

# BIBLE LANDSCAPES

## WEEK 1: RIVERS

The longer I have been doing these talks, the more I've seen that every time of the year is special in one way or another. I see this time of year as the season when folk are looking forward to summer, hopefully a nice warm one with not too much rain. It's the holiday season when the schools shut for the long break. It's a time when you feel entitled and deserve to wind down and enjoy a bit of rest and relaxation from everyday work and concerns, whether that be at home or place of employment. It's a time when you feel you need to recharge your batteries and take time to see around you at what there is to make you feel a bit better about life in general. It's a time, especially when the weather is good that you want to get out and about. And, it's a Christian thing to want to rest because God rested on the seventh day and what He did was to look around at everything He had created and He saw that it was "very good". And you can see from just these photos that He has given some 'very good' aspects of His creation to Wales and left out one of the not so good ones.

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.

So, when you are 'out and about' whether at home or abroad it might be an idea to take a closer look at "all things bright and beautiful" in creation. Apart from the desert (although as Annette reminded me you do have plenty of sand on the beaches) all the landscapes have counterparts in the Holy Land. And these talks bring a glimpse of those counterparts to you, which hopefully will make the Bible more real to you as you see the same aspects of that creation around you here in Wales. The apostle Paul said that even those who had never heard the gospel knew in their hearts there was a God just by seeing the world He had created. We live in a beautiful world, yet Paul also says that creation itself is "groaning" and looking for redemption because of the curse put on it after the fall. If what we see around us is beautiful, what must heaven be like? That thought in itself ought to stir the imagination when you see the wonders of God's natural world.

A few years ago I homed in on trees and showed what they taught us about God. This time I've broadened the idea out a bit to focus on some landscapes mentioned in the Bible to find out what they remind us of when we see them. Although firmly based on what the Bible says, the points made in these talks will be more visual than textual. For a change, just seeing the features of the landscapes each week is intended to remind you of how God has used these aspects of planet earth's surface to further His plans for the people who live on it. You've heard the expression "if walls could talk the story they could tell". Can you just imagine what these landscapes could tell if they could talk?

I'm starting with rivers because water is necessary for life to exist, develop and flourish. The word 'river(s)' is used physically, metaphorically and spiritually in the Bible. Unfortunately, in physical terms English translations of waterways in the Bible make it difficult to know which we would class as rivers and what we would class as just streams. The RSV names 15 rivers and probably the most familiar to us are the Euphrates, Nile and Jordan. The Chebar (Kebbar) and Jabbok rivers are less familiar but are important backdrops to Bible events which have had effects right up to the present day.

Although less familiar, the Jabbok and Chebar (Kebbar) have a lot to tell us. For the last 70 years the country of Israel has been at the very heart of Middle East politics and conflicts, yet its name originated by the side of the river Jabbok nearly 4000 years ago. The story of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham who wrestled with an angel, whom he believed to be God

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Himself, is told in Genesis 32:22-32 and although Jacob came away from that encounter with a permanent hip injury, he also came away with a new name (32:28). The children of Israel, or the Israelites was the name by which God's chosen people were known until the united kingdom ruled by David and Solomon split after the death of Solomon.

Millennia later we meet Ezekiel sitting by the river Chebar (Kebbar) (Ezekiel 1:3-2:3; 10:11-22). He had been taken to Babylon in one of the first deportations. It was while he was sitting by this river that he had the supernatural vision of God's wheeled chariot and the living creatures with faces like a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. These are mentioned again in the throne room vision in Revelation chapter 4 and scholars agree they represent the highest forms of wild, domesticated, human and avian life, over which God has complete control. The saddest thing about Ezekiel's vision, however, is that in chapter ten he sees the glory of the Lord leaving the temple. It was an ominous vision for it meant the glorious temple that had been built by Solomon was going to be completely destroyed by the Babylonians. But even more serious, was the fact that the Holy of Holies which had housed the Ark of the Covenant was no more. What had symbolised God's presence with His people on earth was obliterated from history.

This was devastating for the Jewish people because the tangible symbols of God's presence with them was gone forever. The Ark of the Covenant, the depository of the Ten Commandments, where a sample of the manna was stored and which was the 'mercy seat' representing God's throne, disappeared. When the truth of this finally hit home to the exiles, is it any wonder that the people could not sing the songs of Zion by the other rivers in Babylon (Psalm 137). We may not think that is much of a tragedy because, as Christians, we now experience the presence of God and Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit but, apart from being reminded by Indiana Jones, have you ever wondered where the ark is now and will it ever be found? Well, there's a little detail in Revelation 11:19. John saw in a vision God's temple in heaven. Guess what he saw there – you got it, the "ark of his covenant". It's interesting too, that the last chapter of Ezekiel describes the heavenly temple which is echoed in the description of the temple-city of New Jerusalem in Revelation. So, mention of this river has led us not just to thinking about the presence of God leaving the people of the old covenant and returning to His present day people through the Holy Spirit, but also to the intriguing thought that one day, we might actually see the ark of the covenant in the actual face-to-face presence of God.

And mention of the rivers of Babylon take us to the most prominent river in the Old Testament – the Euphrates. It is first mentioned in Genesis 2:10-14 as one of the four rivers flowing from the source of God's river. Because the location and existence of all four rivers are known in the present day, this has led to the view that the Garden of Eden must have been located in this region. On the map you can see the source is in the south-eastern part of Turkey, it flows through Syria and its greatest length is in Iraq. Is this important?

Take a look at this map. According to the Bible, Abraham answered the call of God and left Ur, beyond the Euphrates (Joshua 24:3) and lived as a nomad for the rest of his life. Yet, the land promised to him had its most westerly point at the Mediterranean Sea and its most easterly border at the Euphrates river. In Kings and Chronicles this is stated as the west-east axis of Solomon's kingdom (1 Kings 4:21 & 2 Chronicles 9:26). His father, David had fought a battle near the Euphrates river (2 Samuel 8:3 & 1 Chronicles 18:3) and several times enemies are said to have come from beyond that river (1 Chronicles 5:9). Can you imagine what would

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happen if Israel tries to claim all that territory today. I reckon we would be in the middle of World War III.

In fact, for the Israelites, the first attack from this direction was the attempt by Balak to force Balaam to curse the Israelites while they were on the borders of the Promised Land (Numbers 22:5). That was the incident when the donkey saw the angel, was beaten because it refused to move and then spoke to Balaam saying he could not curse the Israelites, but only bless them. The main enemies that came from beyond the Euphrates, however, were the Assyrians and the Babylonians who brought the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to an end. Isaiah writes of the Assyrians as a “razor hired from beyond the Euphrates river” (7:20) and the conquest as the “mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates.” It would overflow in all the channels, run over all the banks and cover the breadth of the land (8:7-8). While prophecies spoke of the doom of both empires there is one interesting detail about the river itself. Jeremiah wrote the prophecy about the fall of Babylon on a scroll stating that Babylon would be destroyed and left desolate. He gave it to a man called Seraiah to take to the exiles to be read aloud to them. Then the scroll was to be tied to a stone, thrown in the river Euphrates as a sign that the city and empire would never rise again to geographical and imperial greatness. That prophecy has remained true when you think of the state present day Iraq is in.

The last mention of the Euphrates is in Revelation 9:14 and 16:12 in relation to God’s final judgement on the earth. The four angels who will unleash that judgement were bound at the river Euphrates and the river itself would be dried up to allow the combined evil anti-God forces to fight the final battle against God and the Lamb. So, from the first to the last book of the Bible, the beginning and the end of the story of the God who is the Alpha and Omega, the river Euphrates forms an important backdrop to the historical events that progressed God’s plans for His world.

The other important river in the Old Testament is the River Nile which is primarily associated with Joseph and Moses. It was Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream that led to Jacob and his other son’s settling in Egypt, a stay of four hundred and thirty years. Then Moses was miraculously saved to become the leader of Israelites. Through the plagues which included turning the waters of the Nile into blood, Pharaoh was forced to let the people leave Egypt to embark on their journey to the Promised Land. On the way the Law of the Ten Commandments and all the organisation that would turn the twelve tribes into God’s chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy nation were put in place. While the people did not respond in the way God had intended, what is recorded originated on the banks of the Nile. Saving the baby boy put in a basket and left among the bulrushes on the Nile set in motion the story that led millennia later to the emergence of two of the world’s greatest religions – Judaism and Christianity. The Mosaic Law is still the bedrock of Judaism and the Ten Commandments are still recognised as the fundamental tenets of Christian conduct. The importance of Moses is shown by the fact that he is mentioned more times than Abraham in the New Testament and he appears with Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration.

Then we come to the Jordan river. In the Old Testament it is first mentioned when Lot and Abraham had to go their separate ways and Lot chose “the whole plain of Jordan” which was the most fertile area of land in the region (Genesis 13:11). Then the river is part of the landscape when the Israelites camped on the plains of Moab poised to enter the Promised Land. Only the river Jordan stood in their way but it became the miraculous precursor to the fall of Jericho (Joshua 1:1-3; 3:1-5-2). When the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stepped into its waters, they dried up and allowed Joshua and the Israelite army to cross and take Jericho.

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Then we have the story of Namaan the pagan military officer who was deeply offended when Elisha told him to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan river to be cured of his leprosy. He reluctantly did so but as a result of his healing came to believe in and serve the God of Israel (2 Kings 5:10-19).

In the New Testament, the Jordan river can justifiably be classed as the backdrop to the birth of Christianity. It was here John the Baptist heralded the coming of the Saviour who would inaugurate the kingdom of God. With repentance and water baptism people's sins would be forgiven in John's time. Later, after the atoning death, then resurrection and ascension of Jesus as Christ and Lord, His followers would be baptised by the Holy Spirit. Jesus, Himself was commissioned for that purpose by baptism in the Jordan by John. It was there that the dove descended and a voice from heaven declared Jesus was God's Son in whom He was well pleased. Today, many people still go to the Jordan river to be baptised. The chorus 'Away far over Jordan' is an echo of Joshua's first crossing of the river which Christians now see as the entrance to their Promised Land of the new heaven and earth.

There are so many more mentions of rivers in the Bible especially God's control of them. Psalm 74:15 speaks of God opening up springs and streams and drying up ever-flowing rivers. Isaiah 50:2 states that God's mere rebuke can turn rivers into a desert. Habakkuk 3:9 questioning God's anger at the rivers, states that He split the earth with them. All of this shows that the inclusion of rivers in the Bible landscape is not 'window-dressing'. All the references to them have important stories to tell and significant spiritual lessons to teach us.

Add to them just six of the world's greatest rivers – the Mississippi in North America, the Amazon in South America, the Danube in Europe, the Congo in Africa, the Ganges in India and the Yangtze in China, not to mention so many more. Then picture these as the image of God's attributes of love and justice.

*Amos 5:24 (NIV) But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

*Song of Songs 8:7 (NIV) Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.*

What would the world be like today if justice was a widespread and as flowing never-endingly as these great rivers? What would the world be like if it was flooded with all the love contained in those river waters? Yet, while we may be overwhelmed by the injustice and lack of love in the world, we have been given one precious promise. Even as we have to pass through the waters of the injustice and the hatred of the world, Isaiah 43:2 tells us that when we do pass through these kinds of rivers, they will not sweep over us. God's protects His own and spiritually we will be strengthened to cope with what the world is like. That is because as Christians, we have something else to thank God for in the creation of rivers.

In His last public address before His crucifixion Christ told the crowd that those who came to Him would never be spiritually thirsty because they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if they put their faith in Him. Again, picture the influence and the power of the Holy Spirit described as "rivers of living water". Think of that power in your life as the length, breadth, depth, power, economic and social necessity and benefit, the strategic importance and the overall the significance of just these six rivers for sustaining the life of their countries and communities. But its not only the physical life on earth that rivers symbolise. Previously, in John chapter four Jesus had already told the Samaritan woman He met at the well that the living water He could give her would give eternal life.

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And a river is pictured as the landscape of eternal life in God's heavenly kingdom. Isaiah, over two and a half thousand years ago pictured Zion, the Jerusalem of the future and the eternal dwelling place of God, as a place of broad rivers and streams (33:21). The last river in the Bible is called, the 'River of the water of life.' It is clear as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Revelation 22:1). In that setting, like the source of the rivers in Eden, God's throne is the source of the river symbolising eternal life for all who have remained faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rivers in the Bible are full of meaning and no doubt you have your own tales and feelings about rivers you've come across in your journeys.

Thinking of one very near to home, I've picked up an impression that the Loughor river is the line governing Llanelli-Swansea attitudes towards each other, so even a local river can attract meaning in one context or another. Hopefully though, when you come across rivers in future, you won't get negative vibes, but more positively think of God's creation of rivers and how they have enhanced the Biblical landscape in God's word.

## QUESTIONS

1. Which Biblical river do you think is the most significant and why?
2. Do you think seeing the photos of the rivers mentioned in the Bible help to make the Bible stories and meanings more real to us?
3. Have you had an experience – of God connected to a river?

## WEEK 2: SEAS

I really don't need to show you folk any pictures of Welsh seas because the country is surrounded on three sides by the sea and none of you here tonight live very far from it.

You probably all have 'sea stories' to tell but more generally, like it or loathe it, when you think of the sea you can think of it in terms of pleasure or pain, a blessing or a curse, friend or foe. Holiday cruises, sailing for pleasure or sport, bathing in the sea (with or without a newspaper) and the enjoyment we get from seeing marine life in programmes like 'The Blue Planet' can give immense enjoyment.

There are also the hymns which compare the vastness of divine love to the scope of the seas. – Here is love vast as the ocean: The deep deep love of Jesus...rolling as a mighty ocean in its fulness over me – an ocean vast of blessing.

But seas are associated with pain as well. From the now proverbial sinking of the Titanic to the more recent tragedy of the Costa Concordia: from the relatively minor devastation of the storm off the coast at Aberystwyth compared to the major tsunami in Indonesia, the sea is both our friend and our foe.

We have to treat it with respect for it is unforgiving of human mistakes. The seas in the Bible also reveal this dual nature.

Ancient peoples realised this for they associated the waters of the sea with evil, chaos and monsters. Job mentions a monster of the deep in relation to sea (Job 7:12) and there is a reference to God breaking the heads of the monster in the waters in Psalm 74:13. In Ezekiel's prophecy the king of Egypt is described as a monster in the seas, thrashing and churning the water and muddying the streams ((Ezekiel 32:2). In Job the monster is named as 'Leviathan' (3:8; 41:1). But in both Job and Psalms, God's control of this 'monster' is clearly stated (Psalm 74:14; 104:26). Isaiah 27:1 describes God punishing with His fierce, great and powerful sword the gliding and coiling serpent monster of the sea called Leviathan. Finally in the Bible there

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is the image of the beast from the sea in Revelation 13 which brings this sea monster into everyday life. That is because scholars agree this is an image of the political anti-God regimes, given their power by Satan, that have existed through history and will continue to exist in their rebellion against God and their persecution of His people. But God will have the final victory over not just this kind of sea monster but of the one who raised it as well.

In the New Testament the sea is used to describe those who are causing disruption within the church and are distorting the Christian message in both belief and practice. In writing about believing prayer, James describes the person who doubts as “a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6). Jude is even more scathing, calling the ungodly faction within the church as “wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame” (Jude v13). On the basis of this Biblical information about the sea, it is understandable why anything associated with chaos, malignancy, destruction and evil are images of opposition to God. The sea is perceived in very negative terms but, at the same time, seas mentioned by name in the Bible have contributed to much of what we are and believe as Christians today.

With a bit more certainty we can talk about the four seas that are mentioned by name in the Bible – Dead Sea, Red Sea, Sea of Galilee, Mediterranean or ‘Great’ Sea. The photos are how they look today. The Dead Sea is at the southernmost point of Israel; the Sea of Galilee is in its most northerly region. The Red Sea is the waterway between present day Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the photo shows Israel on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Each one has its own story to tell of the contribution it makes to the God’s plans for this world, both negative and positive.

From a human point of view the Dead Sea could be easily ignored. It is only mentioned in the Old Testament starting with the story of Abraham’s rescue of his nephew Lot. Lot had been living in Sodom and was captured by raiders who attacked the city. Abraham fought a battle in the Dead Sea valley to rescue him. (Genesis 14:3). Other than this event, the sea is only mentioned as the border of the Reubenite and Gadite tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan River (Deuteronomy 3:17) and of Judah on the western side (Joshua 15:1-2). King Jeroboam II, probably the most successful ruler of the Northern Kingdom who ruled for 41 years, is said to have restored the territorial boundaries of Israel to the Dead Sea (2 Kings 14:25). Economically, too, the sea was useless because nothing could live in it. Its location, literally, could be described as being unfit for human habitation. But, in spite of the sea’s seeming importance only in connection to Abraham and being the borders of shifting boundaries, it did, however, play an important role in God’s plans.

Before Christ was born Josephus tells of a sect, disenchanted with the way Judaism had developed, who removed themselves to set up a community by the Dead Sea. They were called the Essenes and there is circumstantial evidence to suggest John the Baptist was raised there. But its most significant role was the preservation of the Old Testament and other manuscripts of that world. Today, the Dead Sea Scrolls, including one scroll containing the whole text of Isaiah, is a testimony not just to the existence of what was written in that time, but also the determination to preserve and protect that written prophetic and religious heritage contained in the Word of God. This is a tangible example of how God ensures His word will endure forever.

Next, the Israelite crossing of the Red Sea on the exodus from Egypt is probably one of the best-known Bible stories (Exodus 13:17-14:31). Today, this monument known as “Solomon’s pillar” is a tourist attraction because it is believed to stand at the place where the sea parted to allow the Israelites through. The sea’s role however, sends out mixed signals. To begin with,

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think of the Israelites, weary but elated about their escape from slavery in Egypt. Then they come to the Red Sea with no way to get across. They saw the sea as a foe especially when they hear that Pharaoh's army is pursuing them. They were between the proverbial rock and a hard place and Moses took the brunt of their anger for they accused him of bringing them out of Egypt only to be slaughtered in the desert. The Red Sea at this point was certainly more of a foe and a curse to these people.

But then a miracle happened. Moses pleaded with God, the sea parted, all the Israelites got safely across. The sea had become their way to freedom and their salvation from death and slavery. The parting of the sea became the occasion for the song of Moses and Miriam recorded in Exodus 15:1-21. Here was the picture of the sea being a blessing and a friend. But that wasn't the case for Pharaoh's army. Can you imagine the fear and the terror of those men when the waters of the Red Sea like a tsunami came crashing down on them? For them, it became a foe. Those men died because of Pharaoh's cavalier and contemptuous dismissal of the might and power of Israel's God. If he didn't acknowledge it before this event, he certainly was left in doubt after it.

The next sea we come to is the inland Sea of Galilee. It plays a relatively minor role in the Old Testament, being primarily mentioned in relation to territorial boundaries, but plays a major role in the New Testament because of its association with the ministry of Jesus. Capernaum, by the sea of Galilee, became Jesus' base after He was rejected by His home town Nazareth (Luke 4:14-31). He stayed there for some time teaching and performing healing miracles including healing Peter's mother-in-law and the centurion's servant, which anticipated the inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom of God. People there wanted Him to stay but He refused saying that He had to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to others. So, in this respect, the sea of Galilee was the backdrop to the start of Jesus' itinerant ministry.

It started with an event of crucial significance for the first thing He did while passing by the sea was to call His first disciples. According to Matthew's account the first disciples were Peter and Andrew followed by James and John - Matthew 4:18-22. The sea had provided the means of livelihood for these men and fishing was a profitable business in that time. Consequently, failing to catch fish meant economic loss. According to Luke's account (5:1-11) this call was preceded by a miracle. Those who became His disciples had fished all night and had caught nothing. Jesus told them to lower their nets and they caught so much fish that the nets began to break. On the third occasion Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, John speaks of a similar miracle (John 21:1-25). It was there by the sea that Peter's denial of Christ was forgiven and he was reinstated and personally commissioned to be an apostle.

What Matthew, Mark and Luke do agree on is that Jesus called the disciples from their life on the sea to become "fishers of men". These would be among the men He first sent out on mission to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God (Mark 6:6:13). They later became "fishers of men" by obeying Jesus' 'great commission' to make disciples of all nations by baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching people all about Jesus. These are the men who would be among those spectacularly anointed by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. On that day, Peter's sermon landed "a catch" of 3000 souls. Another 5000 were added after their healing of the lame man. Today, their words and deeds are still carrying on that 'fishing expedition' because what they taught about Jesus and the examples of their own

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lives have become part of the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures that are still inspiring and attracting men, women and children into the kingdom of God.

The Sea of Galilee was thus the back drop to the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth through the earthly ministry of Jesus, the emergence, growth and development of that kingdom, now known as the church, through the ministry of these apostles; and seven books of the New Testament Scriptures. Christians accept that the apostle Peter wrote two of the letters and that the apostle John wrote the fourth gospel, three letters and the book of Revelation. When Jesus called them by the sea of Galilee, it was a world changing moment. The gospel they would preach about the role of salvation and the choice people had to make in their lifetimes about acceptance or rejection of Jesus' atonement for sin, was summed up in Jesus' own parable inspired by the sea and fishing. The parable of the net (Matthew 13:47-51) was one of the parables about the kingdom and the consequences of humanity's choice concerning Jesus.

This sea was also the setting for both Jesus' teaching, on one occasion from a boat; and miracles which were the manifestations of the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus' calming of the storm on Galilee (Mark 4:35-41) when the disciples feared for their lives and walking on the water during another stormy sea episode (Mark 6:45-52) was both a demonstration of Jesus' divine power and a test of their faith in Him. In fact, Jesus demonstrated the Psalm's celebration of "God's rule over the surging sea" stilling it when its waves mounted up (Psalm 89:9) because, as their creator, He is mightier "than the breakers of the sea" (Psalms 93:3-4; 95:5).

The storms that still spring up on this sea are an image of the storms of life everyone faces at one time or another. Like the disciples we can and do panic at times about our ability to cope with the difficulties that come our way. While it is easier said than done, it is these events on the sea of Galilee that inspired the chorus, 'With Christ in the vessel, we can smile at the storm.'

Coming to the 'Great Sea', with some certainty, I can say that Jonah definitely was not smiling when a storm arose when he was trying to escape God's command to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. The terrified sailors, finding out that Jonah was the cause of their plight were reluctant to grant his request to throw him overboard. The more they tried to get to a shore, the worse the storm got. Then they prayed that God would not hold them accountable for Jonah's death. You all know the story of how Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. The Mediterranean Sea determined both life and death. From being a foe and a curse for the sailors it turned into a friend and a blessing. What the general story of Jonah and the whale does not add is the response of the sailors once he had been thrown overboard. Yes, the sea calmed, but as a result of seeing God's answer to their prayers, the sailors "greatly feared" – in other words, were in awe of God and they then offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. We do not know if they continued to worship and serve Jonah's God, but while the mission to Nineveh had been delayed by Jonah's flight, some sailors, at least, had their first miraculous encounter with God.

Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish and then obeyed God and went to Nineveh. What is significant in terms of this sea episode, is that Jesus used it in His own ministry as the sign of the time He would spend in the tomb after His crucifixion. Matthew 12:38-41; 16:4). Just as Jonah had reappeared after his time in the belly of the fish, so Jesus would be resurrected from the tomb. Failure to believe that this was a sign of God's validation and authentication of Jesus ministry of salvation would be at the end of time judged with incredulity by the repentant people of Nineveh. They had repented when Jonah preached there



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but the current generations were refusing to accept the words of Someone far greater than Jonah.

The Mediterranean Sea was also the backdrop of one of the most important events in the post-resurrection period. The spread of the gospel message had to cross the ethnic divide between Jew and Gentile. This happened when the apostle Peter was staying at the home of Simon the tanner at the coastal town of Joppa. It was there he had the vision of the net coming down from heaven containing ritually unclean foods and being ordered to eat. This vision prepared Peter for the meeting with the Gentile Cornelius in his home, for Jews considered such an encounter as making the Jewish visitor ceremonially unclean. At the same time an angel was preparing Cornelius, telling him to send for Peter. As a result, of Peter responding to his invitation to come to Caesarea Martima, Cornelius and his whole household became Christians. While the phrase may seem overused the description of this event as the ‘Pentecost of the Gentile world’ aptly conveys the magnitude of the removing of this ethnic and religious barrier for the spread of Christianity. That the sea was the background of this momentous event led it to playing an even greater role when Paul took the gospel to the Gentile nations outside of Jerusalem, Judaea and Samaria to the ends of the then known world – Rome.

Again, it is very doubtful if Paul was smiling when storms shipwrecked him three times as he crossed the Mediterranean Sea on his missionary journeys and on his final journey to Rome. He writes in 2 Corinthians 11:25-26 that on one of these occasions he spent a night and a day in the open sea. But with the indwelling Spirit of Christ directing his very being, Paul’s faith held in spite of the dangers he faced from the sea as well as the dangers from the people who opposed him on the land. You can see from the map just how big a role this sea played in the spread of the gospel and the extension of God’s kingdom on earth. The high ranking Roman pro-Consul was converted in Cyprus. The letter addressed to Titus is evidence of a church being established on the island of Crete. The shipwreck off the coast of Malta when Paul was being taken to Rome was a blessing to the people of that island as well as saving the lives of all on board that ship.

And, finally a puzzle for you. Revelation 21:1 tells us at the end of time there will no longer be any sea. Yet, in chapter 4 John saw what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal before God’s throne. If you take these statements literally, there is a contradiction. Seas as part of creation was declared ‘very good’ by God and Paul tells us that the whole of creation is ‘groaning for redemption’. This statement in chapter 21 makes all of these references is a bit of a puzzle which I’ve left for you to discuss.

So, when you’re out and about this summer, whether you’re at, in or on the sea, let it remind you of the part these seas have played in progressing the gospel of salvation and the establishment of churches around the world, including the one we are all in tonight.

### WEEK 3: DESERTS

One thing to be thankful for in the UK is that while there may be many areas that are sparsely populated because of the terrain, there are no deserts among them.

Although we complain about too much rain causing so much flood damage and sometimes loss of life, do we really wish for the alternative? These two Welsh reservoirs are but a glimpse of the desert conditions this country could face if climate change means long hot summers. Already there is consultations about desalinization plants having to be built to maintain a fresh

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water supply. While it is highly unlikely that the British Isles will become a desert in the short to medium term, if hot, dry summers continue we will get some experience of what it must be like to live in desert lands where there is always a shortage of water. That, in fact, is the landscape of much of what we read about in the Bible. And, although the thought of having to live in a desert region may alarm or even horrify us, what the Bible tells us about what happened in those landscapes should provide us with the certain knowledge that God is very pro-active even in that terrain. The two terms used for barren areas in the Bible are desert and wilderness and these are interchangeable throughout Scripture. In each case the text refers to places or images which are physically and/or spiritually hostile, dangerous, destructive, unforgiving and deprived of the means of providing the food and water to sustain life.

Dying from thirst was the problem faced by Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael was Abraham's son, yet because of Sarah's jealousy, he and his mother were sent off to find their own way in the desert. Inevitably, weariness and thirst became life threatening, but God intervened. An angel appeared, as did a well giving the water that saved their lives. But a promise was also made that Ishmael would become a great nation. The verse in Genesis about the territory occupied by the Ishmaelites indicates that Ishmael was the progenitor of the Arab nations. The angel's prophecy was fulfilled but sadly, the conflict that had begun in the family circumstances of Abraham grew in intensity and extended to the hostility between the Israelites and the Arabian tribes during the whole Old Testament period. That hostility continues to the present day. So, this desert episode does leave us with another Biblical conundrum. Why did God make this promise, when as an omniscient Being He knew this conflict would continue for millennia and is still unfinished? Whatever the answer may be, we can be sure that God has His reasons. Although there is no definitive answer, what we can ask is: would this have happened in this way if the Israelite people had remained faithful to God's covenant and obeyed His laws?

The next desert event takes us to the Sinai desert around five hundred years later. The exodus of the descendants of the Patriarchs from Egypt took them into a desert where, through their own rebellious stubbornness and ingratitude for their deliverance from slavery led to a 40-year wandering in this arid wasteland. Their attitudes and behaviour, however, did not prevent God revealing Himself to them in ways that should give Christians confidence that even in desert conditions, God can supply every need. Think for a moment. A million or more people had arrived in this desert knowing they had a long journey ahead of them. Within three months they had reached Sinai, where they remained for eleven months. Then it took another ten to eleven months to reach the borders of the Promised Land.

But how did they get their sense of direction to do that? How were they going to get food and drink, for supplies brought from Egypt would only last a few days at most? From the beginning they had a visual manifestation of God's presence with them in the shape of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God was making sure they travelled in the right direction. Then He supplied them with manna, quails and the miracle of obtaining water from a rock. They did reach the border of the Promised Land but because they believed the word of the ten spies instead of the words of Joshua and Caleb, they had to wander in the desert for another thirty-eight years. Moses was later to remind them that during that whole time neither their clothes nor the sandals on their feet wore out (Deuteronomy 29:5). Every physical need was divinely supplied.

Add to that all the ways in which God catered for their spiritual and social well-being. No people on earth have ever been given the blessings promised to the Israelites. God's presence became more tangible in the building of the tabernacle, especially in the Holy of Holies where

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the ark of the covenant was kept. Spiritually, the ten commandments spelt out the holiness of God's character. If the Israelites obeyed those commands they would be distinguishable from all other nations through showing their love for Him and practising social justice through love for one's neighbour. Then the means of atoning for sin when the priest laid the sins of the people on the head of a goat and sent it into the wilderness to die. This day, known as Yom Kippur, is still observed as the most sacred and solemn day in the Jewish calendar. The Christian 'Yom Kippur' is "Good Friday," when the sacrifice involving the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross for the atonement of our sin is commemorated. All that was established by God in the Sinai desert was the beginning of what Christianity is today. All the blessings of the God's presence, protection and providence promised to the Israelites, have been extended to us as the people of God through the atonement of Christ and the mediation of the Holy Spirit. That is some desert legacy!

Centuries later, the desert becomes a place of refuge for David when he was fleeing from Saul's attempts to murder him. Although he had been anointed as the future king, this time the desert turned out to be a test of David's character. He had gathered an army of 600 men (1 Samuel 23:13) but looking at the region how they managed to stay together and survive in such inhospitable territory can only be attributed to David's patience in waiting for God's timing for taking on the mantle of kingship. The proof of that was his refusal to kill Saul when he was being pursued in the desert of Ziph. He passed on the opportunity to kill Saul because despite Saul's murderous intentions towards him, David regarded Saul as the Lord's anointed and therefore it would be a sin to take his life (1 Samuel 26:7-12).

Amazingly in these circumstances, the desert became a place of worship for David. Today we have his communion with God recorded in Psalm 63. There he talks to God literally, "in a dry and parched land where there is no water". Yet, David praises the power and glory of God meditating during the watches of the night because God is his help and he believes that even in this desert place he can sing while resting in shadow of God's wings. He clings to God having the certainty that God will destroy those who want to kill him. In a desert setting and in life-threatening circumstances, this psalm alone is proof of the genuineness of David's devotion to God and his faith in God's power to deliver the destiny God had planned for him

Fast forward another fifteen hundred years and John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness "preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Luke tells us that "the child grew and became strong in spirit and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel (Luke 1:80). When Jesus spoke to His disciples about John, He asked the rhetorical question – What did you go out into the wilderness to see? - Luke 7:24. As I mentioned in passing last time, although it is not conclusive that John himself was an Essene, there is some evidence to suggest that John was brought up by this Jewish sect. They are described by the Jewish historian Josephus as a group of people who had broken away from the temple-centred worship in Jerusalem and established themselves as a messianic focused community at Qumran. They were the people responsible for the preservation and protection of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The community joined in the revolt against the Romans and were defeated in AD68, after which they disappeared from history. If what the evidence points to is correct, then it can be said God had prepared John from childhood, through the messianic focus of these people, for his role as the herald of the coming Messiah. How often, if ever, have we thought that the message of the coming of the penultimate stage of God's plans of salvation for His world through the One John proclaimed, began in a desert?

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Within six months of John's proclamation Jesus came to be baptised by him in the river Jordan, after which He was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Forty days and nights in the desert, alone and in danger from the wild creatures that lived there. Without food or water and having His physical, mental, emotional and spiritual state assaulted by the precisely targeted temptations to renege on and/or give up on the commission confirmed at His baptism by the voice from heaven. Jesus was tempted when He was at His weakest point as a human being and He resisted the attempts to force Him to use His divine power to selfishly relieve the effects the ordeal He was going through. The attacks of Satan come to all, often when we are least able to resist them and they target what Satan knows are our most vulnerable points. As a human being, the only explanation for Jesus' ability to resist Satan was the presence of the Holy Spirit who had led Him into the wilderness to be tempted. The power that was with Jesus on that occasion is the same power that we have been given today to repel the 'fiery darts' of the wicked one targeting us. Additionally, it was this resistance to satisfy His own needs in spite of great provocation that meant Jesus remained sinless and so was able to die as the spotless Lamb of God to atone for the sins of the world and to become our High Priest in heaven. As the writer to the Hebrews states Jesus can empathise with our weaknesses because in human weakness He was tempted just as we are. That is also why Paul can assert that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. While we may not think of a desert landscape being the ideal setting for an event that could make or break our chance of salvation and eternal life, that is exactly what it was. Had Jesus failed to surmount this first insidious attempt to divert Him from His God-given mission, we would not be here tonight. We can thank God that this desert experience of Jesus made not only our salvation possible but resulted in the relationship we now have with God and Christ through the same Holy Spirit that sustained our Lord at this pivotal moment in His life.

Two more references in Jesus' teaching used the desert as a setting. The road between Jericho and Jerusalem was notorious for banditry. That is why people going to Jerusalem for the annual festivals travelled as groups. This road was the setting for one of Jesus' best-known parables, that of the 'Good Samaritan' which teaches how to love one's enemies by practical action. The Jewish-Samaritan schism had gone back to the break-up of the united kingdom of David and Solomon and had become even more entrenched when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon and became more exclusive in terms of ethnicity and religion. By choosing this inhospitable and treacherous region as the setting for the parable Jesus was providing a picture of humanitarian healing and care regardless of who the victim was. At its most basic level, the parable taught that loving one's neighbour, whether friend or foe, meant everyone had to be treated humanely.

The second reference to the desert was an event during the wanderings of the Israelites in the Sinai desert recorded in Numbers 21:4-9. The people were grumbling against the Lord and Moses and venomous snakes were sent among them by God. Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole and when the people who had been bitten looked up to it they were saved from death. Jesus used this illustration to indicate the way He would die (John 3:14). He would be lifted up on a cross so that everyone who looked to Him in faith would be saved from spiritual death. Jesus' use of a two thousand-year-old desert incident to point to the most important event in salvation history is a testimony and lesson to us today, not to ignore what happened in these desert landscapes.

Then, just decades after Christ made this statement, when the kingdom of God, known as the church had emerged, the last book of the Bible gives us an image of 'the church in the wilderness' in Revelation 12. The images in Revelation can be very cryptic but there is

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consensus that the woman who had escaped into the desert when the dragon attempted to destroy her represented the church. This is confirmed by the statement that since the devil could not destroy the woman he resorted to making war against the rest of her offspring – in other words – us (Revelation 12:13-17). Today as the corporate church we may feel we are living in that spiritual wilderness because of the decline in Christianity in our own country in particular and in the western world in general. However, Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail against the survival of His spiritual church and the photograph of the ruins of a church in the Negev desert in Israel gives a tangible sign that even in the physical symbols of our corporate wilderness there are indications of Jesus' presence. Archaeologists believe the carving on the wall to be one of the earliest attempts to depict the face of Christ.

Then as individual members of the church we are 'the remnant in the wilderness'. We are the pilgrims asking the great Jehovah/Redeemer to "guide us through this barren land" for we can also experience 'wilderness' periods of spiritual dryness in our personal walk with God. For Christians, such times are unavoidable because we live in a hostile environment which will not supply us with Jesus as the 'Bread of Life' and the 'Living water'. This wilderness will test our commitment to God to the limit just as the desert tested the people of God in the past. The only way through it is to remember them as examples of what God was to them and what He did for them while they were in desert situations. Like Hagar, Moses and the Israelites, David, John and Jesus we can turn to God's word for the "living water" of the Spirit to assuage our thirst. Their experiences inspire us to keep on going in spite of the difficulties of the conditions. Like them we can rely on the God who keeps His promise to speak what is most appropriate to our hearts in our wilderness times.

And finally, the big question. Will there be a desert in the new heaven and earth? Some statements in Isaiah are images not of the disappearance of the desert but of its transformation. Describing the kingdom of righteousness in chapter 32, Isaiah writes of God's justice ruling the desert. Significantly this will happen when the Spirit is poured out from on high (v15). Chapter 41 is a picture of God as Israel's helper who will make rivers flow on barren heights and turn the desert into pools of water. The image of rivers in the desert is repeated in chapter 43 in the context of God making everything new. And the mention of all these trees growing in the desert recorded in chapter 41 would seem to be the indication of the presence of the fertile field and these waters in the kingdom of righteousness. Equally significant is the statement that the purpose of this transformation of the desert is so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it (Isaiah 41: 20).

As these references to this Biblical landscape shows, even in the hardest places on earth God watches over His people. Words we can associate with the desert just from these examples include water as the necessity of life; the law of love for God and our neighbour; the ability to worship in the beauty of His holiness; His protection, presence, providence in supplying our every need; refuge from the storms of life; good news of the gospel; victory over satanic temptation; spiritual preservation and transformation when His kingdom comes. And if we can recognise that God can give us all these things in wilderness conditions and situations, then we can only wonder and stand amazed at Paul's statement that God can do "immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine." (Ephesians 3:20).

1. **What do we learn about God from these 'desert' scenarios?**
2. **Why do you think the scene of Jesus' temptation was a desert and why Paul spent 3 years in the Arabian desert before becoming the missionary to the Gentiles?**

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3. **In what ways can the church be regarded as the “church in the wilderness” today”?**
4. **What would you regard as a personal ‘wilderness’ experience?**

## WEEK 4: FIELDS

In this part of the world we take fields so much for granted. I’m guessing that unless something attracting interest is going on in fields you pass, you ignore their existence.

As you can see from these Welsh landscape photos, the fields are mainly used for pasture and there is no widespread growing of crops in the fields. The last two show what would happen to those fields in times of drought. On the downside, the animals would have to rely on the hay gathered when the grass was growing. On the upside, drought conditions reveal what has been buried in the past and which could become very valuable assets in the future. For as long as this world has existed fields have been the harbingers of prosperity or poverty which could quite literally, lead to life or death. The fertility and productiveness of fields for the growing of food and for pasture for the animals are essential to sustain life on this planet and this is a fact of life that will continue until this planet is no more. We can be sure of that because in the covenant that God made with Noah the underlying conditions that make the existence of the produce of fields possible is the perpetuation of seasons, day and night, cold and heat all of which determine when the seeds and/or trees for that produce is planted and when it is harvested (Genesis 8:22). While there will be local floods because of the curse of Eden on the natural world, God has promised there will never again be a world-wide flood. Hence, we can be sure that fields will be part of our landscapes until a new heaven and earth come into being. However, particularly in the western world in our more urbanised societies and with technology driven intensive farming methods, we have largely forgotten just how essential the presence of fields in the landscape are. We are so used to having all we need on supermarket shelves that we seldom think of what we would do if there was a world-wide drought and there was a failure of crops that produced so much of our basic foods like bread, dairy produce, meat and overseas crops like tea and coffee. Yes, we complain when we hear of poor harvests of different types of produce because they push the price up in the shops, but we have never experienced the famine conditions that still exist in many parts of the world through because of drought. This is what the people of Bible times faced as well. The failure of wheat, barley, grape and olive crops through drought and/or disease or the death of animals from starvation or thirst spelt disaster. The Bible writers recognise the correlation between fields, pastures and famines because fields are mentioned two hundred times, famines are mentioned one hundred and five times, and pastures are mentioned at least fifty times in the NIV version. The majority of the references are in the Old Testament and refer mainly to grazing land. They appear in differing contexts with a variety of meanings for Christians today.

Like seas, fields in the Bible send out mixed signals and unfortunately, the first human action recorded as happening in a field was murder, when Cain killed his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8). Abel’s animal sacrifice was accepted foreshadowing redemption through the shedding of blood. Cain’s offer of the crops was not accepted leading to the jealousy that led to the killing. Of the other three fields mentioned by name, two are also associated with death. Today, people can see Ephron’s field and the cave where Abraham and Sarah are believed to be buried. It is also possible to see the Potter’s field. It is called the field of blood because according to the record in Acts, Judas Iscariot hanged himself there. The third named field is the Fuller’s field mentioned in Isaiah 7:3. This was the location at Jerusalem where clothes were washed and bleached and the remains of the site exist today. The Lord told Isaiah to meet King Ahaz of

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Judah on the road by the Fullers' field. This may seem to be a passing reference and a minute detail. However, King Ahaz was on his way to defend Jerusalem against an attack by the king of Aram who had allied with the king of the northern kingdom of Israel to attack Judah. Again, you might ask – so what? Well, to cut a long story short, the outcome was the sign given to Ahaz of a virgin giving birth to a Son who would be called Immanuel, but before He would be born the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel would be destroyed. So, while mention of the Fullers' field may seem an irrelevant detail, it nevertheless was a location of not just of the prophecy of the future fates of the two kingdoms but of a messianic prophecy of immense significance.

Then looking at the positive signals we can turn to God's promise of land to Abraham and the promise that He was taking Moses and the Israelites into a land 'flowing with milk and honey' (Exodus 3:8). It is recorded in Leviticus 26:3-5 that if the Israelites obeyed God, He would send rain in season so that the ground would yield its crops and the trees their fruit to the extent that what was harvested would last until the next harvest so that people would never be without the necessities of life. The seven staple foods were wheat, barley, grapes, olives, figs, dates and pomegranates. Reading the account in Numbers 13:23 of it taking two men to carry one cluster of grapes on a pole may seem an exaggeration until you see what a cluster of grapes looks like today. Bearing in mind that it was God who had given the fields the right conditions for growing crops and planting trees, we have no good reason for doubting the Bible account. The opposite of this abundance was famine when the fields did not yield their produce and this was an aspect of the fields of Palestine that still prevails today in spite of modern agricultural processes and irrigation systems. In the Bible, the occurrence of harvest failure can be viewed from different perspectives. On the one hand there is the famine that took Abraham to Egypt where he made the grave mistake of telling the Pharaoh Sarah was his sister. When Sarah was taken as a wife to Pharaoh God subjected his whole household to disease. The result was the deportation of Abraham, Sarah and all that he had from Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20). While this incident had no long-term effect on salvation history, it illustrates the adverse effects of telling a lie, albeit a well-meaning one.

On the other hand there are two key examples of when God used the infertility of fields to further His plans and purposes for the world. The first was Joseph's ability to interpret Pharaoh's dream of seven years of plenty and seven years of famine because the crops would fail and the animals would die. What if Joseph hadn't interpreted Pharaoh's dream about a seven-year famine affecting both crops and animals? What if this famine had not spread to the failure of the crops in the fields of the Promised Land which led to Jacob and his sons going to Egypt to eventually become slaves; and then to become the main characters in the story of the Exodus which determined the course of salvation history? All too often we see history of any kind being determined by great leaders or by major upheavals like war, but it is doubtful if we have ever thought that it was the adverse conditions of the fields in this era that determined the human course of actions leading millennia later to the birth of the Saviour of the world. That can be said with certainty because it was famine too that led to the well-known story of Ruth.

It was famine that caused Naomi and her family to Moab where one of her sons married Ruth, but he subsequently died. Having lost her husband and her sons, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem and Ruth chose to accompany her. As widows they were among the poorest and most vulnerable group in society, but a field of barley became their salvation. The poor were permitted to glean the leavings of the grain around the perimeter of the fields and it was there that Ruth came to the attention of Boaz, a relative of Naomi. The outcome of the meeting was

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the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, who became the great-grandparents of King David and the ancestors of Jesus Christ.

Turning from role of fields as the backdrop to human action, we can look at what the images of fields conveyed to people of the time. Probably the most well-known is David's picture in Psalm 23 of God as the Shepherd leading His sheep to green pastures by the still waters of a stream. In the Old Testament pastures were needed for sheep and goats and while the psalm depicts an idyllic image of pastures, the reality is quite different. Green pastures only last as long as the rainy season and the sun in the dry season means it is hard to find both food and water for the animals. Today, having to move sheep from place to place is called 'transhumance' and there is an annual transhumance festival in Madrid in Spain. Transhumance was David's task as a shepherd to find pasture and water for his sheep. On top of that he had to protect the sheep from predators like lions and bears (1 Samuel 17:34-37). Despite the difficulties he may have had he sees all in the light of God's provision for both man and beast. He refers to God's people as the sheep of His pasture (Psalm 79:13; 100:3). It is an image used by others like Isaiah who states that the poorest of the poor will find pasture (14:30). Jeremiah conveys the Lords condemnation to the religious leaders of the time for spiritually leading astray the sheep of His pasture. Bringing the scattered sheep back to their pasture was the image of the return of the exiles from Babylon to Judah (50:19). The image continues in Ezekiel (34:13-18, 31), Micah 2:12 and Zephaniah 2:7 and culminates in John 10:9 when Jesus declares: "I know my sheep" and "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture".

Together with other references to this pastoral use of fields, we are assured that God knows who are His people in every era of world history. They are indications of God's provision, protection, preservation, restoration and salvation.

In the New Testament fields appear in mainly in images of growing crops and flowers. Jesus' two parables about the Sower and the Weeds are what are termed 'kingdom parables'. The field is the world, the seed is the word of God and the types of soil represent the responses from humanity to the gospel of the coming of the kingdom. No matter what way that parable is interpreted it shows that the vast majority in the world will either reject it or only pay lip service to it. The parable of the weeds depicts people in the world in general and in the visible church in particular, existing in a field as either wheat or tares. The former are those who will hear the gospel, take it to heart, be obedient to the divine commands and values it entails and will do good in the world because they belong to Christ. The tares are those who either have rejected Christ completely or merely have a form of righteousness but deny that the power of that righteousness is Christ. Paul specifically warns Timothy to have nothing to do with such people when he warns of the godlessness that will come in the days before Christ returns (2 Timothy 3:5). When that time comes, the point Jesus makes by letting the 'wheat' and the 'tares' grow together is that God is the only Person with the experience to finally discern the spiritual condition of both and will accurately separate the two and assign them to their eternal destinies. That picture of the "harvest" of the earth is given in Revelation 14. That final time is also a time when there will be no time for anyone who has left anything in a field to go back for it (Luke 17:31) because no one can take anything from this earth with them.

On a more positive note Jesus uses the lilies of a field to teach us not to worry because God will supply our needs. Lilies grew wild in Palestine and as Jesus points out, if God puts such beauty in fields where the grass will wither and the flower petals will fall, why do we worry about the provision of the basic necessities like food and clothing. Trusting God to supply our needs is a work of faith. God knows exactly what each individual needs and when Jesus used



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the commonplace sight of the lilies in the field He led us to the most fundamental tenet of our faith. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and these things will be given to you as well” (Luke 12:27-34). The wild flower photos are just a glimpse of those that exist in Wales. All around us we can therefore be constantly reminded that God will supply our every need when we become citizens of His kingdom through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But somethings as perishable as the flowers of the field also serves to remind us of the imperishable word of God. As Peter quoting Isaiah tells us, the grass will wither, the flowers will die but the word of the Lord will endure forever. And that also takes us back to seed because he reminds us that we are born again not of perishable but of imperishable seed through the living and enduring word of God (1 Peter 1:23-25). When Jesus stated that the death of a kernel of wheat produced many seeds, he was referring to His death producing a harvest of saved souls. We are the seed resulting from the death of the eternally enduring Living Word of God.

After the planting of seeds in the fields comes the harvest and today those images of seeds and fields remind us of why we refer to missionary activity as going into a mission field. The term originated with Jesus who saw the world as a harvest field in need of salvation. That need is perhaps even greater today because of the growth in world population now around seven billion. When the chart was constructed the population was around six billion and it can be seen even at that level that the number of Christians in the 20-44-year age bracket had already begun to decline and there was a very sharp decrease in the number of young people. Recently Scripture Union reminded folk here in Greenfield how few children had any knowledge of Scripture. Annette can give you the estimated percentage. The fields are white for harvesting on our doorstep and if we can't go personally out into those 'fields', what we can do is pray because without all generations and especially our young people turning to Christ, Christianity has no future in our society. It's a personal opinion but I believe God will not desert His people in our time just as He did not desert His people in the past. But, as we saw last week, we are a remnant and will become an even smaller one unless we see the mission field around us for God has reminded us that we are His field.

Finally, what do you make of Paul's assertion that you are God's field? There is some debate over what Paul actually meant by telling the Corinthians that they were God's field. It is not a usual image for Paul and it is possible he added “a building” because he was addressing an urban church. In this case the field means the same as his more usual metaphor of Christians being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit (Ephesians 2:22) What is certain is that he used this description in the context of the personality cult that was developing in the Corinthian church. Some were saying they followed Paul, some saying they followed Apollos. Others were saying that they followed Cephas (Peter) and others saying they followed Christ. Chapters one and three in first Corinthians are devoted to Paul's distress at the division this was causing in the church. What made the situation more serious was the fact that Jesus was being put on a par with mere men. Today, Muslims and Mormons see Jesus only as a prophet, albeit a great one. But to include Jesus in a human category is a clear breach of the first commandment. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they must look to God and to God alone because all the members of the church belong only to God and as such are fellow workers in His kingdom.

In a talk about fields you really can't add anything more to the statement that “You are God's field” except that together with all the other Scriptural truths that references to fields in the Bible lead us to, it is possible none of us will ever look at fields in quite the same light again.

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## WEEK 5: VALLEYS

The one thing I don't have to do is explain to you what a valley is, but I do have to give you a bit of a warning about them! The very fact that this was published in a Welsh newspaper indicates just how prominent the valleys are as an iconic Welsh landscape and how they influence how people perceive Wales.

And when you see these references to valleys it is understandable.

“Down yonder green valley where streamlets meander  
When twilight is fading I pensively rove.  
Or at the bright noontide in solitude wander  
Amid the dark shades of the lonely Ash grove.

As the ‘land of song’ the valley landscape has been immortalised in folk songs like “The Ash Grove” and the Cwm Rhondda title of the great hymn ‘Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah’. It has also been immortalised by the book “How Green was My Valley?” which was made into a film and a TV mini-series. Not very far away too is ‘Big Pit’ the National Coal Museum which is a UNESCO World Heritage site and a reminder of the industrial legacy of the South Wales valleys. I’m sure you could add many more examples of the influence valleys have had on Welsh life and culture. The same can be said for valleys in Bible times because there are at least 30 of them mentioned by name. I must confess that if valleys had not been such a prominent feature of Wales, I would have tried to avoid talking about this landscape because on balance, they are associated more with trouble and death than with happy endings. However, as backdrops to God’s story we have to face the fact that God has shown through them the state of a world we live in. It is a fallen world and in one sense the valleys show us a picture of suffering when God’s way is ignored and people choose to go their own way.

At least, the first four mentioned in Genesis ease us into the less pleasant aspects of valleys. The names of these valleys are Siddim, Shaveh, Gerar and Hebron. The Siddim and Shaveh valleys concern the story of Abraham and Lot. When they went their separate ways because the land would not sustain both their flocks, Lot went to live in the city of Sodom (Genesis 14:12). Chapter 14 records the major battle that took place in the valley of Siddim involving nine kings. During it Lot, together with all the goods and food of Sodom and Gomorrah were taken by the four Mesopotamian kings. To his credit, Abraham pursued them, rescued Lot and brought back the loot taken from the two cities. The king of Sodom came to Abraham in the valley of Shaveh and offered to let him keep the goods but return the prisoners. Abraham refused to accept anything from this king because he was also being visited by another king – Melchizedek the King of Salem. The appearance of this mysterious figure so early in the Bible narrative is of immense significance for it foreshadowed the characteristics and role of Jesus Christ. No one recognised this more clearly than the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament.

Chapter seven of Hebrews is the writer’s evidence gleaned from the Old Testament that the priesthood of Jesus was preordained and that only He had the credentials to fulfil this role. The basis of that is Abraham’s meeting with Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18-20. For example, that account records that the meal shared by Abraham and Melchizedek was bread and wine, echoed in the last supper Jesus shared with His disciples when the new covenant was announced. He also had the authority to bless Abraham giving glory to God for Abraham’s victory over his

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enemies. The fact that Abraham is said to have given him a tenth of everything indicates a recognition that this person was greater in status to him. Other information about Melchizedek adds further weight as to the reasons why Jesus became the perfect high priest. The name meant 'king of righteousness' and 'king of Salem' meant 'king of peace' (7:2). As 'Discipleship Explored' explained to us, Jesus is now our righteousness, which in turn gives us peace with God. Also, the repeated declaration of Jesus being a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek was the result of God swearing an oath to that effect, Jesus was the guarantor of a new and better covenant (7:22) and because, like Melchizedek, there was neither beginning nor end to His life, Jesus' priesthood is permanent and unending. That is why He will always be able to completely save people by being their representative before God.

Here are two valleys, existing at least 4000 years ago that have left a mark on history to the present day. The tar pits in the Siddim valley mentioned in Genesis 14:10 are still visible. The valley of Shaveh, known in Genesis 14:17 as the 'King's valley' still bears that name. We can ponder too, that two thousand years before Christ would come and embody all the attributes of Melchizedek, God gave notice of what His future plans for salvation would entail.

The two other valleys mentioned in Genesis have also left their marks. Genesis 26 records Isaac going to the land of the Philistines because of famine and settling in the valley of Gerar. Trouble came from the Philistines each time Isaac dug a well and discovered water and he had to move on several times. God, however, continued to bless him and the promise given to Abraham was conferred on Isaac too (Genesis 26:24:25). At that place Isaac built an altar and his servants started to dig another well. In the meantime an agreement to leave each other in peace was made between Isaac and Abimelek, the Philistine king. The next day word came that water had been found and Isaac named the well Shibah. Genesis 26:33 records, and I quote, "to this day the name of the town has been Beersheba". Ironically today, Beersheba is nicknamed the 'Silicon Valley' of Israel.

It appears Isaac moved again from the valley of Gerar to the valley of Hebron for it was from this location that Joseph was sent off to look for his brothers. Well, you all know what that led to. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt and the history of God's chosen people was set in motion. Later, Hebron would become the place where David would be proclaimed king leading to the covenant prophetically promising the everlasting kingdom of His descendant Jesus Christ.

Already, in the very first book of the Bible, the valleys have been landscapes in which the people and events that shaped the rest of Bible history first appeared. Other valleys which feature in the narrative may not have had the same impact, but they are important in the context in seeing that these millennia old records are backgrounds to places that still exist in the present time and all have had an impact on how they contributed to the Bible stories. The valley of Eshkol on the borders of the Promised Land was where the spies discovered that cluster of grapes that was mentioned last week. Unfortunately, it was because the Israelites were persuaded by ten of the spies not to enter the land that the people's wanderings took them through the desert for another 38 years until they arrived at the valley of Zered. By that time the whole of the first generation of fighting men who had left Egypt had died and the time had come for the second attempt to enter Canaan (Deuteronomy 2:13-14). Today, the valley of Eshkol is dominated by a desalinization plant and the Zered valley, once in a land called Moab now is found in the modern country of Jordan.

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The conquest of the Promised Land introduced the numerous battles that would be fought in the valleys of the land but more serious than the battles was the Israelites adoption of one particularly heinous form of Canaanite worship associated with the valley of Ben Hinnon. God told Jeremiah not only had He never commanded this form of sacrifice, but it was something that had never even entered His mind. Prophetically God also told Jeremiah that it would become a valley of slaughter and Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is an image of the fulfillment of that prophecy when the Babylonians finally attacked Jerusalem and slaughtered its inhabitants. Tragically, this slaughter was also repeated in AD70 when the Romans put down the Jewish revolt. Although sacrifices to Molek stopped, the Ben Hinnon valley even in the time of Jesus was the rubbish dump for the city of Jerusalem and where Jesus' body would have been left to be burnt with the rest of the rubbish if Joseph of Arimathea had not laid Him in His own tomb. The valley was constantly burning and that is what gave rise to it being also called Gehenna associated with all the images of the fires of hell in the New Testament. On the one hand we can be thankful today that all traces of that notorious past have gone. The revival of the dry bones in the valley of slaughter came with the restoration and return of God's people to Judah where centuries later the Saviour was born. On the other hand, this valley on the outskirts of Jerusalem still exists in a war zone and may yet see a further fulfillment of the valley's fate given to Jeremiah.

The other valley mostly associated with conflict was the valley of Jezreel which is mentioned forty-one times in the Old Testament. This valley where the city of Megiddo is situated, is also the scene of many important events in the history of God's people. Generally speaking, the legacy of this valley is not a happy one. The well-known story of Gideon's fleece obscures the fact that he defeated the Midianites in the valley of Jezreel, but later turned against God. David had married a wife from the valley (1 Samuel 24:3) but her son Amnon was killed by another son Absalom. David also fought the Philistines there on several occasions. Then, Jezreel is prominent in the life of Elijah who fled to the valley after his victory on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Naboth's vineyard was in the valley and Jezebel, who had murdered him to seize it for Ahab, was herself killed by Jehu in Jezreel.

Second Chronicles chapters 22-24 records King Ahaziah of Judah's visit to King Joram of the northern kingdom of Israel in the valley of Jezreel led to an alliance against Jehu. Again there were long-lasting consequences. Ahaziah was killed by Jehu who became King of Israel. Ahaziah's mother Queen Athaliah murdered the royal family of Judah and only the infant Joash was saved. The queen in turn was murdered and Joash reigned in Judah for forty years. But Joash 'did evil in the sight of the Lord' and during his reign the priest Zechariah, who had tried to warn of God's coming judgement was stoned to death in the courtyard of the temple. In the battle with Aram Joash was wounded and his officials assassinated him for the murder of Zechariah. He was not even given the dignity of being buried in the tombs of the kings. Josiah, the king who had done so much to bring religious revival to Judah was killed in battle in the valley and his body was brought to Jerusalem from Megiddo.

The final sad mention of Jezreel is the Lord instructing Hosea to name his first son by that name. It was a prophetic name for it expressed the Lord's intention to destroy the house of Jehu and bring the kingdom of Israel to an end. And while there is no explicit statement of the event in the Bible, for Christians today this battle theme continues for it is believed by some that the final battle we call Armageddon between Christ and the forces of evil will take place in this valley at the site of Megiddo.

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One more valley can be mentioned because it begins with a heart-warming story that has become proverbial in the present day. It can be said with some confidence that probably one of the first Bible stories people heard as a child was the story of David and Goliath recorded in 1 Samuel 17. The boy David killing the giant Goliath because David trusted God to give him victory. This is still the model of stories where the seemingly weak and helpless attacked overcomes the strong and powerful attacker. Yet, that victory had tragic consequences. It led to Saul's jealousy of David and attempts to kill him. Later when David was fleeing from Saul he was given refuge by the priests at Nob a town near Jerusalem. Ahimelek gave David provisions and Goliath's sword. Hearing this Saul ordered all the priests to be killed. His Israelite would not murder priests but Doeg, an Edomite slaughtered them as well as the women, children, infants and animals in the town (1 Samuel 22). Only Abiathar escaped and he joined David later becoming prominent as a priest when David became king and re-established worship of Yahweh. However, the action of Doeg the Edomite entrenched the enmity between the Israelites and the Edomites, which existed throughout Old Testament times and extended to Herod the Great the king who tried to kill Jesus. This violence against His people invoked God's wrath against the Edomites and led to the prophecy of Obadiah included in our Scriptures.

Mention of the valley of Elah, in itself, does not convey much to a general reading of the stories of David, but when the chain of events which ensued from this children's Bible story of David and Goliath, it can be seen that this landscape was the backdrop to an aftermath affecting the lives of individuals and nations right up to the birth of Christ.

After all of that I don't blame you for wondering is there anything good to be said about valleys in the Bible or is it all doom and gloom? Thankfully there are positive things about the valleys. Although Hosea calling his son Jezreel was an ill omen, later in the book, Jezreel is mentioned in the context of God's response to people when they seek Him. The image of this restoration is the grain, new wine and olive oil produced in the valley (Hosea 2:21-23). Today Jezreel is the evidence that this is what God can and has done. Later in chapter 2 Hosea makes the assertion that God can make a valley of trouble like Achor, a valley of hope. Achor was the valley where Aachen, who had taken forbidden loot from the city of Jericho, a sin which had caused the Israelite defeat at Ai, was killed with his whole family. Isaiah also mentions that valley becoming a resting place for herds in God renewal of the world (65:10).

Both Hosea and Isaiah used the trouble in the valley of Achor as an image of hope and a future rest in God's restored creation. At the same time they recognized that those blessings depended on seeking God. In the same way today, our hope and future rest depends on His Son Jesus Christ, who also faced the trouble of His arrest, humiliation and crucifixion by walking across the Kidron valley to the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:1). We know from Scripture how much He was troubled about His coming ordeal, yet He too walked through a valley with the shadow of death hanging over Him. What made the difference to Him and to us is the knowledge that the Psalmist wrote about fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born and which still is relevant today. Like Jesus we need fear no spiritual evil because God is with us.

Figuratively speaking, the whole world is facing two kinds of valleys. Multitudes are in the valley of decision Joel wrote about so long ago. Today, people have to decide what they do with the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Will they or won't they accept Him as Saviour and Lord. That decision will, in turn determine the valley of vision of our eternal destiny. Will it be the image of the destruction of Jerusalem prophesied by Isaiah, or will it be the vision of the New Jerusalem when we will be like Christ.

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Valleys in the Bible teach us that this world is not a safe place either physically or spiritually. That is why often Christians will say they are going through a valley when they are down or facing difficult times. But many Christians will testify to the fact that it was only when they were in the valley looking up to the hills seeking God's help, that there was growth in the fruit of the Spirit. We can be thankful that whatever our 'valley' experiences in this life, one day the vision given to God's people in the Book of Revelation will take us to the eternal mountain of the Lord.

### FOR DISCUSSION

**DO YOU THINK BIBLICAL VALLEYS REFLECT THE STATE OF OUR WORLD?**

**HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE A 'VALLEY EXPERIENCE'?**

**GIVEN BILLY GRAHAM'S STATEMENT, DOES A 'VALLEY EXPERIENCE' ALWAYS HAVE TO BE NEGATIVE?**

**WHAT KIND OF 'FRUIT' CAN A 'VALLEY EXPERIENCE PRODUCE'?**

### WEEK 6: MOUNTAINS

Last week we looked at valleys and it is a geographical fact that valleys would not exist unless mountains were present in the landscape. Mountains and valleys complement each other and Wales is blessed with an abundance of both. While it is true that the mighty Snowdonia dominates the landscape of North Wales and is usually the mountain people first think of when Wales is mentioned, when you look at the physical geography map of Wales it can clearly be seen that the whole country is dominated by mountainous areas. And each of these areas has their own aspects of scenic beauty. It, therefore, should come as no surprise to you that the valleys mentioned in the Bible have their complementary mountains as well. I made a rough count of around thirty named valleys and thirty-one named mountains in the NIV Bible.

The first mountain to appear – quite literally – after the flood was Mount Ararat situated in Turkey. Although hotly debated, present day archaeologists believe they have found evidence of this Bible story because fragments of wood which have been carbon dated to nearly five thousand years ago have been found in the area where Noah's Ark was said to have come to rest. These publicly made claims by respected archaeologists cannot be dismissed out of hand and whether or not they can be proved beyond all reasonable doubt, the fact remains that this first mention of a mountain in the Bible still has a major influence and relevance to Biblical research in the present day.

The next significant event which took place in the region of a mountain (Genesis 22:2) was when Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac. You all know the story of how the sacrifice of the child was stopped at the last moment and how God provided a ram for the sacrifice in place of Isaac. In gratitude Abraham built an altar and called it 'The Lord will provide'. The writer of Genesis stated in 19:14 that to the knowledge of people in his day it was said that "on the mountain of the Lord it will be provided" indicating that Mount Moriah was where this sacrifice did take place. On this occasion God swore by Himself the renewal of His covenant promise to Abraham of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore and the blessing that would extend to all nations through His offspring. Spiritually, that covenant promise has been fulfilled by those who have emulated the faith of Abraham who trusted God to provide the sacrifice demanded because he had told his servants that He and the boy would go to the place God had commanded and "then WE will come back to you". That faith is mirrored by those who put their faith in the sacrificial Lamb provided by God to be crucified on another hill over two thousand years later. Fast forward another two thousand

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years and Mount Moriah is the site known throughout the world as the ‘Temple Mount’ in Jerusalem. It was the site where Solomon built his temple and where it was restored by Ezra and the returning exiles. In spite of the dispute between Jews and Muslims over ownership of the building now situated in the location, this mountain has never lost its association with the God of Abraham for both groups claim Abraham as their ancestor through his sons Isaac and Ishmael.

From Moriah we move on to the mountain that determined the course of salvation history – Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb. All the religious organisation of the people including the Ten Commandments and the tabernacle were covered in the talk about deserts. This one focuses on the mountain itself. Exodus chapter 19 records the physical aspects of the mountain that preceded the giving of the Ten Commandments. The coming meeting of the Lord with His people was heralded by thunder and lightning, a thick cloud over the mountain and the very loud sound of a trumpet (v16). Then the Lord’s descent in fire was marked by the whole mountain being covered in smoke and it was said to tremble. Today we would probably dismiss that latter description as a volcanic eruption, but to the people the time it must have been an awesome and terrifying sight. Additionally, we usually associate thunder and lightning clouds with rainstorms but on this occasion there was no rain accompanying the phenomena. Moses was warned to put a cordon around the mountain because anyone who touched it was to be put to death either by stoning or by being shot with arrows. Anyone who touched them would be unclean. The priests were to consecrate themselves and only when the ram’s horn sounded were the people allowed to approach the mountain. Now this may seem a very over the top procedure but every aspect of the instructions was designed to emphasise and reinforce to the people the ultra-holiness of God and His dwelling place at any given time. None of the Israelites would ever forget this incident. Millennia later John used images of this event to convey his visions to the people of the first century church. The trumpet visions in the Book of Revelation, together with texts about clouds, smoke, fire, thunder, lightning and mountains trembling and falling into the sea the words which convey the awesomeness of the day when the Lord will come in glory and people will see His holiness.

It is also the day of judgement for those who have ignored His warnings about their eternal destinies. As Paul explained to the Galatians, Mount Sinai stands for Hagar who represents the Old Covenant based on the law, obedience to which could allow God to overlook the sins of the people but which could not save them. Just as the unrighteousness of the Israelites excluded them from the immediate presence of God at the mountain He had declared to be holy for that immediate purpose, (Exodus 19:23), so anyone who does not possess the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ will be excluded from God’s holy mountain in the New Jerusalem.

Later in Moses’ final address to the people another two mountains were used to symbolise the blessings and curses that God had commanded him to tell the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. Mount Gerizim represented the blessings of God’s presence, protection, provision and prosperity. Mount Ebal represented the curses that would befall the people for disobedience and unfaithful apostasy. Those curses also included the prediction that the curse would lead to the scattering of the people among other nations and the conquest of their kingdoms. Moses could not have given them a more tangible reminder of both God’s promises and their obligations to Him. Overlooking the town of Shechem the mountains were also reminders of their ancestors as the locations of Jacob’s well and Joseph’s tomb.

Of the many other mountains are mentioned in the story before Moses got to this point the most notable is that of Mount Hor. This is where Aaron, Moses’ brother is believed to be buried.

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The death of Aaron and the appointment of his son Eleazar is recorded in Numbers 20:22-29. Both Josephus, the Jewish historian writing in the first century AD and Eusebius writing in the third century AD repeat the information given in the Numbers account. Aaron is important in the future history of the Israelites, through the times of the kings, after the exile and at the beginning of Christianity. As the writer to the Hebrews reminded his audience, no priest had the right to that office unless called by God just as Aaron was (5:4). The religion of the Northern Kingdom of Israel was flawed from the start because Jeroboam ignored and rejected the Aaronic right to the priestly office. Although this right was recognised in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, it was not always adhered to. One incident during the time of Isaiah was significant because leprosy was inflicted on King Uzziah when he attempted to offer incense at the altar and became angry when the priests told him only the descendants of Aaron had been consecrated to perform that act (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Although the king remained the official ruler of Judah for 52 years, his son Jotham carried out the duties of kingship. After the exile, Ezra returned with a mandate from Artaxerxes to rebuild the temple and re-establish the worship of Yahweh. The genealogy in chapter seven verses 1-6 shows him to be descended from Aaron and as a priest of this line, the “hand of the Lord his God was upon him”. Then move forward again to Luke chapter one. There we are told that both Zechariah and Elizabeth the parents of John the Baptist were descendants of Aaron and that made John the Baptist, the herald of the coming Saviour, a descendant of Aaron too. John was the last of this line to have a major role in God’s plan of salvation for with the coming of Christ, the priesthood reverted to the eternal order of Melchizedek.

When people remember Aaron it is usually in connection with him being a companion of Moses when they repeatedly came to Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites, the golden calf episode in the wilderness and his rebellion against Moses on their journey to the Promised Land. Yet as this memorial to him on Mount Hor indicates, what he represented in terms of priestly office remained in force right up to the coming of Christ.

Our next mountain takes us to a much more well-known story. Mount Carmel was the scene of the great showdown between Elijah and the priests of the pagan god Baal. But this is a story of two mountains not just one. The Mount Carmel story is told in first Kings 18:16-40 and the Mount Horeb (Sinai) story is told in chapter nineteen. You will know the two stories but perhaps not that they were connected by mountains. On Mount Carmel the challenge to the pagan priests was to have Baal send fire to burn up the sacrifice on the altar. When they failed to do so Elijah had the altar saturated with water and then prayed for fire. The ferocity of the fire sent by God not only burnt the sacrifice but the water-soaked wood, stones, soil and the water in the trench around the altar which would normally have contained the blood of the sacrifice. The priests of Baal were then killed in the Kishon valley. It would have been thought that after this spectacular display of God’s power that Elijah would have ignored Jezebel’s threat to have him killed, but instead he fled, finally stopping at Mount Horeb, still called in his day “the mountain of God” (19:8). When he was there in the depths of depression God appeared to him. Again, this mountain is connected to a powerful wind that tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks. Then came an earthquake and fire, and then the gentle whisper that assured Elijah that God had 7000 faithful followers and that Elijah could go back to Israel for God would protect him from Jezebel.

It is estimated that the distance between the two mountains is two hundred and eighty miles and Elijah had to make this journey there and back on foot. You would have thought his ‘mountaintop experience’ on Mount Carmel would have sustained his confidence in God but as in life after a great experience we have to ‘come down to earth’ and get on with the routine



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things of life. Elijah had had a major upper and this was followed by a major downer. It is wonderful to know that such great men are also very human and God understands even when depression takes us from the top of the mountain to the depths of the valley.

And nobody understood that abrupt change of life circumstances more than Jesus. We stop next at Mount Tabor which is believed to be the location of the Transfiguration of Christ. The apostle John was with Peter and James when they beheld the glory of Jesus. All three of the synoptic gospels record this event. What is also significant is that the figures appearing with Jesus were Moses and Elijah, the former representing the law and the latter representing the prophets and both men were connected to the same mountain. Yet, Moses in the midst of all his difficulties in leadership and especially Elijah in his darkest moments, could never have envisaged that what they experienced on mountains would lead to this greater privilege of appearing with the Saviour of the world on another mountain. For Jesus this was the moment when the voice of God confirmed Him as the beloved Son and people should listen to Him but both Matthew and Mark record that when they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus gave disciples notice of His death by telling them not to speak of the event until after He was raised from the dead. The moment of glory on Mount Tabor became the prelude to death on a cross.

Another mountain becomes prominent in the last days of Jesus' life on earth. Before entering Jerusalem for the last time, the Mount of Olives was the location of His speech to the disciples telling them of the signs of the end of the age (Mark 13:3-37). It was from the Mount of Olives He sent His disciples to secure the colt that would carry Him into Jerusalem to the acclaim of the people. After the celebration of the Passover meal, now known as the 'Last Supper' and after singing a hymn, Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives and it was there that He spent each night in prayer during His last days in Jerusalem (Luke 21:27). The Garden of Gethsemane was situated on the Mount of Olives and it was there that Jesus agonised in prayer about His approaching ordeal (Luke 22:39-46). While the Mount of Olives featured in these dark days leading to Jesus death by crucifixion, it also became the scene of His ascension into heaven. We do not find out that this happened on the Mount of Olives until Luke records in Acts 1:12 that after witnessing Jesus' ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem from there. The angel told the disciples that Jesus would return in the same way as He departed and according to the prophecy in Zechariah 14:4-5 on that day Jesus' feet will stand on the Mount of Olives.

That day takes us to the final mountain in this talk – Mount Zion. Zion, the city of God is mentioned one hundred and sixty-six times in the Bible. In the Old Testament it refers to the city of Jerusalem and the temple which housed the Ark of the Covenant. When Ezekiel saw in a vision the glory of God departing from the temple and the city, the focus of the prophets turned to the heavenly Zion when God would make all things new. The two visions of this are associated with mountains. Ezekiel's vision of the heavenly temple city came when he was in exile in Babylon and the hand of the Lord set him on a high mountain in Israel. He was commanded to tell the Israelites everything he saw. The account of what he saw extends from 40:5 to 48:35 and ends with the words "The Lord is there". Zechariah's prophecy to the 'daughter of Zion is that the Lord is coming and will live among His people there (Zechariah 2:10-11). Centuries later, John's vision of the descent of the heavenly temple-city, the New Jerusalem, was also given on a high and great mountain (Revelation 21:10) and this prophecy is echoed in 21:3-4 when a loud voice from heaven declares the dwelling of God is with man. He will live with them, they will be His people and He will be the God who wipes every tear

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from their eyes, when there will be no more death, mourning or crying because the old order of things has passed away.

This is the vision that comes to us as we walk through the valleys of a world overshadowed by both physical and spiritual death. It is the writer to the Hebrews who puts this journey into perspective for those who belong to Christ. Our destination is Mount Zion the city of the living God. Zechariah 8:3 states that the Jerusalem there will be called the Faithful City and the mountain of the Lord. We can be sure that our destiny lies there and we will never be put to shame because we believe and have faith in the Stone laid in Zion, the chosen and precious cornerstone that guarantees we are a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and God’s special possession (1 Peter 2:6-9). And the wonder is that this ‘mountaintop experience’ will last forever.

These talks have been a journey of discovery for me. The one thought that has come is that as Christians we correctly maintain that the Bible is God’s ‘living word’ sharper than any two-edged sword. At the same time though, we seem to perceive God’s word living only in what we read in the Bible and what we see around us we appear to confine only to the topic of creation mentioned in the Bible. For me, the present day existence and recognition of the heritage value of the natural landscapes of the Bible has shown that God’s word is just as alive in the rivers, seas, deserts, fields, valleys and mountains around us, because they speak to us in ways that can only add to our wonder at how every word of what we read leads to the conviction that the Bible is indeed the inspired and infallible word of God.

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