

How to bloom in the desert 5

Yellowed and shriveled up the sight was inconceivable. The cactus looked dead but was flush with flowers. Gently and carefully my coworker moved around the thorns to pick up the forgotten pot to bring it back to retail. The soil's dryness had shrunk and made the plastic container easy for her to lift, but the cactus hung precariously over the edge of the pot and seemed eager to plop out. It desperately needed to be transplanted. Why was this homely and neglected cactus, mysteriously in full bloom?

I often found my coworkers' scope of knowledge about cultivating cacti was better than searching google. From my perspective it seemed like they were all plant savants. Resolving the bizarre mystery of why this half-dead cactus was now flowering was a good example of how extensive was their wisdom. Back in retail my boss explained plants often go into bloom because of stress and drought conditions. Blooming is often a last ditch effort by a species to reproduce itself, so it can produce seeds which allow the species to survive. You can't grow seed from a plant without first growing a blossom, after the bloom the fruit grows and finally from the fruit comes the seed.

Blooming is hard work on any plant. Producing fruit is even harder and it takes a lot of resources. Unfortunately, like the desert flora we often only bloom under stress. Flowering is something we naturally do when we are close to death. It might be the death of a dream or it might be a physical death, but we blossom and show our true colors when we are near the end of life as we know it.

One of the many purposes of blooming is to manufacture seeds for the next generation, so faith can survive and reproduced again and again. In a parched land we wake up and realize how short is the time we have to make a difference, how fleeting are the days we can live for Jesus. Facing the reality of a loss allows us to see the true condition of our surroundings and with a sobered heart we now can pray with genuine surrender.

In our last lesson we focused on Isaiah 35:3,

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.

We learned from this verse that one of the reasons we make a trip to the desert is so God can heal us. God takes us to a quiet dry place and he speaks tenderly to us in our hurt and pain. God desires to bless us and restore us to spiritual health.

Why did Isaiah choose these two parts of the body for healing? Why didn't he say we needed to heal our broken hearts or our troubled minds? Why does he use our hands and knees? I think he had something very important in mind when he began writing poetically

about our weak hands and feeble knees. Specifically, I believe Isaiah was referring to the healing which needs to take place in our lives, so we can pray.

In scripture we are often urged to lift up holy hands in prayer which is often a state of worshipful prayer, and we also are taught to bow our knees in prayer. So, the next principle we see from this passage is if you want to bloom in the desert, you must see in the desert surrendered and worshipful prayer grows. God wants our prayer life to blossom.

God heals us because he wants to know us and be known by us. Prayer then is one of the main practices God uses, so we can know him and learn to trust him. What is the international symbol of surrender? We lift our hands up so everyone can see that we are holding no weapons in our hands. When a person is about to be arrested lifting up their hands is a signal to the police they are unarmed. What does your toddler do when she wants to be held by you? She hold up her hands and by this nonverbal sign she is saying, "Mommy, hold me." When we lift up our hands in prayer to God both ideas of surrender and hold me are communicated.

Secondly, when we think of bending a knee visions of surrender again fill our mind. Whether it is a man humbly falling to his knees and asking his girlfriend to marry him or a subject bowing before a sovereign king a bended knee is another international symbol of surrender. I once heard Jack Schull, preach on giving a blessing to others and he shared that the Hebrew word most often translated to bless in the Old Testament means to bend the knee. So, figuratively speaking healing our spiritual knees is critical to experiencing surrendered prayer.

Both lifting our hands and bowing our knees involve prayerful surrender to God. Can we express our surrender and worship if we are still hurt, angry and don't trust God. It would probably be difficult to do this with any genuineness. A feeble knee will not bend and droopy hand cannot be lifted until they are healed. We must let the dryness of our personal desert become a place of rest and health.

It is important that we understand that surrendered prayer is not a passive form of prayer and neither is it an attitude of self-protection. Sometimes we are so obsessed with wanting the heat to stop in our desert we think we are surrendering, but we are really choosing a form of self-protection or passivity. All of you who work with children have experienced the child who on the surface seems to be obeying you, but is resisting your directions in a very polite way. When I used to teach art I had students in my class who were so polite I hardly noticed they were not doing what I told them to do. Educators call this behavior passive resistance. Surrendered, worshipful prayer comes from a heart of trust. We can't surrender when we do not trust God.

Can we preempt a desert excursion by choosing to surrender in prayer without a current emergency motivating us? Yes of course, at the cactus nursery our preferred method for making the cactus flower was not stress. Our favorite way to produce blooms in our inventory was to fertilize the cacti. We needed them to be at their optimal best for customers to find them appealing, so we always avoided stressing them out, unless we uncharacteristically lost one in the bowels of a distant greenhouse.

Like in the natural world we all prefer to blossom without enduring any stress. We worship and seek God's face because he is worthy of all our praise. While this is reason enough to seek his face, there is also great refreshment which comes on the worshipper when we linger in the Lord's presence. The next time we find ourselves living in a parched land, we need to remember it is ok to ask God to hold us (Psalm 34:18-19). God desires to know us and be known by us. If you want to bloom in the desert, you must see in the desert surrendered and worshipful prayer grows.

Consider for a moment these thoughts.

- 1) Have you ever bloomed in a spiritual drought? Explain.

- 2) Have you ever needed God's embrace? Explain.

Surrender prayer means coming to grips with the goodness of God's plans for our life. When we surrender we are saying we believe God is on our side. In our strength we think we know what is best for us and our loved ones, but we simply do not have all the facts to make an informed decision about our lives. Our scope of evaluation is very microscopic and limited to what we can know in the present. We can't envision what God is protecting us from in our future by allowing us to experience this parched earth today (Isaiah 55:8-9). God and God alone can see the end from the beginning and as the author of time God is not bound by his creation in any way. God lovingly embraces us as victors because he knows with certainty we will be victorious in the end.

Keep bathing in the truths found in Isaiah 35. Consider reading this passage as often as you can. Take a moment review what you have already learned in five lessons about three short verses.