

Wednesday, July 29, 2026

Wandering-Learning to Hear God in the Desert

Deut 1:6-8; Jer 2:2; Deut 8:2-3; Matt 4:1-4; John 7:37-38

Think for a moment about a time when you felt really close to God. Maybe it happened at youth camp. Maybe it was during a worship service. Maybe it happened while you were sitting around a campfire, praying with your friends, or listening to someone share their testimony.

In that moment, God felt real. Worship felt powerful. Your heart was open. You felt like you could follow Jesus anywhere.

You may have even made some big promises to God.

“God, I’m never going back to the way I was.”

“I’m going to read my Bible every day.”

“I’m going to stop caring what everybody else thinks.”

“I’m going to be completely different when I get home.”

Then you got home.

Your alarm went off. Your family annoyed you. Your friends started acting the same way they always act. Your phone started buzzing. School started again. The emotions faded, and suddenly following Jesus did not feel quite as easy as it did during the last night of camp.

Those mountaintop moments are good. We need them. We should be thankful for them. But your faith is not usually defined by how you follow Jesus during the final worship service at camp.

Your faith is defined by how you follow Jesus on the ordinary Tuesday afterward.

Your faith is defined in the desert.

Last week, we talked about God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and meeting them at Mount Sinai. In the biblical story, Sinai is pictured almost like a wedding ceremony. God enters into a covenant relationship with His people. He says, “You are Mine, and I am yours.”

It is beautiful. The Israelites see the mountain covered in smoke. They hear the voice of God. They experience His presence in a way that almost no one else ever has.

You would think God would tell them to stay there forever.

Instead, listen to what He says.

[READ DEUTERONOMY 1:6–8.]

“The Lord our God said to us at Horeb, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance...’”

Horeb is another name used for Mount Sinai. God looks at His people and says, “You have stayed here long enough. It is time to move.”

Why did God have to tell them that?

Probably because they did not want to leave.

They had experienced something incredible at that mountain. They had heard God speak. They had seen His power. They knew He was present.

But God did not rescue them from Egypt just so they could sit at the bottom of a mountain forever. He rescued them so they could follow Him.

And following God meant leaving the mountain and walking into the desert.

A Strange Honeymoon

Years later, the prophet Jeremiah looks back on this part of Israel’s story.

[READ JEREMIAH 2:2.]

“This is what the Lord says: ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown.’”

God remembers the Israelites following Him through the wilderness like a bride following her husband.

In other words, the desert was their honeymoon.

That is probably not the honeymoon destination most people would choose.

Imagine getting married and saying, “I have planned the perfect honeymoon. There is no hotel. There is no pool. There is no air conditioning. There is no restaurant. There is barely any water. The temperature is over one hundred degrees, and everything is brown.”

That is not exactly something you would see advertised online.

But God brought His people into the desert because there were things they could only learn there.

Egypt had been a land for the eyes. Egypt was massive, colorful and impressive. It had enormous pyramids, temples, statues and buildings. Everything was designed to make Pharaoh look powerful.

Egypt said, “Look at us. Look at what we have built. Look at our strength. Look at our wealth. Look at our greatness.”

God brought His people away from everything that impressed their eyes and into a place where there was almost nothing to see.

Why?

Because God wanted to turn them from people of the eyes into people of the ears.

He wanted to teach them to listen.

That may be one of the greatest challenges for students today. We live in a world constantly fighting for our eyes. There is always another video, notification, advertisement, picture, message or post to look at.

Everything around us says, “Look at me. Pay attention to me. Compare yourself to me. Want what I have. Be afraid of missing out.”

We are surrounded by noise and images, but we are starving for a word from God.

Sometimes God allows the noise around us to grow quiet so we can learn to hear Him again.

That does not mean every difficult thing in your life was directly sent by God. We live in a broken world. Sometimes we suffer because of someone else’s decisions. Sometimes we suffer because of our own decisions. Sometimes painful things happen that we cannot explain.

But even when God did not cause the desert, He can still meet us in it.

God does not waste the desert.

Just Enough for the Next Step

When we hear the words of Psalm 23, “**He makes me lie down in green pastures,**” what do you picture?

You might imagine a huge, green field with thick grass. You might picture a peaceful meadow where sheep can eat until they are completely full.

But the wilderness where David cared for sheep did not usually look like that. Much of it was dry, rocky and brown. The “green pastures” were often small patches of grass growing beside rocks where a little moisture had collected.

The shepherd would lead the sheep along narrow paths. The sheep would eat a little grass here, take another step, find another patch and eat again.

The shepherd did not always lead them to a field containing everything they would ever need.

The shepherd gave them enough for the next step.

That is one of the lessons we learn in the desert: God may not give us the entire plan, but He is faithful to give us what we need to obey Him today.

Most of us want more than that.

We want God to show us the entire map.

“God, tell me what my future is going to look like.”

“Tell me where I’m going to live.”

“Tell me who my real friends are going to be.”

“Tell me whom I’m going to marry.”

“Tell me what career I’m going to have.”

“Tell me how this situation is going to turn out.”

We want God to explain everything before we agree to take the first step.

But God often says, “Trust Me with the next step.”

You may not know how everything is going to work out, but you know the next right thing to do.

You know you need to tell the truth.

You know you need to apologize.

You know you need to ask for help.

You know you need to forgive.

You know you need to walk away from that temptation.

You know you need to stop hiding.

You know you need to spend time with God.

You may not have the entire map, but you have enough light for the next step.

“What Is It?”

Moses talks about this in Deuteronomy 8.

[READ DEUTERONOMY 8:2–3.]

“Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you... He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

God allowed His people to become hungry, and then He fed them with manna.

Do you know what the word “manna” means?

It basically means, “What is it?”

The Israelites woke up, saw something on the ground and asked, “What is it?”

Someone must have said, “That sounds like a good name.”

They did not recognize it, but God provided it.

Every morning, the Israelites had to walk outside and gather what they needed for that day. They could not control it. They could not manufacture it. They could not store up enough so they would never have to trust God again.

Every morning they had to depend on Him.

God was teaching them, “Your life does not depend only on the food you can see. Your life depends on listening to Me.”

The desert revealed what was happening inside them.

Would they trust God when they could not see tomorrow’s food?

Would they obey God when His instructions did not make sense?

Would they follow God when the road was uncomfortable?

That is what the desert does. It reveals whether we only follow God when life feels good or whether we actually trust His voice.

Some people want Jesus as long as Jesus agrees with them.

They want Jesus to forgive them, encourage them and help them. But when Jesus tells them to forgive someone else, change their behavior, surrender a relationship, control their words or confess their sin, they suddenly stop listening.

We cannot call Jesus our King while picking and choosing which of His words we will obey.

The more we allow God to speak into our lives, the more He brings order into our chaos.

Think back to Genesis 1. The world was wild and empty. Darkness covered everything. Then God spoke.

Every time God spoke, more order came from the chaos.

Light appeared.

Waters were separated.

Land emerged.

Life began.

God's voice brought order to chaos.

The same is true in us. When we allow God's Word to correct us, guide us and shape us, He begins bringing order to the chaos inside our hearts.

That does not mean all our problems disappear. It means we have something solid to stand on when everything around us feels uncertain.

Jesus in the Desert

This desert theme does not end with Israel.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, He is baptized in the Jordan River. The heavens open. The Spirit descends, and the Father says, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

That is a mountaintop moment.

Jesus hears the voice of His Father. His identity is declared. The Spirit of God is visibly present.

What happens next?

Mark says the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness.

Jesus goes from baptism to desert.

He goes from hearing the Father's voice to being tempted by Satan.

That means the desert is not proof that God has abandoned you.

Jesus was exactly where the Spirit had led Him, and He was still in a hard place.

Sometimes we assume that if we are following God, everything should become easier. We think obedience should remove every struggle.

But Jesus was obedient, loved by the Father and filled with the Spirit—and He still entered the wilderness.

In Matthew 4, Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread.

Jesus has been fasting for forty days. He is hungry. Satan is essentially saying, "If you are really God's Son, stop trusting the Father. Take control. Meet your own need in your own way."

Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 8—the passage about Israel in the desert.

"Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Israel entered the desert and struggled to trust God's voice.

Jesus entered the desert and listened.

Israel complained because they did not have bread.

Jesus refused to make bread because His Father had not told Him to do it.

Where Israel failed, Jesus remained faithful.

Jesus became a person of the ears.

The desert did not cause Jesus to forget what the Father had said. The desert caused Jesus to hold more tightly to it.

Before the wilderness, the Father had said, “You are My Son.”

Then Satan came along and said, “If You are the Son of God...”

Do you see what Satan was doing?

He was trying to make Jesus question something God had already said.

The enemy still works that way.

God says you are loved, and the enemy whispers, “If God really loved you...”

God says you are forgiven, and the enemy whispers, “If you were really forgiven...”

God says He is with you, and the enemy whispers, “If God were really with you, you would not be going through this.”

The desert is where you must decide whose voice you will trust.

Shade in the Desert

There is another image from the biblical desert that matters.

In the desert, even a small amount of shade can be life-giving. A broom tree is not a giant oak tree. It does not create enough shade to build a house underneath it. But it can provide enough protection to sit down, rest and recover.

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah sits beneath a broom tree.

Elijah has just experienced an incredible victory on Mount Carmel. He expected the people to turn back to God, but they did not respond the way he expected. Jezebel threatened his life, and Elijah ran into the wilderness.

He was exhausted, afraid and disappointed.

He sat beneath a broom tree and told God he was finished.

God did not shame him.

God allowed him to rest. God fed him. Then God told him to get up because his story was not over.

The shade was not a place for Elijah to quit forever.

It was a place where he could recover enough strength to take the next step.

Some of you may need to hear that.

Resting is not the same as quitting.

Admitting that you are tired is not weakness.

Asking for help does not mean you have failed.

Sometimes God gives us shade because He knows we cannot keep walking without rest. But the purpose of the shade is eventually to help us stand up and keep following Him.

You may need to talk with a parent, youth leader, pastor, counselor or trusted adult. You may need to admit that you are overwhelmed. You may need to stop pretending that everything is fine.

God did not tell Elijah, “Try harder and stop being dramatic.”

God cared for him.

Then God reminded Elijah that he was not alone and that God still had work for him to do.

Water for Someone Else

The goal of following Jesus is not simply surviving your own desert.

God wants to shape you into someone who can bring life to others.

Isaiah 32 describes God’s people as shelters from the wind, refuges from the storm and streams of water in the desert.

That is what God wants His people to become.

He wants you to become the kind of person who brings shade into someone else's exhausting day.

He wants you to become the kind of person who brings encouragement into someone else's loneliness.

He wants you to become the kind of friend who listens when everyone else is talking.

He wants you to become the kind of student who notices the person everyone else ignores.

He wants you to become the kind of follower who carries the love of Jesus into someone else's desert.

In John 7, Jesus stands during the Feast of Tabernacles and says:

[READ JOHN 7:37–38.]

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me... rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

(Shake palm fronds) Notice what Jesus says.

We come to Him because we are thirsty, but the water does not stop with us.

Jesus gives us life so His life can flow through us to someone else.

You may be walking through a desert right now. You may feel lonely. You may be struggling at home. You may feel confused about your future. You may be battling temptation, anxiety or doubt.

I am not going to stand here and pretend that those things are easy.

The desert is hard.

But the desert does not mean God has forgotten where you are.

The Israelites may have felt like they were wandering, but God knew exactly where they were. His presence went before them in a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night.

They did not always know where they were going, but God did.

You may feel like you are wandering, but you are not hidden from God.

You may not understand the route, but God has not lost the map.

You may not see everything you want, but you can still listen for His voice.

Conclusion

The question is not whether you will ever walk through a desert.

You will.

The question is: Who will you become while you are there?

Will you become bitter because life did not go the way you planned?

Will you run back to the things God rescued you from because they seem easier?

Will you fill every quiet moment with noise so you never have to face what is happening inside you?

Or will you become a person of the ears?

Will you slow down enough to listen?

Will you trust what God has already said?

Will you receive enough grace for the next step?

Will you allow Jesus to turn you into shade and living water for someone else?

Your faith is not only built during the mountaintop worship service.

Your faith is built when the emotions fade and you choose to obey anyway.

It is built when you cannot see the full path but still take the next step.

It is built when you are hungry but refuse to stop trusting God.

It is built when you are tired enough to rest but faithful enough to get back up.

It is built when you are thirsty but still allow the love of Jesus to flow through you to someone else.

God does not waste the desert.

He uses it to teach us to hear His voice, trust Him for the next step and become life for the people around us.

So here is the question I want you to sit with tonight:

What might God be teaching you in the desert?

Not, “How quickly can I escape?”

Not, “Why can’t my life be as easy as someone else’s?”

But, “God, what have You already said? What is my next faithful step? How can I trust You here?”

You may feel like you are wandering.

But God knows exactly where you are.

Listen for His voice.

Trust Him for the next step.

And keep walking.