

Illustrated Bible Life

Streams in the Desert

One of the striking images of the Bible that most of us have heard of is that of “streams in the desert.” The actual quote is from Isaiah 35:6 (see Session 3), but reappears in modified form in 43:19 (see Session 5): “streams in the wasteland.” I love this imagery because I really love the desert. I know it is not to everyone’s taste, but I have loved deserts most of my life.

Most of us think of places like the Sahara Desert in Egypt when we think of deserts: vast miles of hot sand with an occasional oasis to provide rest and shade for the weary. However, there are so many types of desert. In fact, just 2% of deserts in North America are sandy deserts.

In the western U.S. alone, there are the high deserts of eastern Oregon, full of sagebrush. There is the unique beauty of the Joshua trees in California, Nevada, Arizona, and Utah, and the saguaro cactus in Arizona and California (both of these are also found in Mexico). The slick rock desert of southern Utah is a fairyland of curious red rock formations. There are salt flats, like the Bonneville Salt Flat in Nevada. One of my favorite types of desert is that found in the Great Basin of eastern Nevada. Alaska has cold or polar deserts, and of course, there is the traditional sandy desert that one can find in places like Death Valley, California.

Wikipedia tells us, “A non-technical definition is that deserts are those parts of Earth’s surface that have insufficient vegetation cover to support a human population.”* Deserts cover about a third of the earth’s land surface. There are both hot and cold deserts. The driest non-polar desert in the world is the Atacama Desert in northern Chile, while Antarctica is the world’s largest cold desert.

A widely-accepted system classifies deserts into three categories: hyper or extremely arid, which have at least 12 consecutive months without precipitation; arid deserts, which receive less than 250 millimeters (9.8 inches) of annual precipitation; and semi-arid deserts (or steppes), which receive between 250 millimeters (9.8 inches) and 500 millimeters (19.7 inches).

Arid or hot deserts receive almost no precipitation, but occasionally, a downpour will occur that results in flash floods. These temporary streams and rivers follow dry riverbeds, known as arroyos or wadis, and they can be deadly, as they occur suddenly and push everything in their path downstream. Yet, they are also life-giving. These “streams in the desert” water the sparse vegetation and quench the thirst of desert dwellers, both human and animal.

It is to this type of life-saving benefit that the Scriptures refer when citing “streams in the desert” or “wilderness”—the life-giving water that makes the difference between survival and death. This is also the metaphor Jesus used when talking to the Samaritan woman in John 4: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (vv. 13-14).

* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert> accessed on March 13, 2024.