

The Desolate Place & the Divine Imperative

Introduction

The Text

“⁴² And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them,⁴³ but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”⁴⁴ And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea” (Luke 4:42–44).

Alone with God

- A. When’s the last time you got alone with God? And I mean really alone? I don’t mean, when’s the last time you opened up your Bible for a few minutes before work or said a few prayers before bed. I mean: when’s the last time you experienced something like what’s described in these lines of an old hymn: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus; Look full in His wonderful face; And the things of earth will grow strangely dim; In the light of His glory and grace.”
1. When’s the last time you experienced that? This can happen before work, it can happen before bed, but there’s something different about it. Somehow or other, you feel alone with God, as if everything else in your life is secondary, and it’s just you and Him.
 - a. We might think such things are rather extraordinary encounters, once-in-a-lifetime moments of intimacy with our Creator, but truly this ought to be the regular, even daily, pursuit of every child of God.
- B. Our text begins: “And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place” (v. 42). It is this Desolate Place that we are going to focus on this morning. I want to ask three questions: (1) What Is the Desolate Place?; (2) Where Is the Desolate Place?; and (3) Why Do We Avoid the Desolate Place?

(1) What Is the Desolate Place?

A Paradoxical Wilderness

- A. We must begin by seeking a greater understanding of this “Desolate Place” that Christ departs into. The word translated “desolate” here is really the adjective form of the noun elsewhere translated in Luke’s gospel as “wilderness” or “desert”.
1. In other words, then, Christ is retreating into a “wilderness-like place”.
- B. When once we make this connection, we are able to move a little deeper in our understanding it:

1. In the Biblical record, the wilderness is a place of trial (Deut 8:2); a place of temptation (Luke 4:1-2); a place of want (Luke 9:12); a place of demons (Luke 8:29); a place of danger (2 Cor 11:26).
2. But, intriguingly, it is also a place of revival and intimacy with God (Hos 2:14-15); a place of rest and refreshment (Mark 6:31); a place of fullness and provision (Luke 9:17); a place of vision and clarity (as we'll soon see in our text).
 - a. It is a place to be alone with God.

And There He Prayed

- A. And this is precisely why Christ has come to such a place. We might at first be left to wonder at what He is doing in this desolate place. Luke, in our immediate text, doesn't say.
 1. But we are not left to our imaginations here. For we are told just how Jesus made use of such desolate places down in Luke 5:16: "He would withdraw to desolate places and pray."
 - a. In fact, Mark's account of the story in our text makes this inference an absolute certainty: "And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35).
- B. That the very Son of God would so value such alone time with His Father, ought to inspire us to value it as well. For we remember that Jesus is not only God, He is man, and not only man, He is the perfect man. And as such, He is our example, the living Sermon, the One who shines light on the way we all ought to be, were created to be, but so often aren't.
 1. Therefore, the Desolate Place—the place of prayer and intimacy with God—ought to be one of our highest priorities, as it seems clearly to have been for our Savior.

The Divine Imperative

- A. But, in our text, we are given more about this Desolate Place and its value in the life of a child of God.
 1. For as we follow with Jesus here we come to see that it is time spent in this Desolate Place that keeps clear before Him (what I would call) the Divine Imperative—the mission that God has sent Him on, the Father's to-do list for His life.
- B. For it is while He is out praying in the Desolate Place that we read: " ^{42b} And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, ⁴³ but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (vv. 42b-43).

1. Jesus knows why He has come: *“I must preach...I was sent.”* There is no doubt in His mind. Here is the Divine Imperative for Him. And I think we are meant to connect His certainty on this with His time in the Desolate Place.
- C. We must apply this to ourselves at this point. The Desolate Place is where we too will get a sense of the Divine Imperative for us.
1. Too often we derive our *“musts”*, our action plans, not from the Desolate Place of prayer with God, but from our own will and desires. We have a to-do list alright, a mile long in fact, but is it God’s? His list for my life is the only list that really matters.
- D. We should ask ourselves: When was the last time that I truly asked God what He wants for my life? *“Everything’s on the table Lord. Here I am send me.”*
1. Maybe you are always there in that place of *“living sacrifice”* (Rom 12:1), but I suspect some of you are like me.
 - a. I can prepare an entire sermon before I even realize I never really sat back and said: *“God here I am...what do You want me to say? What is my Divine Imperative, my compelling necessity, my ‘must’? For what purpose am I being sent?”*

Soft Skin and a Steel Spine

- A. Without such time in the Desolate Place, alone with His Father in prayer, Jesus may well have been subject to the crowd’s demands. But strengthened in spirit, and with renewed sense of the Divine Imperative for Him, He is able to keep on the narrow way, even if that means letting others down.
- B. The people of Capernaum *“came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them”* (v. 42). But He said, *“No.”*
1. For God sent Him not only to save the people of Capernaum, but *“in order that the world might be saved through him”* (John 3:17). *“I love you Capernaum. I’m going to die for you Capernaum. But I’ve got to go!”*
 - a. We learn very quickly that, while Jesus is Servant of everyone, He is not owned by anyone. He follows the orders of His Father and His Father alone.
- C. Something I regularly pray for as your pastor is that God would give me both soft skin and a steel spine.
1. I want to be approachable. I want you to be able to share your ideas, give me constructive criticism, tell me things you want me to do or don’t want me to do. I want soft skin.

2. But I also want a steel spine. I want to be a pastor of principle and conviction. I want a sense of the Divine Imperative. I want to be prepared to let people down if it means being obedient to the will of God for me and this church.
- D. And you'll need this sort of thing as well. When your boss wants you to tell that "white" lie to save a few bucks. When your kids want you to let them see that movie that all their friends are going to, but you just don't feel good about it. When the culture is telling you you're a bigot for believing that homosexuality is a sin and out of step with God's design.
- E. How are we going to have the strength to stand in these moments?
1. The only way to make it through such crises of faith is by regularly retreating to the Desolate Place with God. Only there does the Divine Imperative become plain. Only there are we given strength to let people down in love—for God and for them.

(2) Where Is the Desolate Place?

- A. Hopefully, by now you're coming to see the great value of the Desolate Place. Perhaps you're even seeing the need to create rhythms, habits of visiting such a place on a regular basis. So the question naturally becomes: "Okay, so where is it? Where is the Desolate Place in congested, gridlocked Silicon Valley?"
- B. Of course we might initially think of the more extreme examples: those retreats we might take on an annual, quarterly, even monthly basis as a chance of clearing our hearts and minds and regaining clarity and connection with the Lord.
1. You might go, like my previous landlord, to the hermitage up in Big Sur for a silent retreat.
 2. You might visit one of the prayer houses Peter told me about tucked away in the Santa Cruz mountains.
 3. You might just go for a long drive alone with the Lord up Highway 1.
 4. I try every Saturday evening (when it's not raining) to get out to the hills behind my house in an attempt to clear my head and pray for you all and the Sunday Service.
- C. Certainly there is something to getting out of your normal environment that is conducive to meeting with the Lord. But we must resist the notion that such a place is somewhere we can only visit every now and again. No! We need it every day!
1. Therefore, it is important to see that the Desolate Place truly can be wherever you are.
 - a. It can be in your living room in the morning before the kids have woken up.
 - b. It can be in your car while you're stuck in bumper to bumper traffic.
 - c. It can be in your cubicle at work as you cry out to God with all of your heart.
 - i. The Desolate Place is wherever the child of God is willing to lay himself down desperate to meet with His Father.

- D. Consider the late missionary Hudson Taylor's example, as his son and daughter-in-law describe their experience with him traveling through China: "It was not easy for Mr. Taylor in his changeful life, to make time for prayer and Bible study, but he knew that it was vital. Well do [we] remember traveling with him month after month in northern China, by cart and wheelbarrow, with the poorest of inns at night.

Often with only one large room for coolies [Chinese laborers] and travelers alike, they would screen off a corner for their father and another for themselves, with curtains of some sort; and then after sleep at last had brought a measure of quiet they would hear a match struck and seek the flicker of candlelight which told that Mr. Taylor, however weary, was pouring over the little Bible in two volumes always at hand.

From two to four a.m. was the time he usually gave to prayer; the time when he could be most sure of being undisturbed to wait upon God. That flicker of candlelight has meant more to them than all they have read or heard on secret prayer; it meant reality, not preaching but practice."

1. The Desolate Place for Hudson Taylor was behind a thin little curtain in an otherwise crowded room.

(3) Why Do We Avoid the Desolate Place?

- A. So, if the Desolate Place is so vital to the child of God, and if we can enter into that place wherever we are at, why do we so often avoid it?

(1) I'm Too Busy

- A. Surely the example of Hudson Taylor immediately convicts and inspires us on this point as well: "From two to four a.m. was the time he usually gave to prayer."

1. "From two to four a.m."?! That's about the time when I attempt the noble task of...snoring. While I'm snoring, He's in the Desolate Place praying, worshiping, waiting on God, turning a little candle into the Shekinah-glory of God's presence.

- a. Who in this room doesn't have two to four a.m. open in their dayplanner (Moms!)?

- B. I'll let Francis Chan encourage us onward here: "There is no substitute for being alone with God. If you don't have time, you need to quit something to make room. Skip a meal. Cancel a meeting. End some regular commitment. There is . . . nothing more important you could do today.

God literally determines whether or not you take another breath. "He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25). Could anything be more important than meeting with the One who decides if you live through this day? Could anything be better? How can we not make time to be with the Maker of time? What plans do you have today that you think so important that you would race past the Creator to get to them?"

- C. We claim we are too busy for the Desolate Place, but it is precisely time alone with the Father in this place that will give us clarity and conviction and success in all that we put our hands to. We must see that we are too busy to skip it!

(2) I Get Too Lonely

- A. We often struggle being alone, do we not? We live in a culture that is somewhat opposed to the idea. Your friends and family are always with you, if not in person, than at least in your pocket on your phone. We're always plugged in.
 - 1. And so when we finally try to unplug to meet with God in the Desolate Place, we almost have an allergic reaction. Things start shaking that shouldn't be shaking.
- B. Hear Bonhoeffer's sobering words on this point: "There are Christians . . . who cannot endure being alone, who have had some bad experiences with themselves, who hope they will gain some help in association with others. They are generally disappointed. Then they blame the fellowship for what is really their own fault. . . . Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community. Alone you stood before God when God called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out. If you refuse to be alone you are rejecting Christ's call to you, and you can have no part in the community of those who are called."
- C. His words sound bleak but essentially He is saying this: the most important thing about you is where you stand personally with Jesus Christ.
 - 1. To spend so much time in community, even Christian community, that we lose that personal relationship with Christ (that is enriched in the Desolate Place most of all) is to bring our soul into harm's way. We should not be scared of getting alone with God. He desires to satisfy and heal us to the depths of our being. He wants to be with us!
 - a. And, what's more, such alone time with Him will actually make our times with others all the richer!

(3) I Don't Know What to Do

- A. If we're honest, this is part of the struggle right? "I want to meet the Lord in the Desolate Place, but I have no idea what to I'm supposed to do when I get there. I just feel awkward. I feel confused. Am I supposed to read my Bible, journal, memorize Scripture, intercede for others, fast, listen to music, do artwork, meditate, levitate, or what?"
- B. Certainly we could go into a discussion of spiritual disciplines and methodology. I am not at all opposed to such things. But we can often overcomplicate what is, at base, quite simple.
 - 1. There are really two things we must do in the Desolate Place: (1) Listen to Him; and (2) Talk to Him. Read your Bible, wait on His Spirit, and pray.

- C. But do you know what? Sometimes even these things will seem too difficult. Sometimes all you'll be able to do is cry. And even that is enough.
 - 1. Do you remember Hagar, mother of Ishmael? She's driven out into the wilderness by Sarah and she thinks she's going to die. All she is able to do in her desolate place is cry. "She lifted up her voice and wept" (Gen 21:16). And God hears her!
- D. O brothers and sisters, just make an effort to draw near to Him from your heart, and He will draw near to you (James 4:8)!

Conclusion

- A. Returning to Luke's gospel as we close: I wonder if you know that we owe our very salvation to the Desolate Place. It is Christ's commitment to the Desolate Place that keeps the Divine Imperative ever before Him.
 - 1. Throughout this gospel, we will watch as He keeps retreating and refreshing. He keeps clear on the reason He has been sent by God into this world.
- B. And we watch this holy habit of His carry on until we come to one final example of it in Gethsemane. It is in Gethsemane that we are told: "He withdrew from [His disciples] about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed . . ." (Luke 22:41). And He lays it all out before His Father.
 - 1. And when He rises from His knees, the mission is again clear: "[Judas] . . . do what you came to do" (Matt 26:50). And He goes to the cross, in fulfillment of all that the Father sent Him to do.
- C. Christ alone could live this life and did. He maintained holy composure to the end. He kept His mission firm to its completion.
 - 1. My only hope in this is Him. That He would teach me how to pray. That He would lead me by His Spirit to the Desolate Place and grant to me the clarity of the Divine Imperative. I fail at this. I am growing in this. We need Jesus to forgive our sins and fuel our growth in grace. He does both.
 - a. We will make it through our own cross and crisis. Because of Him.