

# Into the Desert

Deuteronomy 8:1-5 · Hosea 2:14-20 · Matthew 4:1-4

## Session Overview

*Discovery Aim.* The group discovers that in Scripture the wilderness is where God leads those he loves, and learns from St. John of the Cross to read dryness in prayer as possible evidence of growth rather than proof of failure.

*Catholic Touchstone.* The battle of prayer (CCC 2725-2731): facing distraction and dryness, the Church teaches that the heart's battle is inseparable from prayer, and that dryness can be the moment of sheer faith clinging to Jesus.

## What You Need to Know

Sooner or later, every praying person hits the desert: prayer that felt warm goes flat, the fifteen-minute appointment becomes sand, and the obvious conclusion presents itself: I am doing something wrong, or God has withdrawn. Tonight's session exists to interrupt that conclusion with Scripture and with the most pastorally useful thing St. John of the Cross ever wrote.

In *The Dark Night* (Book I, ch. 9), John gives three signs for discerning when dryness is not backsliding but the beginning of what he calls the night of sense, God weaning the soul from relying on felt sweetness: first, the soul finds no consolation in the things of God, but none in created things either (mere backsliding usually finds its pleasures elsewhere); second, the soul keeps turning toward God with painful care, fearing it is failing him (lukewarmness does not ache like that); third, the soul finds it can no longer meditate discursively as before, though it is drawn to remain quietly attentive to God. Where the three concur, John says, the dryness is God's work: he is feeding the soul in a new, imperceptible way.

Handle this with pastoral precision, and say the caveats out loud: dryness can also have ordinary causes (sin unconfessed, no sleep, overload, skipped prayer), which is why John gives signs and not a blanket blessing on all dryness. And spiritual dryness is not the same thing as clinical depression; a person whose darkness floods the whole of life, appetite, energy, and hope should be encouraged to see a doctor as readily as a confessor, and the two helps do not compete. The Carmelite tradition after her is bluntly practical: sometimes the first remedy for a struggling soul is dinner and a full night's sleep.

The Take-Home sealed guess opens next session. Tonight you may notice people connecting the dots between the dryness discussion and the question they wrote at Session 1. Let them; say nothing.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Deuteronomy 8 reads Israel's forty years backward and finds love in the sand: "you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart" (8:2), "that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone" (8:3), and the astonishing summary: "as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you" (8:5). Deuteronomy reads even the years that followed Israel's rebellion (Numbers 14) as a father's formative discipline: never mere punishment, never accident, but pedagogy, with God doing the leading.

Hosea makes the desert a courtship: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (2:14), with betrothal language following: "I will betroth you to me for ever" (2:19). God strips away the lovers that Israel confused with him precisely to give himself. Keep this verse in hand; it returns in Sessions 8 and 9.

Matthew 4:1 fulfills the pattern in Christ: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The Spirit does the leading; the Son fasts forty days as Israel wandered forty years, and

answers the tempter from tonight's Deuteronomy text: "Man shall not live by bread alone" (4:4, quoting Deut 8:3). Jesus walks into our desert and wins there, which is why our deserts can be walked with him.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John of the Cross

John gives three signs that dryness in prayer is God at work and not the soul's fault: the soul finds satisfaction neither in God nor in creatures; it turns toward God with anxious care, fearing it is failing him; and it can no longer meditate as before, yet is inclined to remain alone in loving attentiveness. Where all three meet, he teaches, God has begun to feed the soul directly, without the sweetness of sense: the dryness is not abandonment but weaning, the beginning of stronger food.

*The Dark Night, Book I, ch. 9.*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Teresa of Avila

Teresa testifies that for many years her own prayer was a battlefield of distraction and dryness; she sometimes dreaded the hour of prayer more than any penance, and for a time she abandoned mental prayer altogether, a decision she afterward counted among her worst. Her counsel from the far side is blunt and kind at once, in substance: never leave prayer, whatever it feels like; carry the cross of dryness without forcing consolations; God was at work in the dry years and repaid the fidelity, and he was never absent in them.

*Summarized from The Life, chs. 8 and 11.*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)

A brilliant Jewish philosopher and an atheist in her youth, Edith Stein picked up St. Teresa's autobiography one evening at a friend's house and read it through the night; by the account preserved in that first biography, she closed it saying, in substance: this is the truth. She entered the Church, then Carmel, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, and spent her last years writing her unfinished Science of the Cross on St. John's doctrine before dying at Auschwitz in 1942. The desert doctrine of Carmel was not theory to her; she carried it into the darkest night of her century and found it held.

*Her final, unfinished work was The Science of the Cross, a study of St. John of the Cross (1941-42); the reading story is from the first biography of her, written by her prioress, Teresia Renata Posselt.*

## Catechism Connection

CCC 2729 normalizes the battle: the habitual difficulty in prayer is distraction, and the therapy is not hunting each distraction down but turning back to the heart, for a distraction reveals to us what we are attached to. Note how exactly this pairs with Session 2: the desert exposes the threads.

CCC 2731 addresses tonight directly: another difficulty is dryness, when the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. And then the Church's stunning reframe: this is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb, and if dryness is due to the lack of roots, because the word has fallen on rocky soil, the battle requires conversion. Both possibilities, honestly held, exactly as John's three signs hold them.

CCC 2015 repeats the cost clause we met in Session 1: there is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle, and the way of perfection passes by way of the Cross.

### THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Thread B ("Water to Flame") is planted tonight: at the end of the session, point at the paradox that the Bible's deserts keep producing water (Exodus 17:6, water from the rock, mentioned but not read tonight)

and say that in two weeks the study follows the water. Plant only the image.

Thread A: rest tonight. If someone asks about the tailor, hold the line: Session 11.

Sealed guess opens NEXT session. Remind everyone, seriously, to bring Take-Home 1 folded. If someone has lost theirs, have them rewrite their answer from memory this week and seal it.

Pastoral watch: this session can surface real pain (long dryness, depression, anger at God). Do not diagnose anyone in the room with John's signs; teach the signs, and offer to talk privately afterward.

## Session Goals

1. Discover from Deuteronomy 8, Hosea 2, and Matthew 4 that God himself leads his beloved into the wilderness, for love.
2. Learn St. John's three signs and the two-sided honesty of CCC 2731 (dryness may be growth; it may be rocky soil).
3. Distinguish spiritual dryness from ordinary causes and from clinical depression, and normalize seeking both kinds of help.
4. Fortify everyone's daily appointment before it meets its first desert.

*Time note (75-90 min).* Win 10 min; Build 50 min; Send and Live It 15 min. If pressed, compress Q2 (Hosea) into the leader reading it aloud with one observation; never cut the three signs or the CCC 2731 both-sidedness.

# Into the Desert

Deuteronomy 8:1-5 · Hosea 2:14-20 · Matthew 4:1-4

## Opening Prayer

Father, you led Israel through the wilderness to humble them and to know their hearts, and your Spirit led your Son into the desert before us. When our prayer turns to sand, teach us to stay. Speak tenderly to us in the wilderness, as you promised. Amen.

## WIN

W1. Describe a season when something good (a friendship, a sport, a job, faith) stopped feeling good. What did you conclude at the time? Do you still agree with that conclusion?

W2. When your prayer goes dry, what is the first explanation your mind offers you?

## BUILD

Q1. Read Deuteronomy 8:1-5. Who led Israel into the wilderness, and what three purposes does verse 2-3 give for those forty years? What does verse 5 compare it to?

### ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"The LORD your God has led you" (8:2): the desert was his itinerary, not a wrong turn. The purposes: to humble you, to test you and know what was in your heart, and to make you know that man does not live by bread alone but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD (8:2-3). Verse 5 names the relationship inside the hardship: "as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you." Fatherhood, not abandonment. Note also 8:4: their clothing did not wear out; the desert was austere but never unprovided.

Q2. Read Hosea 2:14-20. God is speaking about unfaithful Israel. What is shocking about the word "Therefore" in verse 14, given what comes before it? What does God want the wilderness to produce?

### ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The preceding verses are a courtroom of infidelity; the expected "therefore" is a sentence. Instead: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (2:14). The stripping away of Israel's false lovers is not vengeance but courtship: the wilderness is where God gets his bride alone to win her back, and it ends in betrothal "for ever... in steadfast love and in mercy" (2:19). Applied to prayer: when God removes the sweetness we had half-fallen in love with instead of him, the removal itself can be the allurement. He wants us, not our enjoyment of our feelings about him.

### DISCOVERY MOMENT · Q3

Read Matthew 4:1-4. Jesus answers the tempter with a quotation: "It is written." Have the group find where it is written (hint: they have already read it tonight). Then compare the two scenes side by side: Israel's forty years and Jesus's forty days. List every parallel they can find.

### ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The quotation is Deuteronomy 8:3. Parallels the group should catch: forty years / forty days; led by God /

led up by the Spirit (4:1); hunger and testing in both; Israel grumbled and failed the tests, Jesus trusts and prevails; Israel is called God's son (Ex 4:22), Jesus is the Son (3:17, immediately before the desert). Matthew is showing Jesus reliving Israel's desert and getting it right on our behalf. Conclusion for prayer: the desert is not a sign the Spirit has left; the Spirit led him there, straight from the affirmation of his baptism. Our dry seasons stand inside his.

#### **BUILD, THEN PRESS: SHOULD A CHILD OF GOD EVER FEEL ABANDONED?**

At full strength, in a voice the group has heard on Christian radio: "This dark night doctrine baptizes spiritual failure. The New Testament is a book of joy: the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace (Galatians 5:22); rejoice always (1 Thessalonians 5:16); ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full (John 16:24). If your prayer is dry and God feels absent, the biblical response is not to mystify it as a stage of growth; it is to repent, to break through in faith, to claim the joy purchased for you. Persistent spiritual darkness means something is blocked: unconfessed sin, unbelief, or a work of the enemy. Calling it a gift from God teaches Christians to settle for a defeated prayer life and slanders a good Father. What father hides from his own child?"

This deserves its weight: it quotes real promises, and its pastoral instinct (do not glamorize misery) guards something true.

#### **ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Keep everything it gets right: joy is a fruit of the Spirit, sin does block, and no one should romanticize desolation or stop examining their conscience; John's first sign exists precisely to rule the ordinary causes in or out, and CCC 2731 says plainly that some dryness is rocky soil requiring conversion. But the claim that felt absence always signals failure breaks on Scripture itself: it was the Spirit who led Jesus into the desert (Matthew 4:1), the LORD who led Israel forty years to test and humble them (Deuteronomy 8:2), and the psalms God inspired include Psalm 88, which ends in darkness without resolution, and Psalm 13's "How long will you hide your face from me?", prayers the Holy Spirit gave his children to pray. Job's comforters made the steelman's exact argument (suffering must mean hidden sin) and God rebuked them (Job 42:7). And the Father did not spare his own Son the experience of our estrangement (we will stand there next week, with the Church's precision in hand). The Catholic teaching does not glamorize dryness; it discerns it: sometimes conversion is needed, and sometimes "this is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony" (CCC 2731 in substance), a faith more precious than the feelings it has lost (1 Peter 1:6-7). A father who is weaning a child has not abandoned the child; he is feeding it differently.

#### **DIG DEEPER: THE THREE SIGNS, ON ONE CARD**

Put St. John's three signs (Dark Night I.9) where the group can see them: 1) no satisfaction in God or in creatures; 2) anxious, loving care toward God, fearing one fails him; 3) discursive meditation grows impossible, but a quiet drawing to be with God remains. Ask: why is each sign necessary? What does each one rule out? (1 rules out having found new pleasures elsewhere; 2 rules out lukewarm indifference; 3 shows a new manner of receiving God, not a mere shutdown.)

Q4. A friend in the group says: "My prayer has been sand for two months. I must be doing it wrong." Using tonight's texts, the three signs, and CCC 2731, how would you actually walk with her? What questions would you ask; what would you not say?

#### **ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Draw out a real pastoral protocol: ask about fidelity (is she still showing up?), about the ordinary causes

(sleep, overload, unconfessed sin, sacraments), about the rest of life (if everything is dark, gently encourage a doctor as well as a confessor; grace builds on nature). Then apply the signs without forcing them. What not to say: "you must have hidden sin" (Job's comforters), and equally "this is definitely the dark night, congratulations" (presumption). What can always be said: God led his beloved into deserts before, on purpose, in love; stay at the appointment; shorten it if needed but keep it; cling to Jesus with the will when the feelings have gone home (CCC 2731). And Hosea 2:14 is allowed to be read aloud to her.

## SEND

S1. When your desert comes (or if you are in it now), what one line from tonight will you keep: Deuteronomy 8:5, Hosea 2:14, Matthew 4:4, or one of John's signs? Why that one?

S2. Who do you know who has quietly stopped praying because it went dry? What could you say to them this week, without preaching?

### Live It This Week

- Keep the fifteen-minute appointment every day this week even if (especially if) it feels like sand. Fidelity is the whole assignment.
- On one dry day, pray Psalm 63:1-8 slowly and mean the first verse as your own.
- Bring Take-Home 1, sealed, without fail next week. If you lost it, rewrite your original answer this week and seal it.

### Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, led by the Spirit into the wilderness, you know our deserts from inside. When we cannot feel you, give us the faith that clings; when we are weaned from sweetness, feed us with yourself; and speak tenderly to us in the wilderness until the day of betrothal. Amen.

#### SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE · HOSEA 2:14

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her."

## SESSION 5 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

# Into the Desert

*Every passage used, in order*

| Passage                                   | Where it is used                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Deut 8:1-5</b>                         | Q1: God led; humble, test, teach; a father's discipline                 |
| <b>Hos 2:14-20</b>                        | Q2: allured into the wilderness; betrothal forever                      |
| <b>Matt 4:1-4</b>                         | Discovery: the Spirit leads Jesus; Deut 8:3 quoted                      |
| <b>Ex 4:22; Matt 3:17</b>                 | Discovery answer: Israel God's son; Jesus the Son                       |
| <b>Gal 5:22; 1 Thess 5:16; John 16:24</b> | Steelman: the promises of joy at full strength                          |
| <b>Ps 88; Ps 13:1; Job 42:7</b>           | Steelman answer: inspired prayers of darkness; Job's comforters rebuked |
| <b>1 Pet 1:6-7</b>                        | Steelman answer: faith tested more precious than gold                   |
| <b>Ps 63:1-8</b>                          | Live It: the dry-day psalm                                              |