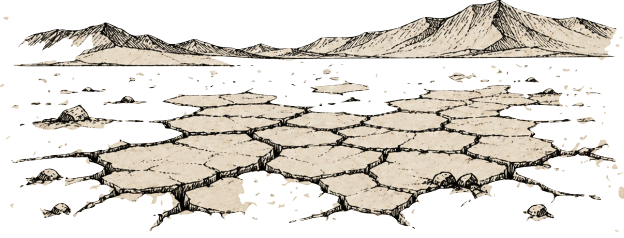


THE DEATH VALLEY SURPRISE

What looks barren may not tell the whole story.

Death Valley, California is one of the hottest and driest places on earth, and the name seems appropriate. Much of the landscape is rock, dirt, sand, and mountains. Rainfall is scarce. Temperatures can be brutal. If you stood there and judged the possibilities simply by what you could see, you probably wouldn't expect much.



For all intents and purposes, it's dead.

In the winter of 2004, something unusual happened.

Death Valley received a significant amount of rain. Not long after, in the spring of 2005, the desert began to change. Flowers appeared. Not a few flowers scattered here and there. Huge portions of the desert floor were suddenly covered with wildflowers. Yellow, purple, pink, and white spread across a landscape that had looked almost completely lifeless.

The flowers hadn't suddenly arrived from somewhere else. The seeds were already there. Some had been beneath the desert floor for years, invisible and waiting for conditions that would allow them to grow.

Death Valley wasn't dead.

It was dormant.

There was far more beneath the surface than anyone could see.

This event got me thinking: *How often do we make assumptions about people based entirely on what we can see on the surface?*

Someone tells us they don't believe in God. Someone wants nothing to do with church. Someone has been hurt by Christians. Someone rolls their eyes when religion comes up. Someone seems completely uninterested in spiritual things. We look at a generation that doesn't seem particularly interested in attending church. We look at workplaces, neighborhoods, cities, and countries where traditional expressions of Christianity appear to be disappearing.

Without realizing it, we start making assumptions:

Nothing is happening here.

They aren't interested.

They don't care.

They're too far gone.

The soil is too hard.

This isn't fertile ground.

We see Death Valley.

But Jesus keeps saying something that should make us question what we think we see:

"The harvest is plentiful."

That's an extraordinary statement.

Jesus didn't say the harvest could become plentiful if His disciples worked hard enough. He didn't tell them to go manufacture a harvest. He told them that the harvest was already plentiful.

There was something in front of them they weren't seeing.

I do want to be careful with the Death Valley picture.

The Bible is clear that apart from Christ we are spiritually dead. Paul writes that we are "*dead in our transgressions and sins.*" The Gospel isn't the story of people discovering that they had spiritual life hidden inside themselves all along.

We need Jesus. God makes us alive.

So when I say there may be more beneath the surface than we can see, I'm not suggesting that people are spiritually alive without Christ. I'm suggesting that God may already be at work in places we have decided are barren. Those are very different things.

Long before someone prays a prayer, opens a Bible, or even knows what they believe about Jesus, God may already be stirring something.

There may be a question they can't shake, a disappointment that has exposed something deeper, a longing they don't have language for yet, or pain that has made old answers feel inadequate.

There may be curiosity hiding behind criticism.

There may be a conversation from three years ago they still think about.

There may be a Christian they met who didn't fit their assumptions about Christians.

There may be a moment of beauty, kindness, loss, wonder, loneliness, or joy that awakened something they don't quite understand.

None of that means the person secretly knows Jesus. It simply means we should be very careful about declaring a landscape empty simply because we cannot see what is happening beneath the surface.

Jesus told a story in Mark 4 about a farmer scattering seed. The farmer goes to bed. He wakes up. Days pass. Life continues. And beneath the surface, something happens. Jesus says the seed sprouts and grows, *“though he does not know how.”* The farmer doesn’t stand over the ground yelling at the seed. He doesn’t dig it up every morning to see if anything is happening. He doesn’t manufacture growth.

Something is happening that he cannot see and cannot completely explain.

Eventually, it becomes visible.

I think we need more humility about what might be happening beneath the surface of people’s lives. We are very good at focusing on what we can see: church attendance, Bible knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, language, and religious affiliation. Those things tell us something, but they tell us very little.

They cannot tell us what conversation someone had with God in their car last Tuesday.

They cannot tell us about the question someone has been afraid to ask.

They cannot tell us about the Christian coworker whose kindness has quietly challenged years of assumptions.

They cannot tell us about the person who hasn’t entered a church in fifteen years but has recently found themselves strangely curious about Jesus.

They cannot tell us what the Lord of the Harvest is doing beneath the surface.

And that’s where our assumptions matter, because what we believe about people affects how we approach them.

If I decide someone isn’t interested, I will approach them differently.

If I decide a place is spiritually barren, I will stop looking for fruit.

If I assume nothing is happening, I probably won’t notice the clues that something is.

But if Jesus is right and the harvest really is plentiful, I can be with the exact same person differently. I can become curious. I can listen more closely. I can ask another question. I can pay attention to the things they say and even the things they almost say. I can stop trying to create spiritual interest and start noticing where interest, longing, tension, pain, or curiosity might already exist.

That’s a very different way of moving through the world. It replaces assumption with Holy Curiosity. It replaces pressure with attention. It replaces the need to manufacture something with the freedom to notice what Jesus may already be doing.

Maybe that's part of learning to see the harvest the way Jesus sees it. Everyone else sees a crowd. Jesus sees a harvest. Everyone else sees the desert. Jesus knows there is more to the story.

Death Valley looked empty. Then it rained, and suddenly the landscape revealed something that had been hidden beneath the surface. The desert hadn't told the whole story.

So before we decide that a person, a generation, a neighborhood, a workplace, or a city is spiritually barren, it might be worth remembering Death Valley. Sometimes what looks like nothing is happening is simply the part of the story we can see.

And I wonder how many places we have called barren simply because the flowers haven't appeared yet.