

Desert Prayer

The Jesus Prayer

The ancient desert prayer tunes the heart to God. In the earliest centuries of faith, Christians in the deserts of Palestine and Africa sought a short prayer that could be easily repeated, in order to acquire the habit of **"prayer without ceasing."** The result was The **Jesus Prayer**: *"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."*

Literally, a desert is an arid, hot and barren place. Figuratively, in the spiritual literature, it refers to any place of retreat - a house of prayer, the seashore,

the woods, a quiet room in one's home, or even one's heart.

In two weeks' time we enter into the season of **Advent**, a time to find 'our own desert' and prepare the way of the Lord. Advent is a kind of spiritual wilderness journey. The desert can be a very hostile place for the unprepared, but it can also be a place of great beauty. In fact, in order to hear God, there has to be a place of wilderness within us. God most frequently speaks in the desert areas of our lives. In the silence and solitude.



"I am going to allure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart." (Hosea 2:16)

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths"

Isaiah speaking of John the Baptist in Luke 3:1-6



Ceaseless Prayer

Prepare the way for the Lord

What does this mean in practice? Who are the people that we see hanging around Jesus in the New Testament? Who actually comes out to hear John the Baptist?

Aren't they the people with needs, who know there's something missing in their lives, who need to be healed, people who know they have a need for God?

The Lord knows that we need to be purified in this life. We can get too attached to certain things; our desires and needs can become disordered. God must intervene. So what does He do?



Twist of Fate

He leads us out into the desert, where He speaks to our heart. What does this mean in real life? How does God do this?

We have a sudden reversal of fortune; we have a loss; we are overwhelmed with things we can't cope with; we get sick.

Today, we experience the Pandemic, what is God asking each one of us? God is waiting to connect with us here and now, not tomorrow or next year, precisely because we are most open and vulnerable to Him at

these times of our lives. Sacred scripture shows that the desert plays an important role in the history of the people of God.



One of the fathers said: Just as it is impossible to see your face in troubled water, so also the soul, unless it is clear of alien thoughts, is not able to pray to God in contemplation.

Called to be a Contemplative

Both the Old and New Testament often refer to the desert, the wilderness, or a place apart where God summons those He loves to forget the cares of the world and concentrate on His love and the meaning of life. Jesus chose to live, die and rise in the Middle East -

a land of deserts. During His public life, Jesus periodically retreated to the desert to pray. It was there that He found peace and solitude. Each one of us is called to be a contemplative, and to see God in the circumstances of our daily life.

It is not required, however, to run off to the mountains or the desert in a literal way to pray, but we can pray without ceasing, when we meditate and pray the Jesus Prayer constantly.

The Name of Jesus

One way to meditate that is used by many Christians today and is believed to have been initiated by the Desert Fathers is the **Jesus Prayer**. The Jesus Prayer involves controlling breath and body movements and

repeating, *Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me*. By sitting and concentrating on the heartbeat and continually repeating the phrase, one can become absorbed in the presence of God.

The prayer has scriptural roots, for St. Peter proclaimed, "...of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Practice of the Presence of God

The writings of the early desert fathers and solitaires taught different forms of the Jesus Prayer as a way to remember that Christ dwelt within. Each monk could choose his own phrase or word - a type of mantra for calming the body and mind.

The Jesus Prayer has remained an important prayer to Christians, who believe with the Desert Fathers that invoking the name of Jesus keeps the mind in the constant presence of God, and prepares the heart for meditation and the gift of contemplation.

This is a relatively simple, and quite ancient, prayer, *“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* In intent, it is meant to push us toward the Pauline injunction to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing” (1Thessalonians 5:16-17).

Prayer of the Publican

One is supposed to repeat it over and over until the words dissipate, becoming a sort of pure reflection on our own sinfulness and need for mercy, transforming every moment into a moment for prayerfulness and stillness before our Omnipresent God. In this sense, it calls to mind the Parable of the Pharisee and the

Tax Collector (Luke 18:13). While not all will find the practice meaningful, it is the perfect sort of prayer for our modern times. People feel busy, torn apart by family life, work, and other social obligations, de-centred as our families and communities become less central to the ways we live our

lives. This reality means “less time” for prayer; it means a sense of being separated from our true end, God. Such a short and traditional prayer offers, at minimum, a way to pray throughout the day; yet it can also mean much more, implemented correctly, it can be an entirely new lens through which to experience spiritual life.





“I may have to live in a desert of daily routine, but I can have the inner strength to face the desert and take my stand in it with peacefulness and poise. I may have to spend the rest of my life sweeping the floors, but I can learn to find the highest value in the humblest occupation. I accept the deserts into which the Lord may lead me. The Psalmist expects to be led by the Shepherd to restful waters, but the path to this refreshment may wind through the desert of daily routine.” (Charles Cummings, O.C.S.O. Trappist monk)

My Beloved - Ahuvah

That yearning in our heart for something more is the Lord speaking to us in the desert of our soul. That desire to change our life, to be the man or woman of God that we are called to be, to enter into a deeper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, the church and in our heart. This is God speaking in our soul. John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His paths!

The Lord wants to get into many hearts and souls in a deeper way, if only we will let Him lead us into the desert and make time for silence and solitude. It is only in the

silence and solitude, we can enter into the “desert” of our heart.

It may be a challenge to find quiet spaces at home. During this Pandemic, many retreat centres are closed. There are some centres which may be opened for silent retreats. Google and find these retreat centres in Singapore. Or take a ‘forest walk’ in the quiet of Pierce Reservoir, Botanic Gardens, Nature parks and quieten our inner chatter and repeat the Jesus Prayer as we walk in nature or be still and hear the birds and rustle of the leaves in the

wind. Admire the sky, smell the fresh air as we stroll in the ‘woods’. And be surprised by God’s visitation in many ways, through leaves falling, a child smiling, a bird humming, a tug in our heart, a soft voice saying “My Beloved One”. These are our desert prayers, when we ‘surrender our techno gadgets, social media addictions, our busy-ness, our preoccupations, our worries, fears and anxieties’ and let God enter into the ‘desert of our souls’ and be refreshed, renewed and rekindled.



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