anything as long as there are people around to encourage and help us shoulder the load. But in the desert, we're all too often alone ... without the encouragement and support we need. Through that experience, God forces us to Himself, pressing us deeply into a growing dependence on Him for all of our needs, both physical and emotional.

3. Finally, Moses learned the ability to rest and rely on God. God didn't forget Moses. And He didn't forget His people back in Egypt. Exodus 2 records,

> *23 Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. 24 So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 25 God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.*

I've made two lists from that passage – what the sons of Israel did, and what God did. Notice ...

What Israel Did	**What God Did**
They sighed because of the bondage *They cried out* *They groaned before God* *Their cry rose up to God*	*God heard their groaning* *God remembered His covenant* *God saw them* *God took notice of them*

God's plan ultimately prevails and we know of the great deliverance that happens. What we so quickly forget is the harshness of the lessons. Learning to rest and rely on God means that He must strip away the superficial from our lives. There are no shortcuts. He is the Lord of the desert. The most precious object of God's love is the child in the desert. If it were possible, you mean more to Him during this time than at any other time. You are the pupil of His eye. You are His beloved student taking the toughest courses. He loves you with an infinite amount of love.

Jesus went through the worst desert of all for you. He was alone as no man has ever been alone. He was rejected. He lived in obscurity. He suffered the worst that earth and hell could hurl at Him. On the cross He said, *"I thirst."* And when that desert night was the darkest, He screamed, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"*

Jesus walked through the desert first. He felt its heat. He tasted its loneliness. He accepted its obscurity. He faced down Satan himself while the desert winds howled around Him. And He will never, ever forget or forsake the one who follows Him across the sand.

Keep your feet in the sand,

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