

Arabia - A Time To Think (Communion Preparatory Service)

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[0 : 00] Perhaps when we think of communion, we don't automatically associate it with Arabia. After all, what does a parched land made up of deserts and scrubland got to do with the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper?

But in the light of Galatians 1.17, perhaps they have more in common than we might think. In fact, they don't just have things in common, but the Apostle Paul's experience in Arabia is a direct pattern of what our experience this weekend at our communion can be.

Paul, or as he was called at the time, Saul of Tarsus, had been an outspoken enemy of the early church. But as we know, on the road to Damascus, the risen Lord met him and changed his heart. Having spent some time in Damascus before he went to Jerusalem to meet with the other apostles, we read in Galatians 1.17 that he went away to Arabia, which at the time spanned the wilderness areas of the Middle East.

So Syria, Jordan, western Iraq, and today's Arabian Peninsula. His retirement to Arabia is a direct pattern of what our experience this community weekend can be in three ways.

[1 : 35] First of all, a time to rest, then a time to reflect, and then a time to resolve. We might be in Glasgow this weekend, but spiritually speaking, for these three reasons, we're taking a journey this weekend together with Saul of Tarsus to Arabia.

The first reason he went to Arabia was it was a time to rest, a time to rest. Paul had so recently been through a life-changing experience which had turned him upside down.

There used to be a fairground ride at the now-closed Loudoun Castle theme park that did the same to me. It was called the Milchurn. It spun you around in a circle with dizzying speed, and when it stopped, you felt sick and you couldn't walk in a straight line.

What Paul endured that day on the road to Damascus was far more dramatic. He had spent his entire life thinking one thing, and now having encountered the glory of Christ on the road to Damascus, he realized that for all those years he had been wrong.

He was blinded by the light of the majesty of Christ. He had to be led by the hand. For three days he could not see. And we read in Acts 9 that he ate and drank nothing for those three days.

[3 : 10] Well, God had mercy upon him and provided for him a helper in a local Christian called Ananias. By a great miracle of power, Ananias laid his hands on Paul, and his blindness was healed.

He then immediately began preaching the gospel he had devoted his life to destroying. He preached it so earnestly that zealous Jews planned to kill him.

And he ended up escaping from Damascus by being lowered in a basket from a hole in the city wall. In the space of just a few short weeks, Paul had been through a stiffer test than any milk churn at a theme park.

He must have been exhausted by the turnaround in his life with all its attendant activities. And so the first reason Paul retired from Damascus after his conversion and spent time in Arabia in the desert was to rest.

We don't know how long he spent there compared to the Damascus from which he had escaped, the Damascus to which he returned, and the Jerusalem he went to after that.

[4 : 28] But he spent long enough there in Arabia to recover his mental, his emotional, his physical equilibrium.

The theology of Jesus regarding rest has been largely ignored by the evangelical church in favor of an activism which leads to exhaustion, disillusionment, and burnout.

The expression, I'd rather burnout than rust out, was once very popular in the evangelical church. But it's a gross distortion of the teaching of the Jesus who said to his disciples, come apart and rest with me a while.

And come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. We all admire Robert Murray McShane.

He's one of the heroes of Scottish church history. The minister of St. Peter's in Dundee, he died at the age of 28 after a short life spent in tireless labor for Christ.

[5 : 43] On his deathbed, he deeply regretted his life choices. And he said to a friend, God gave me a message to deliver, the gospel, and a horse to deliver it, my body.

But alas, I have killed the horse, and now I cannot deliver the message. We might admire McShane's zeal for the mission of the gospel, but he was wrong to commend a life of relentless work with no rest.

If he had heeded the words of Jesus inviting him to rest more, McShane's impact upon the Christian life of Scotland might have been far greater than it was.

Communion seasons are times when even for a short while we can rest. You know, we all have busy lives, balancing so many demands while trying to find time for our families, and if we're fortunate, a little personal time.

Historically, communion seasons were packed with so many meetings, both formal and informal, that often they just added to the stress rather than taking away from it. By contrast, we have every justification for saying, this weekend is a Sabbath of Sabbaths for me.

[7 : 15] This is a weekend of rest, where I can switch off my work phone, ignore my emails, say no to studying for exams, and taking a deep, deep breath.

Just rest quietly. This communion season represents that Sabbath of Sabbaths where you can join with Paul in Arabia, recovering that mental, emotional, and physical equilibrium after the relentless of modern life.

This is a time to rest with Jesus, not to feel stressed and guilty because you're not busy burning out for the Lord. Follow Paul's example and go to Arabia.

Don't view your rest as disobedience and laziness, but as obedience and recovery. And suppose we'd never thought that way before.

A time to rest.

[8 : 31] That's the first reason he went to Arabia. Second, it was a time to reflect. A time to reflect. Few countries in the world have enjoyed such rapid growth in the church than South Korea.

One of South Korea's greatest New Testament scholars is an outstanding man called Se-Yoon Kim. Kim made one of the greatest contributions to understanding the letters and theology of Paul when he said that the whole theology of Paul, including Galatians with its life-transforming statement of God's grace, Romans with its stunning proclamation of justification, Ephesians with its unashamed pronouncement of the sovereignty of God, all of it was Paul's reflections on what happened to him on that day, on that road to Damascus, when the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ stopped him in his tracks and turned him around.

Se-Yoon Kim's contribution to the ministry and mission of Paul cannot be overestimated. Everything Paul said, did, and wrote was the mature at working of what had happened to him on the road to Damascus that day.

The risen Lord Jesus had shown grace to the worst of sinners. That's the message of the book of Galatians. He had justified the ungodly. That's the message of the book of Romans.

He had displayed his sovereignty over the hatred of men toward God. That's the book of Ephesians and so on. The Damascus road experience happened so very quickly and it took Paul a lifetime to work it all through in his heart and in his mind.

[10 : 30] The time he spent in Arabia was the beginning of that process of reflection. Paul needed time to process all that had happened to him that day.

He needed time to understand how wrong he had been to stake his life and salvation on his obedience to the traditions of the rabbis as opposed to faith in the grace of God revealed in the gospel.

He needed time to understand how in the light of the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ his zeal for Judaism had been misplaced. He needed time to reflect on how a man is justified by faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ and not by his observance of the law of works.

And so this time in Arabia was intentional time out on Paul's part. Time to experience the risen and exalted Christ not as a blinding flash of light and words come from heaven but through the Holy Spirit working in his heart.

Unless he had gone immediately from Damascus to Arabia in other words. we would never have had Philippians with its overflow of Christian joy.

[11 : 51] We wouldn't have had Corinthians with its all-encompassing doctrine of the church. We wouldn't have had Thessalonians with its undaunted hope of Christ's second coming.

The risen and exalted Lord Jesus planted the seed of all these things in Paul's heart on the road to Damascus that day. But it was Paul's time in Arabia which allowed this seed to germinate and grow in different directions because it gave him time and space to pray through and reflect on them all.

Formerly known as shell shock, PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder is now a very well recognized mental health challenge faced by many ex-servicemen and service women.

They recall deeply traumatic episodes experienced perhaps in conflict situations and they play them over and over and over again in their minds.

The record is stuck. They can't move on from the moment they killed their first enemy combatant or they experienced that roadside bomb where they lost some of their colleagues.

[13 : 04] they're haunted by the ghosts of war and they spend the following years stuck in that moment of trauma. The medical profession now understands that rather than stigmatize sufferers from PTSD they need treatment including talking therapy.

therapy it's that talking therapy delivered by caring and unskilled professional counselors which helps them to unstick the record to process what happened to them that day to begin to heal to begin to move on with their lives.

PTSD I'm sure is one of the most painful of all mental health challenges but with advances in modern psychology and medication it's now one of the most treatable. There's a sense in which what Paul did by retreating to Arabia to spend time in solitude was done in order to allow the Holy Spirit to counsel him and to talk him through the undoubted mental trauma of the Damascus road experience.

Because you see Paul never moved on from that experience. But through his ministry and mission it's clear that he had learned how to process all that had happened to him.

I'm not saying that his conversion held the negative consequences for him of a soldier on the battlefield. Rather it held for him the infinitely positive and life changing wholesomeness of grace and joy.

[14 : 48] Nevertheless he needed time to reflect and process his experience of the living and glorious Christ. He needed time to unpack it all to read it.

For my 15th birthday my next door neighbor gave me a copy of J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece The Lord of the Rings. I received the gift gladly but I didn't immediately know the story nor what the story meant.

it took me weeks to read through these three volumes. And in the same way Paul received the gift of salvation on the road to Damascus but it took him a lifetime to understand what that gift meant and what it all understood how it was to be processed and what it all meant.

That understanding and that process began during his time of enforced solitude in Arabia. There's a sense in which every communion season gives us an opportunity as Christians to take time out from our busy lives and to think deeper on what happened to us on the day that we came to know Christ as Saviour and Lord.

To allow the seed of what God planted on us that day to germinate and grow more completely. Every communion season can become for us somewhat of an Arabian experience as we along with Paul process our conversions and like him work through the infinitely positive and life changing wholesomeness of the grace and the joy the gospel can bring into our daily experience as Christians.

[16 : 36] We might be physically located in Glasgow this weekend but spiritually we can be with Paul in Arabia thinking through how it's possible for God to justify sinners purely on the basis of their faith in Christ.

Working out how the sovereignty of God in salvation led to the cross on which our Saviour died and the tomb from which he rose on the third day. Enjoying a fresh experience of the Holy Spirit's ministry of refreshment in our lives.

This communion season through the word preached and the sacrament received gives us time to reflect on our own conversion whether that happened eight days ago or 80 years ago because the truth is that just like Paul the whole of our Christian lives from beginning to end is a coming to terms with what happened on the day Jesus met with us and changed our lives forever.

Take these things home think about them this evening. Perhaps we can spend some time thinking about how the grace of the gospel has impacted us personally. Rather than watching March of the day or whatever sit quietly by yourself join with Paul in Arabia as he reflected on his Damascus Road experience with Jesus and as our previous minister to overseas students Finley McKenzie one of the wisest men in the world used to often say to me improve your convertedness improve your convertedness.

So Paul went to Arabia to rest to reflect and then thirdly and finally it was a time to resolve a time to resolve I don't know where that pernicious and evil form of Christian teaching called health and wealth prosperity came from peddled by smooth talking preachers to packed auditoria it promises physical health and economic wealth to faithful Christians for seed money we can only conclude it comes from the devil himself for when it came to Paul he was promised only suffering and poverty Ananias the Christian from Damascus who was to care for the newly converted Saul of Tarsus was told by the Lord in Acts chapter 9 verse 15 about

[19:14] Saul of Tarsus he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name as Paul promised physical health and economic wealth he was promised it's diametric opposite as a function of his faithfulness to Jesus the previously xenophobic Saul of Tarsus who because he was so zealous for the traditions of the rabbis had hated the Gentiles was being commanded by Jesus to go to the very people he'd hated and proclaim the gospel to them even the early Jewish Christians had their suspicions about the Gentiles their Gentile Christian brothers and sisters and treated them as second class believers some called the Judaizers didn't think the

Gentiles worthy of Christian salvation furthermore the newly Christian Saul knew how much the Jews hated Christians for until a few days previous to this he had been at the spearhead of their persecutions but now Jesus is calling him to go back to his own people and to the Gentiles with the very gospel they hated mission commanded suffering promised that's what Jesus promised the newly converted Saul of Tarsus health and wealth not for a moment mission and suffering instead this is the task that awaited Paul suffering for Jesus on account of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus he got the first taste of it in

Damascus itself when soon after he regained his sight he began to evangelize and attracted the hatred of the local Jews who tried to kill him and that's the other reason therefore he retired to Arabia to spend time alone with God to reflect upon the life-changing charge the risen Jesus had given him to devote his life to mission and as a result to endure a life of suffering and having reflected upon it to resolve to obey Jesus and to willingly embrace God's calling upon his life he was being called to do everything that he had previously hated to proclaim the gospel and to do what he knew would eventually cost him his life to preach the gospel to his fellow Jews and to Gentiles he took time out in Arabia to count the cost of the charge Jesus had given him and to resolve to obey read 2nd Corinthians 11 Paul's litany of the injuries he received at the hands of those who hated him on account of his evangelism for Christ if a forensic pathologist had examined Paul's body he would have concluded here's a man who had been tortured and malnourished broken and misshaped and they were merely his physical injuries they failed to take into account his social emotional mental and psychological sufferings surely if a Christian missionary ever suffered for the name of Christ it was Paul and from the very first days after his conversion he knew it was going to happen because

Jesus told him it was Paul needed time to process it all so he retired to the deserts of Arabia where having reflected on all Jesus was calling him to do he determined himself to willingly embrace it in the power of the Holy Spirit modern sports coverage of rugby games like we've had today begins well before kickoff before the two teams emerge on the pitch a camera shows the scene from one of the changing rooms it shows the team getting psyched up for the match there's loud rock music playing sometimes heavy metal the team is bunched together with the coach in the middle giving final instructions but whatever it is the team knows it's going to fight ahead of them they need to be fully determined when they get in that pitch to give every ounce of their energy and skill to that challenge now Paul didn't spend his time in Arabia listening to loud music but he did spend his time

alone with God preparing for the long lifelong fight in which he'd been called to engage the fight for the gospel which he knew would cost him his life on

[25 : 02] Monday morning we'll be leaving this communion weekend behind us and going back out into the busyness and chaos of normality the busyness and chaos of normality but we'll be going back having been challenged by the word and sacrament and the question is this what are we being challenged and strengthened by word and sacrament for and the answer is the same as that which it was for Paul mission and suffering who knows what we will suffer in the next while as a function of our obedience to Christ we need to take the opportunity this weekend to join Paul in Arabia psyching ourselves up to resolve to follow in the footsteps of Jesus himself whatever that may cost us hopefully none of us will ever have to suffer as much as

Paul did and yet not one of us knows what's before us even tomorrow it's wise to grasp this opportunity to build up our resolve and to be determined to follow where Christ shall lead us in the days to come so we have rest reflect and resolve the three reasons Paul retired from Damascus to Arabia rest reflect and resolve three reasons why we can value this communion weekend the great thing about it all is that as Christians like Paul we don't do these things alone for God's Holy Spirit is with us as surely as he was with Paul in the desert the presence of the risen and living Christ is with us helping us to rest helping us to reflect and helping us to resolve and if that's all we experienced this weekend namely the presence of

Christ by his Holy Spirit then our trip to Arabia this evening will have been worth it may God bless this weekend to all of us let us pray oh Lord our loving heavenly father most all of us live frantic and busy lives and we desperately need the rest that you have promised us in the gospel we ask oh Lord that over the course of this weekend you would help us to find rest in the gospel rest in the Holy Spirit who assures us of a strengthening presence we also pray oh Lord that you would help us to reflect on all that happened to us on the day or during the days as we were becoming believers for some of us we can pinpoint the day or the hour even for others it was more of a process for still others they never knew a day when they weren't

Christians and yet Lord we pray that you would help us to reflect on the great principles and seeds of truth that were planted in us at that stage and to work them out in our lives giving glory to you at every stage Lord we also pray for your help as we resolve to follow you into mission and suffering we recognize that all of us oh Lord we recognize that many of us may be suffering averse not one of us are sadomasochists none of us enjoy being hurt or enduring pain and yet oh Lord if it's going to result in more people knowing the truth about Jesus Christ in the gospel of your son and having eternal life through faith in him then we pray oh Lord that you would make us determined to walk in your way we pray that you are blessed this weekend to us you would help us oh

Lord to change the way we think about ourselves and about you in line with your word and all we ask is in our great redeemer's name Amen