



Norman Carr

Lois and I attend Northridge Friends Church, although retirement allows us many days away from Wichita, Kansas. The above photo was taken at Badwater Basin (282 feet below sea level), a geographic oddity in Death Valley. We have also looked down on Badwater from the cliff's edge of Dante's View (5,476 feet above sea level) to see soaring raptors below and miles of geologic curiosities tumbled like Monopoly tokens across the endless valley. The splendor makes my head ache, like when I use the big spoon and eat ice cream too quickly. It's a good ache, the desert.

Emblematic desert outlooks also have gone to my head. I chuckle at the wretched cartoon character crawling over the dunes towards a sardonic punch line. And I rack my brain when challenged to list ten books or CDs that I'd want to be stranded with on a desert island. The following seven pages include ten Scripture references I would pack in my desert island survival kit. What are yours?

Deserts offer everyone a rarified environment for contemplation; however, if you do not have a neighborhood desert, may these *Fruit of the Vine* pages provide you opportunities for respite and reflection.

BIBLE READING: John 3:30; Isaiah 35:1-2

My wife enjoys listening to Beethoven at the symphony; I like hearing “Roll Over Beethoven” in my garage. She loves a path of pine needles on cool, dew-scented mornings; like mad dogs and Englishmen, I am attracted to desolate sunburned deserts. For marital harmony I try to stay awake during a sonata and Lois endures colorless landscapes where slithering creatures lurk. In these great voids her eyes ache for a bloom, a hint of civilization, or just one reason to argue against the prevalent, irreverent accusation: God forsaken.

French novelist Honoré de Balzac turns on its head the blasphemy “God forsaken” with his desert premise, “God is there and man is not.” Balzac’s insight parallels Scripture. In John’s gospel he leaves no doubt about John the Baptist’s humble formula for an enduring relationship to Christ: “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). I appreciate the Baptist’s concise assertion and the sharp contrasts the apostle John presents throughout his gospel. His writing style provides us—and particularly newer Christians—unambiguous direction.

Survival in the desert can depend on unambiguous direction; even more dire consequences hold for God’s path to eternal life. Throughout the Bible, deserts are God’s testing grounds for faith where wanderers had opportunities for a divine pause to discern what and whom they needed for survival. We remain tested today. If I am “there” and God is not, I will languish in a wasteland. But if I become less, die to self, I will gain eternal life redeemed in a land of full bloom.

SONG: Reach Out To Jesus

PRA YER SUGGESTION: Lord, if in a spiritual desert I feel forsaken, help me realize it is I who have wandered from your path.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: Lamentations 3:19-23; 1 Peter 5:10

It's "Robert" on his death certificate, but my younger cousin will always be "Bobby" to me. One day Bobby trekked far into the desert furnace of Joshua Tree National Park where the prolonged blast of a sudden windstorm conspired with nightfall to disorient and exhaust him. Cause of death: The enchanted but brutal wilderness.

While in Joshua Tree this year, my mind lingered on a poignant detail of Bobby's fate: He had collapsed near the trailhead where his car awaited. Shelter was close, but.... Like a desert mantra I repeated the two small words: *Close, but....*

Scripture provides brooding examples of *close, but....* Moses gazed at the Promised Land, his quest for 40 years through the desert, but was denied the last steps. This pillar of the faith lacked faith and disobeyed the Lord. Moses got *close, but....* In the New Testament, the rich young ruler consented to do almost anything, to give almost everything. Christ revealed a path and the young man took some bold steps. He came *close, but....*

A sermon in 1870 concluded with, "He who is almost persuaded is almost saved, and to be almost saved is to be entirely lost." This admonition inspired the hymn "Almost Persuaded," penned not for the wretched but for wonderful people like you and me who do great works and hold to high morals but often succumb to the spiritual tragedy of being *close, but....* All the more amazing that God gives us everything and is with us always; he does not and will not come *close, but...in any way.*

SONG: Almost Persuaded

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, give me strength to do good works, but give me endurance and courage for the final step to faith.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: 2 Timothy 1:7

When William moved to Marathon, its population increased to 423. Train tracks divide the desert outpost and William lives on the wrong side of those tracks. Some people would describe him as a “desert rat.” Last fall he noticed me marveling at the small adobe ruin he lived in and welcomed me with warmth like the Texas sun.

We talked. William rolled a cigarette and smoked it down to an ember which he used to light another. Smoke curled around fingers that matched the texture of the cracked adobe walls. His hands could be mistaken for old gloves. They seemed incongruous with his gentle spirit and contentment in the midst of so few material possessions. William made a comment about God’s generosity as we stepped outside to see the roofless kitchen and bathroom. After the tour, our pleasant visit ended with William insisting, “The good Lord provides. I can’t outgive my God.”

As I walked away, my hiking boots intruded on the scant domain of a small lizard; at the last second, it darted through the cacti. I drove away thinking about William and the lizard.

William didn’t look like my Christian friends at Northridge Friends Church, but he had deliberately and effectively shared his witness with me—a stranger. The lizard had cowered, relying on stationary defense: a ploy to be unnoticed and not attract attention. A compelling question formed in my mind that perhaps you might consider: “Today, will I have more in common with the lizard or with the desert rat?”

SONG: I Love to Tell the Story

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, you have given me everything I need. As my thanksgiving in return, may I have the courage to share my Christian witness.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: Proverbs 3:5-6; John 1:43-49

Provoked by the draft in 1965, I stepped out of a high school cap and gown and into a military uniform. Providence spared me from hostility except for a flare-up in North Africa where a young Muammar Gaddafi led a revolution to rid his country of Western influence including the United States military. With a click of my combat boots I landed in the Libyan Desert to help dismantle a U.S. airbase. Like a soundtrack for this confrontation, a call to prayer blared from a crude PA system to summon Muslim believers; the recording boasted that this land was unchristian. Standing in this bleak desert I identified with Nathanael and remembered his rebuff, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46).

For the elite in ancient Jerusalem, faraway Nazareth was a cultural desert. To Nathanael’s credit he quickly overcame this prejudice and submitted to Philip’s advice: “Come and see.” More importantly, Nathanael recognized in this wasteland the Son of God and heeded Christ’s simple command to “Follow me.”

Boondocks like Nazareth cover the globe, and we can also pinpoint self-made spiritual deserts turned arid by our worldly perspective and desires. Can anything good come from these wastelands caused by sin? Through our most barren circumstances, God will lead us out of our deserts if, like Nathanael, we make an about-face. Thanks to God’s grace, it matters little where we come from, but our life depends on to whom we turn.

SONG: I Stand Amazed

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, may the sinner who rebuffs God’s grace and the unbeliever who denies Christ turn to see the good from Nazareth.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: John 7:33; 2 Peter 1:19

Rocket scientists have launched a company that takes reservations for trips to the moon; fortunately, more down-to-earth tourists can experience lunar landscapes in deserts like the Chihuahuan, home to Big Bend National Park. There on Dagger Flat my boots have tamped their tread design into fine sand as I trudged along like Neil Armstrong. But unlike his historic moon imprint, the sharp outline of my boots quickly faded in shifting sand.

A few months ago in Big Bend, I looked down at my vanishing footsteps and recognized a metaphor for life's journey. I admit to a somber pang for so few, transitory decades to share with loved ones in this world: We're here, and then we're gone. I lamented having not made any lasting impression on this earth; my mark will vanish quickly as footprints in sand. Then wafting through the wind came a phantom version of a country gospel hymn that got me humming and nodding in agreement: "This World Is Not My Home." Nor is the moon, beguiling though it is, my "to die for" destination. That night in desert-pure darkness I gazed far beyond the moon and canopy of stars to the Gloryland yearned for in old hymns.

The gravity of this world would hold our feet to earth and a temporal life. But Scripture assures that God beckons us to an eternal home. I guess you could say he is taking reservations. To reach our eternal destination we simply must follow the lasting impressions made by Christ's sandals. I guess you could say it's not rocket science.

SONG: This World Is Not My Home

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, may I focus not on earth's shifting sand, but on the solid path you have prepared for me.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: John 3:30

The last glow of civilization faded in our rearview mirror at sunset; ahead, only a few miles of desert separated Lois and me from Big Bend National Park and the border with Mexico. The sky filled with stars as we settled into a cabin on U.S. 90. Instead of falling asleep, I fell into a Hank Williams song—nearby a train rumbled alongside the lost highway with its whistle whining and a coyote aimed his melancholy moan at a sliver of moon.

Unable to sleep, I stepped outside to wonder at the Milky Way, an unattainable sight back home where earth-generated light pollutes the night sky and trumps the stars. In the city we flip a switch and turn night into day. Modern man no longer needs the stars for navigation; we have an app for that. Progress and technology have taken us far, but has our self-reliance taken us far from God? Has our self-generated brightness blinded us to God's light? Ironically, that night cast light on John 3:30 and revealed to me that the brighter I shine, the less I see of heaven's light.

Hank Williams died young from alcohol and honky tonks, but his darkness inspired "I Saw the Light," a sinner's hymn of confession and salvation. Because of God's mercy, the darker our night, the brighter he shines. In the desert night I looked heavenward and wondered why people fail to see the sublime, fail to gaze at heaven in adoration, fail even to open their eyes to God's light. Long ago a star led three wise men to Christ; today that light still leads to salvation.

SONG: I Saw the Light

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, help me to shine only by reflecting your light.

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BIBLE READING: Luke 23:39-43

My recent meander along Route 66 transcended geography to become time travel back to childhood vacations in the family station wagon. Burma-Shave signs streamed by in Arizona, and billboards enticed me to see a two-headed rattlesnake at the world's largest cement teepee in New Mexico—or was it California? Discovering the ruins of an abandoned gas station, the shell of a former motel, or a long deserted café particularly intrigues me in the Southwest. These walls *can* talk if signage survives. Blame genetics for my attraction to faded ghost town signs or a retro typeface on a billboard (my father was a sign painter). Occasionally, on the edge of a desolate stretch of desert, I discover the roadway announcement “Last Chance! Gas and Groceries” in large faded letters across a crumbling wall.

Last chance warnings reverberate in steady cadence throughout the Bible as pleas to unbelievers on the road to perdition. For example, in telling the Easter story, Luke contrasts two thieves alongside Jesus as the three endured the last minutes of their crucifixion and the thieves' last chance for salvation. One thief ignored his chance at redemption and scoffed at Jesus' torment and sorrow. The other criminal confessed his sin and invited Jesus to prepare the way—not for the end of life, but for the beginning of life eternal. This poignant interaction is a microcosm of Christ's ministry: He ached over one lost sheep while he rescued another for God's kingdom.

We are sinners at Christ's side today. Who will pass by their invitation to salvation, and who will stop for him?

SONG: He Lifted Me

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, give me the urgency to live as if today were my last chance for forgiveness and eternal life.

—Norman Carr