



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Strength From a Desolate Place

Mark 1.35-39

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### *Time To Think Along the Road*

One day in August 1998, I spent an hour watching traffic from alongside one of Atlanta's expressways. I had been to see my parents and was driving the approximately 40 miles from their home to my sons' school when my engine began to sputter. I headed for the right lane, then up a ramp about five miles short of where I intended to exit. At the top of the ramp the car quit. I couldn't restart it to get it a little farther off the road.

I suspected the alternator, but it wasn't exactly what I had thought. The belt had come off leaving the car to run on battery power alone. When the reserve power stored there was depleted, the car quit and left me waiting on a tow truck in the hot Georgia sun.

Things like that leave an impression, and so later as I thought more about it, I thought of an application to spiritual life, often described in terms of a way or road.

- Do we ever find ourselves running on empty, our reserve power exhausted?
- I think the modern term for that is "burn-out." We go and go and go; we serve and serve and serve. And we reach a point where we're not sure we have anything left.

Often, all we need is a pause, a break, a time to step back and rejuvenate. But what if our reserves get too low? Or can't recover? We try to keep serving, but we may find that what we have to offer is at best minimal.

Some observations from Jesus' ministry can help us put some safeguards in place.

### *Life Challenges Ministry Endurance*

Even without crises, life can be hard. There is so much to do. Sometimes, we would lessen the stress if we gave up some things that are bad or are less good. Our culture has conditioned us to think we need more leisure than we do.

But, sometimes, it is competing good things that pull us in multiple directions. Harold Kushner aptly described this problem:

Some years ago, I was invited to address the graduating class as a rabbinic seminary. I told those young people about to embark on careers in the rabbinate, "There will be Friday evenings when you rush your family through dinner so that you can get to services on time to give a sermon about the Sabbath as uninterrupted family time. There will be days when you will leave a sick

child at home or a child studying for a test, while you go to teach religious values to the Temple youth group. There will be Sundays when you will cancel plans for a family picnic to officiate at a funeral, where you will praise the deceased as a man who never let business interfere with his obligations to his family. And worst of all, you won't even realize what you are doing as you do it."<sup>1</sup>

How do we find balance? We can begin by reflecting on the fact that Jesus was also busy—with the best things.

Mark 1.21-34 depicts a day in Jesus' life, a Sabbath day at that.

- He went to the synagogue and taught (1.21-22), teaching that was interrupted by a man with an unclean spirit (1.23-28).
- Leaving the synagogue with his followers, they went to the house of Simon and Andrew, where the hostess needed to be healed before she could serve them (1.29-31).
- As the sabbath officially ended, Jesus was besieged by people bringing their sick and demon-possessed for him to heal (1.32-34).

We see a similar set of circumstances in Mark 3.31-34 where Jesus was presented with a choice between the crowds all around him and his mother and brothers.

We see it again in Mark 6.31 where so many were pressing in on him and the apostles that "they had no leisure even to eat."

### *Drawing Strength from the Desolate Places*

Of particular interest in Mark's early chapters is the recurrence of the word (ἐρημος, *erēmos*), translated "wilderness" (1.3-4, 12-13) and "desolate" (1.35, 45; 6.31-32, 35). Matthew, Luke, and John also use this word; sometimes their uses overlap Mark's (e.g., Matt 3.1, 3; 4.1; 14.13, 15; Luke 3.2, 4; 4.1, 42; John 1.23).

But, perhaps because the uses are more concentrated in Mark (all in chapters 1-6), we more readily see a pattern that brings out the significance of the wilderness in Jesus' story.

- In addition to John's preaching and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (1.4, 12-13), Mark highlights important events that occur "in desolate places" (1.45; 6.35; cf. Matt 14.15; Luke 9.12)
- In Mark 1.35, the morning after that hectic Sabbath in Capernaum, Jesus got away "to a desolate place" where "he prayed" (cf. Luke 4.42; 5.16).
- In Mark 6.31-32, the apostles having just returned from their busy practicum, Jesus invited them to get away by themselves "to a desolate place" to "rest a while" (cf. Matt 14.13).

The last two of these texts are especially important for showing us important things about building ministry endurance.

- Jesus expressed the value of sometimes getting away (Mark 6.31).
- Jesus used the time away to replenish his spiritual reserves (Mark 1.35).
- Jesus saw his time away as a respite from the demands of service, not an escape from them; he didn't go into retirement (1.36-39; 6.33-35).
- Above all, Jesus saw that what mattered most was ministry and that ministry should be something that keeps us busy (see above, plus Mark 3.31-35).

We are wise to learn—and avail ourselves of—the value of desolate places.

This is not about convenient discipleship (an oxymoron). God's work is urgent and needs more of the spirit once expressed in the prayer petition some of us used to hear: "wear us out in your service."

Nor is it about simply being busy; even many good things should be evaluated in light of whether they are the best things and appropriate choices made as the result.

Having said that, we should not feel guilty for times when we need to step back and renew, even from the best things.

But we should notice what renewal for Jesus entailed: meditation and prayer. Consistent attention to those disciplines will sustain us even as we maintain busy ministry schedules.

### *Exhortation*

Customarily, it is when we come to the end of a year that we engage in reflection and evaluation as we think about how we can grow in the coming year.

I recommend that we pause to read the story of Jesus, from Mark, the shortest gospel, not just at the end of a year, but any time we begin to find we're struggling with endurance in ministry. As we read, let's think about his determination to do God's will above everything else (see Mark 14.36, and notice in particular how he did that day-by-day).

Having so reflected, let us renew our determination to follow him (see Mark 1.17).

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough: The Search for a Life That Matters* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), 24.