

## Chapter 8

### Journeying with Jesus

The vineyards stretching before us seemed to glow in the early morning dew. After rounding a deep curve on a winding road, a quaint monastery suddenly appeared in the verdant landscape urging us to stop and explore. Surprisingly, the ancient stone structures were still in use by modern day monks. Motoring on, we spied a fifth century walled fortress perched precariously on a hilltop overlooking a rolling valley. Its red tiled roofs could be seen for miles in the brilliant sun.

Mesmerized, we journeyed to the bottom of this hill, parked our car and with anticipation climbed the steep incline to visit the old fortress village. Peeling plaster and intricate wrought iron balconies only added to the antique town's charm and mystery. On cobblestone streets, we encountered tiny shops bulging with pottery, cheeses, and the local vintage begging us to sample and make a purchase.

Gary and I had saved for five years to travel to Italy and celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Touring through the glories of Tuscany in our tiny rental car, we were in no hurry and had no set destination. This is a wonderful way for a person to travel, but it was not the norm for us.

Unfortunately, the road I have traveled probably more than any other in my lifetime is the stretch of I-10 between Tucson and Phoenix. I can't tell you how many times I have driven that ugly road. To make up for the lack of scenery, I usually sew or read in the car if I am not the driver. In fact, throughout marriage Gary and I have often disagreed over who would drive when we had to travel to Phoenix because neither one of us wanted to look at that boring monotonous stretch of highway one more time.

Why do people build highways? Why do people drive on these roads? People build and drive on highways not for the scenery but because they have a destination in mind. When we were traveling through Tuscany we didn't have a specific locale we needed to arrive at. We were celebrating twenty-five years of marriage. We meandered along country roads and explored whatever we felt like discovering. When we get on the I-10 though, we need to get to Phoenix, and the view is not very important. At the end of Isaiah 35, Isaiah introduces a new metaphor, a "highway" in verse 8. At first glance, this might seem like a strange visual to insert when we have been discussing blooming in the desert, but soon we see their compatibility.

When Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden, God was deeply hurt by their choices. Their actions were also devastating to every other aspect of life. It destroyed the ability to have a relationship with God, yes; but it also destroyed their ability to have a relationship with each other and with the earth they were given to steward. Selfishness and sin had entered the world. God foresaw this grief even as they were only becoming aware of what it was going to mean to move out of Eden.

The effects of the fall of man are still reverberating across our globe. That very day, God put a plan in place to restore everything which was lost to mankind and the earth by Adam and Eve's rebellion. From day one he prepared to do this because blooming in desolate places is his idea. Without God's initiative, we are still helpless to enter into a right relationship with him in our strength. No matter how hard we try we can never be good enough to meet the standards of perfection found in God alone. We need a savior; we need a rescuer to again restore us to Eden. Through Jesus, God is going to build a highway to heaven; and once again, people who travel this road will arrive in paradise. Jesus is going to become a highway of holiness, because without holiness, no person can see God and live.

Look at Isaiah 35:8-10,

- 8) *And a highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;  
the unclean shall not pass over it.  
It shall belong to those who walk on the way;  
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.*
- 9) *No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.*
- 10) *And the ransomed of the Lord shall return  
and come to Zion with singing:  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain gladness and joy,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. ESV*

With this metaphorical change, we see that the desert is not just a place in which we bloom in; the desert is only our temporary home. We were created for eternal paradise.

When we want to bloom in an arid land, we will see the highway to heaven is Jesus. Without God providing this highway of holiness, we would never be find or be fit to live in heaven. Jesus used words similar to those in Isaiah when he taught about his mission to earth in John 14:6.

*Jesus said to them, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me." ESV*

We cannot be holy unless we are made holy through Jesus. The holiness that is imparted to us was purchased by Jesus' death on the cross. We are forgiven of our rebellion to God, which we inherited from Adam, because Jesus stood in our place on the cross and paid the price for all our sins. (Romans 5:12, 15-21).

When we travel on this highway, we are declared holy even though we have been rebellious in the past. Through this new relationship with God, we will no longer act foolish. Everything we used to do, because Adam's sin was seeded in us, can now change (Romans 5:12-15). It doesn't happen overnight, but slowly Jesus begins to transform us from the inside out (2Cor. 3:18).

This is why Isaiah 35 poetically describes our new relationship with God as a walk on a highway. Jesus puts his holiness inside of us and like learning to walk physically, each day we will grow in our ability to commune with him. Just as Adam and Eve once walked in the garden with God, we will now enjoy fellowship with God.

Spiritual deserts always have tremendous purpose. God is not the author of evil, but he is never thwarted when we encounter evil. His designs for us are good. He woos us to the desert to bless us (Hosea 2:14). Experiencing Jesus' unconditional love for us is the pinnacle of God's eternal plan for our lives.

Consider these questions about your personal spiritual desert:

1) Because of Jesus sacrificial work, personal communion with God is again possible. If you desire this restored relationship, please pray this prayer with me.

*Lord Jesus, thank you that you have made a way for me to know God. Thank you that by your sacrificial death, you built a highway to the Father. Thank you that you are going to restore to me everything I lost when Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden. Please forgive me for my sins against you and give me your eternal life. I give you my life and choose to love you. Would you please give me your life and restore to me all that was lost in Eden? Amen*

If you prayed this prayer for the first time, it is important you share your decision with someone. Remember verbalizing your new hope will comfort others.

2) Have you prayed a prayer similar to this one before? Is it time for you to tell your desert story? Review lesson 7 and prepare for this blessing.

While we have breath, we will continually learn more about how to walk with God on the highway to heaven. It is a walk and not a run. Trying to choose a different path besides Jesus will not bring us back to Eden. Sorrow and sighing flee only as we continue traveling on this road. It is true that some days we won't like the view, but our eternal destination will always make the scenery we encounter relevant to our desire to keep flowering in desolate places. In our next lesson, we want to explore the principles that contribute to our ability to become repeat desert bloomers.