

B E S T I L L
A N D
K N O W

D A Y 2



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GROWING STRONG IN THE DESERT

Here are some verses you've probably never seen in a devotional or heard in a sermon:

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." (Lk. 3:1-2)

Doesn't that just warm your heart?

We typically breeze over verses like these on our way to the good stuff. Why would we bother with a list of names, especially when we can't pronounce most of them?

It helps to realize that this is a list of the most important people in the Judean world that Jesus grew up in. Caesar, Pilate, and a handful of tetrarchs (a kind of sub-governor) represent the ruling power of Rome. Annas and Caiaphas were Israel's high priests, exercising ultimate religious influence from Jerusalem. So, this is a "who's who" of civic and religious life in first-century Palestine. It was common for a writer (like Luke) to include a list like this so his readers would know the setting for his story. If we made a list of our own it might include Justin Trudeau, Brian Palister, and Irvine Ferris (I had to look that one up) on the one side, and High Priest David Hearn on the other.

You may still be wondering why this shows up in a devotional. Here's what I want us to notice: while all these important people were doing important things in impressive places, the word of the Lord came.

To John.

In the desert.

It doesn't come to Tiberius in his Roman palace. It doesn't come to Caiaphas in the midst of his temple duties in Jerusalem, even though that was the centre of Yahweh-worship. Instead, it comes to a guy living in the wilderness and eating bugs.

Strange, isn't it? And yet, this is another example of the upside down ways of the Kingdom of God. He shows up in surprising places to do significant things. Places like sheep pastures, fishing boats, Samaritan wells, and deserts. Lots of deserts.

It turns out that, while deserts are inhospitable to most forms of life, they are ideal for growing people strong in spirit. That's what happened to John, according to Lk. 1:80: "The child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."

Surrounded by the barrenness and dryness of the desert, John learned to rely on God and little else. He learned patience. He learned trust. He learned to quiet the voices that clamoured for his attention in his head and to be attentive to the still small Voice in his heart.

God uses deserts to grow people strong in spirit, and that includes the one we find ourselves in now. The self-isolation and social distancing we are practicing can be seen as a kind of desert-experience. Most normal aspects of life have been stripped away. We aren't producing as much as we did since our work and school have been disrupted. Perhaps our finances are drying up. Deserts can be harsh and inhospitable but they can also be a place where we grow strong and deep. Let's root ourselves in God's faithfulness as he uses this space to shape us and refine us.

The word of God came to John in the desert.

Be listening for him today.

FURTHER READING:

Psalm 63

KEY VERSE:

"O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land where there is no water."
(v. 1)

CALIBRATING PRAYER:

Lord, much of my life seems to be stripped back these days. Help me to see the ways that the space that has opened up actually makes room for your presence. Give me an ear for your still small Voice - loving me, guiding me, assuring me.