

HOPE THAT HANGS IN THERE
Isaiah 35:1-10

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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For the first time in more than 100 years much of the Southeastern United States last summer reached the most severe category of drought, creating an emergency so severe that even Atlanta came within 90 days of running out of water.

The little town of Omre, Tennessee, was hauling water on fire trucks from Alabama and limited water availability to three hours a day. Christian artist Michael W. Smith and the mayor of Atlanta pleaded for people to hold prayer meetings asking God for rain. I don't know for sure, but I heard the Baptists started sprinkling converts, the Presbyterians started dry cleaning, and the Methodists were handing out IOU's.

It's been dry, really dry, and people are rightly concerned.

The people of Israel were acquainted with droughts too. From the dusty roads of Palestine to the windy deserts of Iraq, people in the Middle East understand the value of water. It's even more precious than oil. So, when the prophet Isaiah promised that waters would break forth in the wilderness and streams flow in the desert, people paid attention. The thought of a crocus blossoming in the desert was reason to rejoice.

So it is that droughts come in all kinds of ways. There are physical droughts and spiritual droughts. There are mental and emotional droughts which sap the strength right out of you. But here is the good news. God comes to the desert with streams of mercy never ceasing. Yes, my dear friend, near despair in the lowland of strife, God is in the desert. He comes to quench our deepest thirst.

GOD IS IN THE DESERT OF OUR OWN MAKING.

Let's just be honest, we sometimes put ourselves in the desert. There are droughts of our own making. Grief and sorrow, discouragement and disappointment cause us to go into isolation—to separate ourselves from the very source of our strength.

That's what the prophet Elijah did. He won the battle of the gods on Mt. Carmel only to become terrified by the threats of Queen Jezebel. Elijah starts feeling sorry for himself. He becomes exhausted at always being in the public eye, challenging the status quo, so he runs to the desert. He hides in a cave; he wishes he was dead. Life is too complicated, too complex. Elijah has had enough. But the Lord finds Elijah in the desert. The first thing he asks is this "What are you doing here? You are not alone; there are 600 faithful on your side. Get up and get out of here."

Do you ever feel like Elijah? Nobody understands. Nobody cares. I am all alone facing this difficulty. Stop complaining long enough to listen. There is another Voice in the wilderness. It is God coming to get you, to lead you to higher ground. God is in the desert.

Somebody wrote this prayer that I think is worth sharing:

Lord, I need to keep things in perspective,
I get so engrossed in my ups and downs
That I forget that you hold
The whole world in you hands.
Just for today, help me see the big picture.
Fill my heart with a daring and dangerous hope.

GOD IS IN THE DESERT OF OUR TEMPTATIONS.

No sooner is Jesus baptized than he is led into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. There He struggles with the meaning of life.

Is life about BREAD? Take the cash and let the credit go. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die. Every person has walked that valley.

Is life about CELEBRITY status? Is the goal of life to be a star? The gifted may be tempted more than the limited. So many opportunities knock. How can we know the difference between an invitation and an obligation?

Is life about POWER? Kings and kingdoms may bow at your command. Can anyone resist that kind of offer—to be in charge, to have control, to do good for your own sake?

Jesus found the angels in the desert watching over him. So can you. Oh, how sweet to find that the light is as deep as the shadow, and heaven is nearest when we are hovering by the gates of hell. God does not desert us in the deserts of temptation.

Jurgen Moltmann tells about surviving a prison camp in Nazi Germany. "It was nothing very overwhelming," writes Moltmann, "and yet the experience of misery and forsakenness and daily humiliation gradually built up into an experience of God. It was the experience of God's presence in the dark night of the soul that filled me with hope.

"The chaplain gave me a New Testament. I would rather have had something to eat. Yet the Psalms gave me words for my own suffering. They opened my eyes to the God that is with those "that are of a broken heart." He was present, even behind barbed wire, no, most of all behind barbed wire.

"This experience of not sinking into the abyss came in two ways: a) strength to get up again after every inward or outward defeat, and b) it made my soul rub itself raw on the barbed wire, making it impossible to settle down in captivity or come to terms with it."

GOD IS IN THE DESERT OF OUR TROUBLES AND SUFFERING

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those with fearful hearts—be strong; do not fear; your God will come.

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
The ears of the deaf unstopped;
Then the lame will leap like a deer,
And the mute tongue will shout for joy.

Does God have favorites? I think so. But not the favorites portrayed by television evangelists today. The rich might squeeze through the eye of a needle when greased well by God's mercy. But the poor, the weary, the ill are always on God's mind.

Somebody here needs to hear this. I am amazed at the number of people who consider their affliction, their grief, their pain, as some kind of punishment from God. Down in the valleys of their own souls they search for some mistake that should have been corrected. Of course, we all have our sins. To assume our suffering is a result of some sin is to paint a picture of God that I cannot embrace.

Genuine hope is not blind optimism. It is hope with open eyes, which sees suffering and yet believes in the future. Hope does not look back. Hope leans forward.

Our hope is built on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Resurrection is not merely Christ's consolation in suffering; it is also a sign of God's protests against suffering.

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your savior come,
And leap, ye lame, for joy.

Today, right here, there are weak hands that need to be strengthened, feeble knees that must be made firm, and fearful hearts that need courage and encouragement. God is in the desert of your illness working for good.

A Jewish rabbi wondered what kind of questions a Jew would probably have to answer at the Last Judgment. The normal ones came to mind. Were you honest in business? Did you seek wisdom? Did you keep The Commandments?

But the question that came to him unexpectedly was this one: Did you hope for my Messiah? For the messianic expectation is an essential part of Jewish faith.

Of course, we are Christians, not Jews. We believe the Messiah has made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet, we are still people in waiting. We hope for the return of Jesus and the fulfillment of his kingdom. So, if I could borrow the rabbi's question I would like to ask you—will you be looking for Jesus when he comes? Are you still hoping for His return? Are you counting on the Kingdom coming on Earth as it is in heaven? Will your hope endure as long as life and breath and being lasts, or immortality endures?

Will you be watching for Jesus when he comes?

Amen.

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*A Christian Fellowship Biblically Focused on
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