

**DISCOVERY GUIDE**  
5 LESSONS FOR GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS

# THE PATH TO THE CROSS

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Embracing Obedience and Sacrifice



THAT THE  
**WORLD**  
MAY KNOW.

EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE IN  
**HISTORICAL CONTEXT™**  
Ray Vander Laan  
With Stephen & Amanda Sorenson

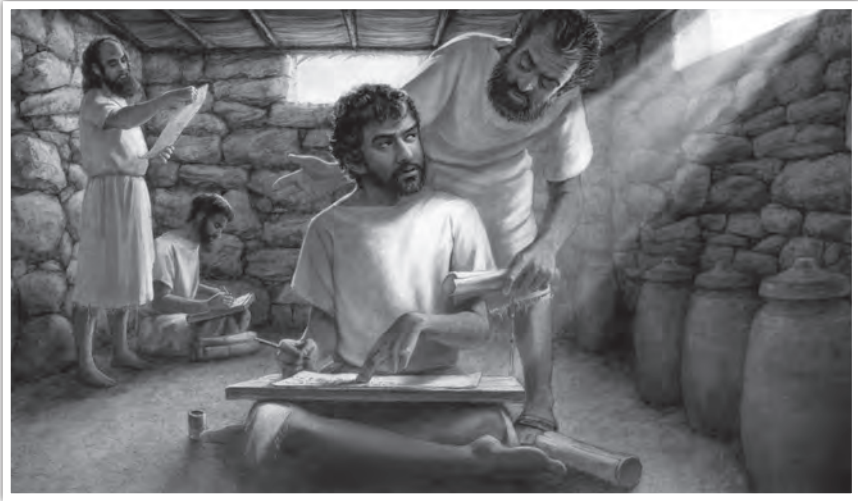
## THE WAY OF THE ESSENES

About 150 years before the birth of Jesus the Messiah, some of God's people — the Essenes — established a community in the Judea Wilderness near the northern end of the Dead Sea. We know it as Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Not all scholars agree that Essenes lived at Qumran, wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, or were the people the scrolls portray, so study and debate about the nature of the community continue. However, given the lack of other significant theories about Qumran, the scrolls, and the Essenes, we will take the position of mainstream Bible scholars that the Qumran ruins are those of the Dead Sea Scroll community that was part of a religious movement that included the Essenes.

In any case, our primary focus is not on the relationship between the people who lived in this community and the Dead Sea Scrolls. We will focus on why this group of God's people went into the desert to live as they did. We want to know the role they played in God's great story of redemption.

Part of the answer is revealed in the Hebrew Bible where the prophets proclaimed God's command for his people to "prepare the way" for his coming. Malachi wrote that God would come after he sent his messenger to prepare his way (Malachi 3:1). The words of Isaiah add further insight: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3).

The Essenes were passionately committed to learning and obeying every word that came from the mouth of God. They knew that God wanted to dwell among them and believed with all their heart, soul,



**THE ESSEnES SPEnT LOnG HOuRS in THE bRuTaL dESERT HEaT WRiTInG On PaRCHMenT. THEiR WRiTInGS in CLud Ed bOOKS fROM THE HEbREW bIBLE, COMMEnTaRiES On THESE bOOKS, and THE REGuLaTiOnS Of THE ESSEnE COMMuniTy.**

and strength that if they prepared the way he would come. So they eagerly anticipated the coming of the Messiah and went into the desert to “prepare the way” for him.

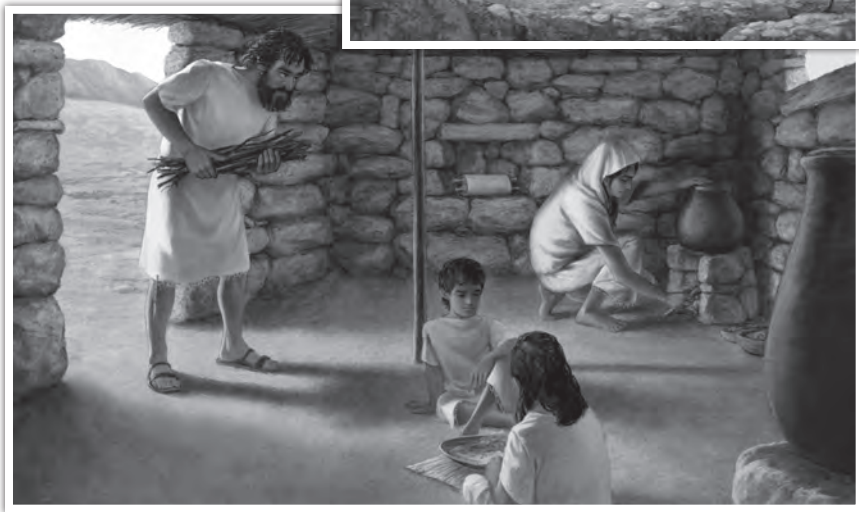
But anyone who has hiked the rugged mountains of the Judea Wilderness will likely ask, “Why did the way for God have to be prepared *in the desert*, especially this one?” Throughout history this wilderness has remained virtually uninhabited. Its rough, steep terrain and lack of water make it unsuitable for good travel routes. Its summer heat frequently exceeds 120 degrees Fahrenheit, hot winds often dry out any remaining moisture, and chilling temperatures set in soon after sunset.

Wouldn’t it have been easier for God’s way to be prepared in the fertile countryside near the Sea of Galilee or the well-watered hillsides near Jerusalem? Why did God choose the desert as the place for his people to prepare for his glory to be revealed? Why did he choose a place where simply surviving is so hard?

Again, part of the answer can be found in the Hebrew Bible. In the exodus story, God worked through his prophet Moses to miraculously bring the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, deliver them from

Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, and lead them into the "vast and dreadful desert" (Deuteronomy 8:15) where he met with them and lived among them for forty years. In the desert, they learned to depend on God and live by his every word. Isolated from the influence of Egyptian and Canaanite cultures, the Israelites became a unified people whom God molded and shaped to be a kingdom of priests who would display his character to the world.

In a sense, the desert is the perfect place for God's people (including us today) to learn to be his people. In the desert, the diversions of a comfortable lifestyle fade into silence, and God's powerful whisper can be heard. In the desert, we can survive — and even thrive — but only by God's faithful provision. In the desert, we learn that it is better to be in the arms of God during tough circumstances than to rest in paradise and forget about him. In the desert, the



**THE ESSENES LEFT UPPER-CLASS LIFESTYLES FOR HUTS IN THE HARSH WILDERNESS OF JUDAEA, A MESSAGE OF THEIR EXTREME DEVOTION TO THE BIBLE. THE ESSENE MEMBERS WERE MALE, HOWEVER THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT THEY LIVED IN THE DESERT WITH THEIR FAMILIES AS THEY PREPARED THE LORD'S WAY OF OBEDIENCE.**

influence of gods of our own making lose their power, and we are drawn into intimate relationship with the one true God.

So we should not be surprised to find the Essenes in the desert. There, for weeks, months, years — and sometimes a lifetime — they exchanged lives of relative comfort for desert hardships in order to live out their passionate commitment to obey every word that came from the mouth of God. There, they created a community isolated from the self-focused, pleasure-seeking Hellenistic society and what had become a corrupt priesthood in Jerusalem. In the desert they dedicated themselves to preparing the way for God.

And out of that same barren desert, the Bible character we know as John the Baptist took up the cry. With the fiery passion of Elijah, he called on sinners to repent and prepare the way for the Lord. And just as the prophets had said, God came as Jesus the Messiah to continue the next chapter in God's great redemptive story.

## Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

### *The Very Words of God*

*A voice of one calling:  
 "In the desert prepare  
     the way for the LORD;  
 make straight in the wilderness  
     a highway for our God.  
 Every valley shall be raised up,  
     every mountain and hill made low;  
 the rough ground shall become level,  
     the rugged places a plain.  
 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
 and all mankind together will see it.  
     For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

**Isaiah 40:3–5**

### **Think a bout it**

Take a few moments to think about your image of what it means to love God and live for him, then describe what you think a life of passionate obedience and faithful devotion to God looks like.

What sacrifices might be required in order to obey God and love him with all our heart, soul, and strength?

### **dVd notes (29 minutes)**

God shapes and molds his people in the desert

The Essene community: learning to live by God's every word

The Essene lifestyle: passionate obedience and intense devotion

## Prepare the way for the Lord

### **dVd discussion (7 minutes)**

1. At times God chose to use harsh desert areas near the Promised Land as a training ground to mold and shape his people for their role in the next chapter of his unfolding story. Like a shepherd, he led the ancient Israelites through the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula to teach them to depend on him and live by his every word. Moses and Elijah spent time with God in the Sinai deserts. Elijah, David, John the Baptist, and Jesus spent time with God in the Judea Wilderness. The Essenes went into that same wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord — to know his words and obediently “walk” his path.

On the map on page 21, locate the Dead Sea, Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem, En Gedi, Qumran, and Jericho. Next locate specific desert areas in the region: Judea Wilderness (Judah Wilderness in Old Testament times), Desert of Zin, Negev, Desert of Paran, Desert of Sin, Desert of Shur. How far was the Judea Wilderness from Jerusalem? From Bethlehem?



2. What new insights into the Essenes and their lifestyle did you discover as you watched the video?



In what ways does the Essenes' level of dedication, commitment, and faithfulness in seeking to obey every word of God make an impact on you?

How does the extent of their personal sacrifice help you to comprehend how much they valued the opportunity to participate in preparing the way for the coming of the Lord?

3. In what way(s) do you think the desert wilderness setting helped to fulfill the deep spiritual commitments that defined the Essene community?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Do you think the Essenes could have accomplished their objectives in a more hospitable environment? Why or why not?

## Small Group bible discovery and discussion (15 minutes)

### *The Path of Obedience*

God brought the ancient Hebrews into the desert to teach them how to obey his words and, by their obedience to his words, to walk in his ways. His words were so important that he instructed Moses to write down all of them in the Torah (Deuteronomy 31:9 - 13). God also instructed his people to return to the desert — either literally or by recalling the Hebrews' time there — in order to remember (obey) his every word and to prepare the way (or path) for his coming.

The Essenes acted on these words. They dedicated themselves to walking the path of obedience. With great passion for obeying God, they willingly endured the desert hardships in order to learn to live by his every word. They had an intense desire to prepare the way for their God in the desert, and their faithful obedience greatly impacted their world. It helped to prepare people to more easily understand and apply the teachings of Jesus and influenced the



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an iMaGE Of THE dESiRE and COMMiTMENt REQuiREd TO WaLK THE  
PaTH Of ObEdiEnCE and "PREPaRE THE Way" fOR GOD.**

theological climate of the Jews for about two hundred years. Let's consider what it means to walk the path of obedience and "prepare the way" for God.

1. The discipline of desert life may seem especially harsh to us. So to better understand the way of the Essenes, it will be helpful to revisit why God allowed the ancient Israelites to experience hard times in the desert. From God's perspective, how important was it — and how great a price was it worth — for his people to learn to live by his every word? (See Deuteronomy 8:2 - 3.)

### **FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING: THE "WAY OF THE LORD"**

Writers of the ancient Hebrew text used concrete language to describe God and the character he expects of his people. They frequently used *halak* ("walk") and *derekh* ("path" or "way") to describe a person's daily life and relationship with God. So rather than saying "Live a good life" as Westerners might say, a writer of the biblical text might say something like "Walk a good walk" or "Walk in the path."

For the Israelites, walking was the primary means of transportation. Sometimes walking was hard and sometimes it was easy. A person could choose one path or another. So the Israelites readily understood what it meant to "walk in the way." Just as we choose a path when we "walk" from one place to another, we choose a lifestyle "path" as we journey through life. The Bible describes an obedient and righteous lifestyle as "God's path" or the "way of the LORD" (Genesis 18:19) and a rebellious and sinful lifestyle as our "own way" (Isaiah 53:6) or "the way of the wicked" (Psalm 1:6).

In addition to meaning "path," *derekh* can refer to a major road or a path that is worn by constant walking. The word is also translated "obedience" and "commands." So when God told his people to walk in his "ways" as he

had taught them, he wanted them to learn to walk his right path or road by obeying his commands. To walk in the *way of the Lord* is to obey his words. God, too, has a *derekh* (Isaiah 40:3). If we desire to walk with God, he wants us to prepare his way — his path — by walking obediently in it. The Essenes went into the desert to prepare the *derekh*, or way, of the Lord. They prepared the way by walking in his path, which they accomplished by obeying his every word.

2. When Moses recorded how God wanted his people to live, he repeatedly told them to walk in the way God had taught them. As you read the following portions of the text, take note of *how* God’s people are to walk in his ways. Then discuss specific examples of what it might look like for God’s people today to follow these instructions.

Deuteronomy Text	What Does It Mean to Walk in God’s Way?
5:32–33	
8:6	
10:12–13	
26:17	
28:1–2, 9	
30:16	



**DATA FILE****The Dead Sea Scrolls: An Accidental Discovery**

In 1947, near an old ruin in the Judea Wilderness at the northern end of the Dead Sea, a Bedouin shepherd noticed a small opening to a cave. After throwing a stone into the opening and hearing pottery breaking, he told two family members about his discovery. The next day, Muhammed edh-Dhib squeezed into the cave, which was littered with broken pottery and held ten intact jars.

Two of the intact jars contained a large scroll and two smaller ones, which Muhammed showed to other shepherds. Little did they know that they had just discovered incredible treasures—the book of Isaiah, the *Manual of Discipline* (describing Qumran community rules), and a commentary on the book of Habakkuk! Muhammed hung the scrolls from his tent pole for several months, then sold them to an antiquities dealer named Kando in Bethlehem.

Kando found the cave, located additional scrolls, and then—after showing them to church officials in Jerusalem—sold the three original scrolls to a Jerusalem antiquities dealer named Samuel for less than one hundred

**THE CaVES Of QuMRan***continued on next page . . .*

dollars. As word of the discovery spread, Professor E. L. Sukenik of Hebrew University purchased Kando's additional scrolls. Meanwhile, Samuel had taken the three scrolls to the United States where Dr. Sukenik's son, Yigael Yadin, purchased the original find for \$250,000. He presented the scrolls to the State of Israel, and they remain in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Bedouin from Muhammed edh-Dhib's tribe located more caves containing additional scrolls and thousands of fragments. An official archaeological investigation was launched to examine the caves and the nearby ruins that scholars recognized as Qumran.

Known today as the Dead Sea Scrolls, these scrolls (mostly scroll fragments) were found in at least eleven caves near the ruins of Qumran. Among the six hundred scrolls represented, scholars have identified copies of all Old Testament books except Esther; Jewish writings from other sources such as the apocryphal book of *Jubilees*; and specific Qumran community writings that included Old Testament commentaries, liturgical writing such as hymns, and rules for community conduct. The most well-known scrolls include the nearly intact Isaiah scroll; the Copper Scroll describing sixty-four locations where temple treasures were hidden (none of which have been found); the Habakkuk commentary in which prophecies of God's judgment are applied to the Romans and those who resisted the Essenes' beliefs; and the *Manual of Discipline* describing Essene community rules.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have profoundly affected our understanding of biblical texts and affirmed the accuracy of the Scriptures. Prior to these discoveries, the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible dated to approximately AD 1000. These scrolls go back beyond 100 BC. Scholars were amazed to find few differences between old and new texts—most involved spelling changes. Truly, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). In addition, the scrolls have provided striking insights into the theological and cultural setting of Jesus' life, the early church, and the history of Judaism.

## **faith Lesson (5 minutes)**

God led the ancient Hebrews into the desert so that they would learn to walk the right paths — his paths — by faithful obedience to his “words.” His inspired words have remained central to the shaping and molding of his people. His words were essential to the walk of the Essenes, they were essential to the walk of Jesus, and they are essential to those of us who seek to follow him today. God’s words are so important that when Jesus faced Satan’s temptations in the desert, he repeatedly said, “It is written” (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10) and then quoted the very words God gave to the ancient Hebrews in the desert!

1. What does Jesus’ response to Satan’s temptations reveal to you about the foundational importance of the lessons of the exodus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Try to imagine how highly Jesus valued God’s words and how deeply committed he was to walk faithfully on God’s path.
  - a. What kind of attitude and energy do you imagine Jesus brought to his study of God’s words? What do you think was foremost in his mind and heart as he studied God’s words and set out to obey them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. Describe what living out a commitment to obeying every word from the mouth of God might have looked like in Jesus’ daily life and what it might look like for you.



3. Consider what you have learned about the fire in the soul of the Essenes that drove them into the desert to make whatever sacrifices necessary to walk with God and obey his word. In what ways might their example inspire you to make similar sacrifices?

What would those sacrifices be?

In what ways would you expect your life to be different if you, following the example of the Essenes and Jesus, devoted yourself to obeying God's Word and walking in his way?

To what extent are you sold out enough to God and to his Word to make the sacrifices required to walk the path of obedience and prepare the way of the Lord?

### **Closing (1 minute)**

Read together Deuteronomy 28:9 - 10: "The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD."

Then pray together, testifying to God and to one another of your desire to walk in God's ways. Ask God for the strength to fulfill your commitment to learn and obey his every word. Ask him to bless your walk so that other people will come to know him.

## **Memorize**

*The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD.*

**Deuteronomy 28:9–10**

# Learning to Walk in the Way of the Lord

*In-Depth Personal Study Sessions*

## day One | The Desert as God's Land

### The Very Words of God

*Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees. . . . He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you.*

*Deuteronomy 8:11, 15–16*

### bible discovery

#### *The Desert: Where God Teaches His People*

God has often used desert settings to test and train, shape and mold his people. In the desert, he spoke to the patriarchs and established his covenant through which the entire world would experience his blessings. In the desert, he established the twelve tribes of Israel, the priesthood, the worship practices, and the annual celebrations of his faithfulness and call to obedience. In the desert, God spoke to his people through Moses — the first great prophet and the prefigurement of the greater Moses to come (Acts 3:17–23).

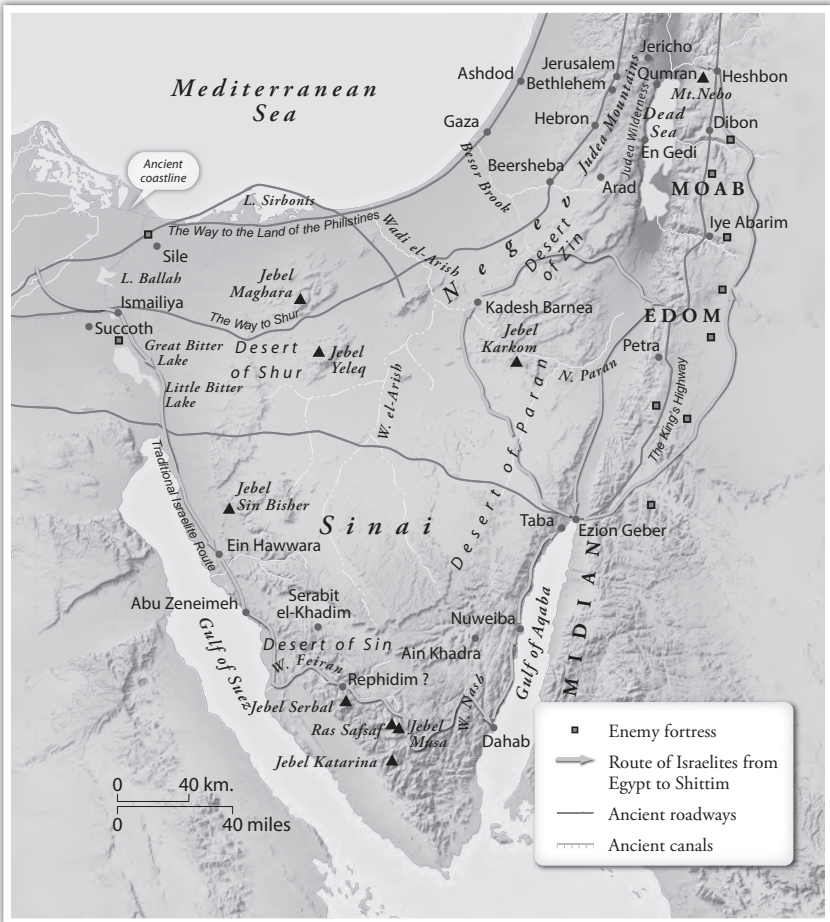
God's ancient people often experienced painful struggle and suffering in the desert, but there they also experienced his faithful provision, mercy, and forgiveness. In the desert they rebelled against God and then turned to him in repentance and obedient submission. There, God kindled within his people the desire to know (experience) him, obey (love) him, and trust him completely as his holy people.



### PROFILE OF DESERT LANDS NEAR AND IN ISRAEL

**Sinai Desert.** This severe desert has intense daytime heat, chilling nights, and little or no rainfall. Travel across it is difficult due to ridges of steep, rocky mountains. Today a few nomads eke out an existence here caring for flocks and trading with farmers from fertile areas, but to support large numbers of people would require outside resources or God’s miraculous provision in order to survive. This desert’s inhospitable conditions are highlighted in Deuteronomy 1:19; 8:15; and Psalm 78:40; 107:4–5.

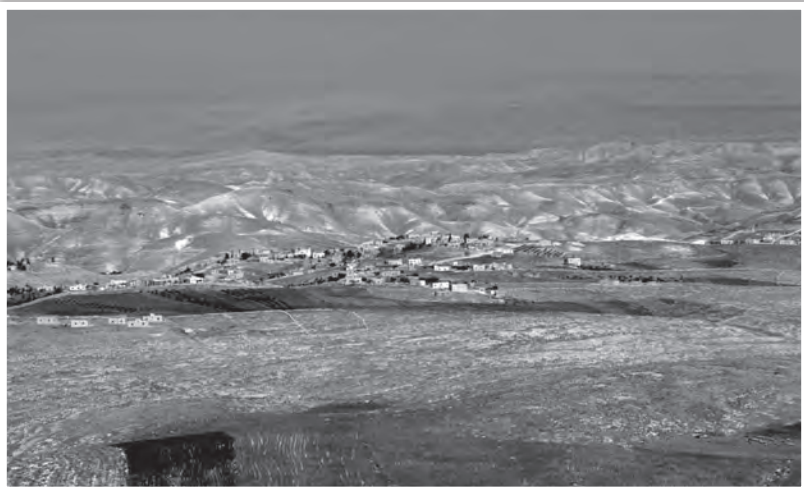
**Negev Desert.** Barely forty miles south of Jerusalem, this desert can be divided into three distinct regions. With rolling hills and broad valleys, the



northern region is good sheep country and produces small amounts of grain during a rain-blessed (eight-inch) year. The central region, including the Zin Wilderness, has rugged canyons and is inhospitable even to nomads. The southern region, called the Wilderness of Paran, is the most barren and may receive only two inches of rainfall annually.

The nomadic patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) lived in the Negev, along the edge of fertile farming areas to the north. They traveled great distances seeking pasture and water for their flocks. The small cities in the north were mostly trading posts and military outposts. Here God “partnered” with Abraham and his family so that “all peoples on earth” would be blessed. (See Genesis 12:1–3; 20:1.)

**Wilderness of Judea.** This desert is on the eastern slope of the Judea Mountains. Roughly ten miles wide and thirty miles long, it begins within a half mile of the well-watered central mountains of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The mountainous terrain descends suddenly from 3,000 feet above sea



**THIS PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN EAST OF BETHLEHEM AT THE VERY WESTERN EDGE OF THE JUDAEA WILDERNESS. THE OLIVE GROVES IN THE FOREGROUND PRODUCE A SIGNIFICANT CROP WITHOUT IRRIGATION. IN THE DISTANCE YOU CAN SEE THE RUGGED HILLS IN THE CENTER OF THIS DESERT.**

*continued on next page . . .*



4. In what ways do you think the Israelites' desert experiences prepared them for their role in God's redemptive plan? (See Deuteronomy 4:1 - 9; Isaiah 43:1, 3, 10 - 12.)

**THINK ABOUT IT**

**The Legacy of the Desert**

The time the Hebrews spent preparing for the exodus and enduring the desert hardships proved pivotal for their religious faith. Despite their struggles and failures, God revealed to them everything they were to believe and practice. Consider the following examples of the practices God established in the desert and the role these practices played in preparing God's people for the Messiah's arrival. Identify as many links as possible between these practices and Jesus and his ministry.

The Text	The Faith Practice	The Text	The Faith Practice
Ex. 12:1 - 20, 43 - 49	Passover laws	Lev. 11	Clean and unclean food
Ex. 13:3 - 10	Feast of Unleavened Bread	Lev. 16	Day of Atonement
Ex. 20:1 - 17	Ten Commandments	Lev. 23:4 - 43	Feasts of the Lord
Ex. 25 - 30	Tabernacle	Lev. 25:1 - 5	Sabbath rest
Lev. 1 - 7	Offerings to God	Num. 6:1 - 21	The Nazirite
Lev. 8; 21; Num. 6:22 - 26	Priests' ordination and rules	Deut. 6:1 - 19	Love God: keep his commandments



5. It is important to remember that the exodus experience was a journey — a time of testing, a time of failure, a time of rebellion, a time of submission, a time of teaching, a time of maturity. As you read the following portions of the text, compare the Israelites' struggles and rebellion with their growing faith and commitment to obey God and walk in all his ways. In each instance, notice how God responded and how his people responded, then describe what you see happening in the relationship between God and his people.

<b>Text</b>	<b>God's Action/ Response</b>	<b>The People's Action/Response</b>	<b>The Nature of the Relationship</b>
Ex. 14:10–14, 26–31			
Ex. 15:22–27			
Ex. 16:1–6, 13–30, 35			
Ex. 17:1–7			
Ex. 19:3–8; 32:1–4			
Ex. 39:32–43; 40:33–38; Num. 9:18–23			
Josh. 1:1–5, 10–11; 3:14–17			

**DID YOU KNOW?****The Three “Lands” of the Exodus**

In a sense, the three geographical regions of the exodus represent the story of all God’s people.

*Egypt was Pharaoh’s land*, where the people were in bondage to the security, food, and moral standards that they thought Pharaoh “provided.”

*The desert was God’s land*, where Israel learned that God alone met all their needs and trained them to live as his treasured possession.

*The Promised Land (Canaan)* was the land God gave to Israel as their inheritance to use in obedience to him rather than trusting in their own strength or the false hope of other gods.

As followers of Jesus, we also share in this story. We, too, have been freed from the bondage of sin, led through difficult “deserts” where we learn to obey and depend on God alone, and received blessings from God that he desires us to use in faithful obedience to him.

**Reflection**

Although we might think of the desert as a place of punishment, God used (and continues to use) it as an ideal place of training and learning. In the desert, God’s people depended on him for their survival; he had their full attention. As they came to know and trust him, he transformed his people from oppressed refugees into a powerful nation that was prepared to live by (obey) his every word in the Promised Land. In fact, most of their later triumphs in God’s service were rooted in their desert education.

Think about your own “desert” experiences — times of pain and struggle. How do you respond when you are in the “desert”?

Do you remember God's faithfulness and patiently wait for him to provide for your needs (food, guidance, comfort, forgiveness)? Or are you more inclined to become bitter?

Do you turn toward God to seek a deeper, more trusting and obedient relationship with him? Or do you try to run away from him or handle the hardship on your own?

Do you consider your response to the "desert" experiences of your life to be a failure? Why or why not?

How might the ways in which God demonstrated his love and faithfulness to the ancient Hebrews in the desert help you to know and trust him — and depend on him alone?

To what extent are you willing to accept God's instruction (to obey his every word) and mature in your faith as the ancient Hebrews did through their desert experience?

## Memorize

*Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees. . . . He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you.*

*Deuteronomy 8:11, 15–16*

## day Two | Remember the Desert

### The Very Words of God

*Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

*Deuteronomy 8:2–3*

### bible discovery

#### ***Remember and Obey the Lessons of the Desert***

It is easy for us to think about the exodus in terms of its impact on the ancient Israelites. In the desert, God revealed his intimate presence to them through fire, cloud, and the thunder of his voice. His awesome miracles — water gushing out of rock, bread and meat from heaven, deliverance from enemies — testified to his love and protection over his beloved people. Of course God wanted them to remember all that he had done and to obey all of his words.

But God’s challenge to “remember” the desert was not just for those who experienced it firsthand. God spoke his words to Moses and established practices for his people to obey in order to ensure that his people, from generation to generation, could in a sense return to the desert. He wanted them to remember — to relive its hardships,

testing, and intimacy with God— so that it would lead them to live by his every word. So what exactly did God want his people to remember about the exodus and their desert experience?

1. Often the Bible refers to positive aspects of what God accomplishes during “desert” experiences. What do the following verses reveal about God and his people — and what future generations were to remember?

Text	Positive Aspects of Desert Experiences— What Are God’s People to Remember?
Deut. 8:2–3	
Ps. 77:11–20	
Ps. 78:52–55	
Ps. 105:37–45	
Jer. 2:1–3	

In what way(s) can remembering these passages and events teach, discipline, and encourage God’s people of all times to trust and obey him, depend on his care and protection, and walk in his ways to become who he has called them to be?

In what ways do these passages speak to you regarding your walk with God and the challenges you face in the “deserts” of your life?

2. The Bible does not ignore the hardships of the desert or the struggles the Hebrews faced. As a people who previously had experienced life only in the fertile, well-watered delta of the Nile River, desert life certainly would have been difficult. But part of remembering must include the difficulties, the people’s unfaithfulness and complaining, their disobedience, and the dreadful consequences of sin. What do the following passages reveal about God and his people — and what future generations were to remember?

Text	Negative Aspects of Desert Experiences — What Are God’s People to Remember?
Deut. 9:7–14	
Deut. 32:7–15, 20–26	
Neh. 9:16–21	
Ps. 106:7–46	
Ezek. 20:6–20	

In what ways does the record of these events — the terrible consequences of sin, God’s punishment for sin, and God’s faithfulness to forgive and restore his people to his path — serve as a warning and incentive for greater faithfulness to future generations of God’s people, including God’s people today?

Which warnings are important for you to take to heart as you face “desert” challenges in your life?

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### What Does It Mean to Remember the Desert?

God's prophets frequently pleaded with his people to recall (Hebrew: *zakar*, meaning to recall and act accordingly) their experiences in the desert. In a sense they were challenging God's people to go back to the desert and rejoice in his ancient story. They wanted God's people to relive the desert experiences in order to remember God's words and rededicate themselves to the obedient walk he had taught them.

Although Western people are good at mental recall, *experiential* remembering is not the norm for us. To put ourselves back into the ancient biblical story requires significant effort. The closest we normally come to such remembering is our practice of the Communion meal Jesus instructed us to keep. When we participate in Communion, we are not just recalling an experience from long ago. We are, in effect, joining Jesus and his disciples at that meal.

One blessing that people who travel to Bible lands often receive is the feeling that they have joined the ancient story as participants, not simply spectators. Becoming participants by walking in God's ways is a crucial aspect of being part of God's redemptive plan. Whether or not we actually travel to Israel and its desert lands, we are to "remember" as if we had been there.

3. What did Moses command the Israelites to do so that future generations would remember the experiences and lessons of the desert and live by God's every word? (See Deuteronomy 6:4 - 12; 11:18 - 21.)

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Never in the Israelites' history has God's presence and daily leading been as clear as it was during the desert exodus — at least not until another “word” came out of the desert (John 1:1 – 10; Luke 4:1 – 14). In order for his people to remember this intimate time of provision, guidance, and protection, God established a yearly festival called Sukkoth (or the Feast of Tabernacles, Leviticus 23:33–43). For eight days, they lived in temporary shelters and read from the Torah as a way to relive the exodus experience.

4. God intended the Hebrews to become his witnesses to the world of his deity, salvation, power, and holiness (Isaiah 43:10 – 12).
  - a. What did God intend the time in the desert to accomplish in his people so that they could fulfill that calling? (See Exodus 19:4 – 6; Leviticus 20:7 – 8, 26; Deuteronomy 7:6 – 9.)
  - b. According to the writers of the Christian text (New Testament), what is the calling of those who follow Jesus? (See 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 3:12 – 13; 1 Peter 2:9.)
  - c. How might remembering (*zakar*) Israel's experiences in the desert and remembering all the words of God help us to walk in his ways and fulfill our calling to be his kingdom of priests to our world? What could you do to join in that story yourself?



## **DID YOU KNOW?**

### **Seeking Refuge in the Desert**

Most of us don't think of the desert as being a place of refuge. But when God's ancient people felt overwhelmed by life's suffering or the ungodliness of their culture, they often remembered how God had faithfully provided in the desert. So they went into the desert to seek him.

Elijah, for example, went there (1 Kings 19). Hosea called God's people to return there (Hosea 2:14–23). David, chosen by God to become Israel's great king and the "father" of the coming Messiah, spent much time in the desert fleeing from King Saul (i.e., 1 Samuel 24; 26). The Essenes went into the desert as a refuge from their culture so that they could regain the holiness of living by God's every word.

In the solitude of the desert, God's people could hear his voice and words. They could experience his provision and protection. They could derive strength and encouragement from remembering the Israelites' desert experiences. They could focus their effort on obeying God's words and getting to know him in a more intimate way.

5. Why, according to 1 Corinthians 10:1 – 11, must we recall the desert experiences of the exodus?

Which of these warnings and examples address where you are in your walk with God?

What might you understand and learn if you were to study these examples and in a sense relive them as a participant rather than a spectator? How might such an experience change your walk with God?

## Reflection

Through the pages of the Bible, the very word of God that has been entrusted to his people (Romans 3:2), we can remember the experiences and the lessons of the exodus. God's Word has the same purpose for his people today that it had for the ancient Hebrews and Jews of Jesus' day — to help us become God's holy people who display him to the world as we live by his every word.

Quoting the words of the prophet Isaiah, Peter reminds us of how essential the Word of God is to our faith:

*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.*

1 Peter 1:23–25

What have you learned through this study about the value of God's words (and your obedience to them) in your walk with God?

In what ways have you been inclined to undervalue God's Word?

In what ways does “remembering” the desert experiences help renew your passion for knowing (experiencing) God’s words and your commitment to live by them?

Which portions of the Bible have you tended to ignore or view as not being essential to your walk with God, and how might your perspective need to change?

If you, like the Essenes, sought refuge in the “desert” in order to rededicate yourself to walking in God’s path, why would the Bible be essential? What books of the Bible do you think would be most essential?

What specific things can you do now to help you know, experience, and learn from God’s Word?

## Memorize

*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

**Romans 15:4**

## day Three | Dedicated to the Text

### The Very Words of God

*Praise be to you, O LORD;  
teach me your decrees.  
With my lips I recount  
all the laws that come from your mouth.  
I rejoice in following your statutes  
as one rejoices in great riches.  
I meditate on your precepts  
and consider your ways.  
I delight in your decrees;  
I will not neglect your word.*

*Psalm 119:12–16*

### bible discovery

#### *Understanding the Desert Essenes*

The Essenes lived in the wilderness at Qumran as a response to God’s command to prepare the way for him in the desert (Isaiah 40:1–8). In the solitude of their desert community, they sought to escape the “noise” of a Hellenistic culture, avoid contact with Gentiles and Hellenistic Jews, and remain untainted by the corrupt ruling temple authorities. In the harsh desert environment, they dedicated themselves to intense study of the Word of God (especially the Torah) and living by his every word. They diligently prepared for the apocalyptic age that they believed would soon arrive to purify God’s people and install new, godly religious leaders.<sup>1</sup>

1. In order to better understand the Essenes’ steadfast commitment to love (obey) God and his Word, we need to realize that religious Jews of the time recognized a connection between the desert and God’s words. It was not unusual for them to expect to receive God’s words in the desert.
  - a. Where did Moses receive God’s words, and what was he to do with them? (See Exodus 19:1–6; Acts 7:37–38.)

- b. When God gave his words to his people through Moses, where were they and what were they to do with them? (See Deuteronomy 4:10 - 14; 6:4 - 9; 11:18 - 20.)
  
  - c. Where did John the Baptist receive God's words, and how did he respond to them and for what purpose? (See Mark 1:2 - 4; Luke 3:2 - 6.)
  
  - d. So if you were a faithful Jew who wanted to obey God and live by his every word, where might you go and how important would it be for you to read, memorize, copy, study, and interpret the Hebrew text?
2. Given this cultural perspective, it is not surprising that the text of Isaiah 40:1 - 8 would "drive" faithful, passionately obedient Jews such as the Essenes into the desert.
    - a. How much of a commitment would it require to make a straight, level path in the desert — especially in the steep mountains of the Judea Wilderness?



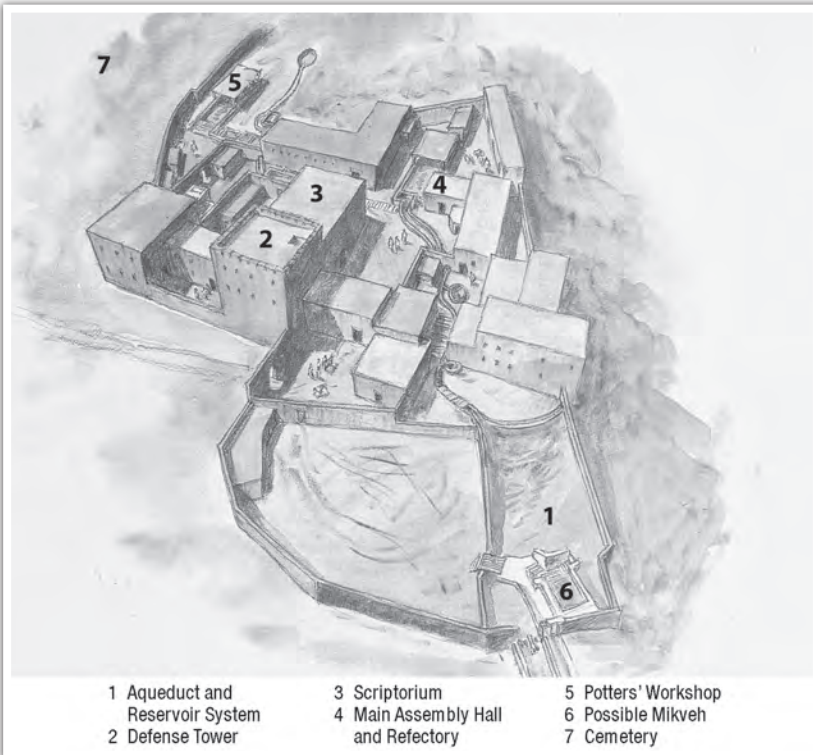
## DATA FILE

### The Community at Qumran

Like many ancient settlements, Qumran was destroyed and rebuilt various times. It was first settled during the Israelite period shortly before the Babylonian captivity (c.a. 600 BC) when it was probably destroyed. It was resettled c.a. 140 BC, during the reign of Hasmonaean king Hyrcanus, but was abandoned after an earthquake (c.a. 31 BC). It became active about the time Jesus was born and remained active until the Roman army destroyed it c.a. AD 68 following the second Jewish revolt.

Qumran's major structures add to our understanding of the community's lifestyle and beliefs. Locate the scriptorium (writing room), *mikveh* (ceremonial or ritual baths, *mikva'ot*, pl.), and refectory (main assembly hall).

**Scriptorium.** Many archaeologists believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written here. Excavation has revealed tables, benches, and inkpots similar to



those used by scribes, as well as basins in which the Essenes could ritualistically wash their hands before and after writing God's sacred name.

**Mikveh.** Several ceremonial or ritual baths had steps that allowed access to the water. New members were cleansed with water in a type of immersion or baptism that apparently symbolized that they were spiritually clean because of their repentance and God's forgiveness. The Essenes' ritual cleansing likely provided the background for the repentance baptism<sup>4</sup> practiced by John the Baptist. (See Matthew 3:6, 11.)

**Refectory.** Archaeologists believe the Essenes practiced a communal meal in this main assembly hall in anticipation of the great banquet of the messianic age. A small water channel entering the sloped floor may have allowed the room to be washed before the meal. Nearby, archaeologists have unearthed a kitchen with five fireplaces and a smaller room containing pieces of more than one thousand pottery jars, dishes, plates, and cups.

It is interesting that archaeologists have not found evidence that community members lived in any of the buildings at Qumran. They may have lived in



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tents or nearby caves. Sparse evidence has been found to prove or disprove either theory. However, Yizhar Hirschfeld of Tel Aviv University recently discovered a settlement of small, stone huts on a steep hillside near En Gedi, about fifteen miles from Qumran. He theorizes (with good support) that a small community like the Essenes, if not actually that group, lived there.

The hut pictured on page 53 at least illustrates the harsh conditions under which the Essenes lived and studied the Scripture. Its rock walls were originally three feet thick and slightly more than four feet high. The floor was beaten clay, and there is a small fire pit in the corner. The roof was probably a tent or a frame covered by palm branches. Although it provided shade, this hut would have been dreadfully hot during the day and cold at night. It illustrates the Essenes' devotion to God and his Word. They willingly gave up comfortable lifestyles in order to live in desert huts such as this because God commanded: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD" (Isaiah 40:3).

3. Some interpretations, theological concepts, and practices that came out of the Essenes' intense devotion and study of the Hebrew Bible gradually found their way into Jewish culture. So their experience with God's words in the desert helped to shape and prepare first-century Jews to better understand the messages of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles. Consider the following examples:
  - a. The Essenes interpreted prophetic Scriptures as being fulfilled by the events of their day, which differed significantly from other religious movements of their time. Why was acceptance, or at least knowledge, of this concept important to God's plan of redemption? (See Matthew 3:1 - 3; Luke 4:14 - 21.)



## Reflection

The Essenes at Qumran had a deep commitment to obey God and his Word. They moved to the desert, away from cultural pleasures and pursuits, and dedicated themselves to living by God's words and preparing his way in the desert. They studied God's words and copied books of the Bible. In fact, more copies of the Psalms, many of which David wrote during his time in the Judea Wilderness, have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls than any other book (thirty-six scrolls).

For a few moments at least, imagine yourself as a participant in the Essenes' desert community and consider what Psalm 119:9 - 16 would mean to you:

*How can a young man keep his way pure?  
By living according to your word.  
I seek you with all my heart;  
do not let me stray from your commands.  
I have hidden your word in my heart  
that I might not sin against you.  
Praise be to you, O LORD;  
teach me your decrees.  
With my lips I recount  
all the laws that come from your mouth.  
I rejoice in following your statutes  
as one rejoices in great riches.  
I meditate on your precepts  
and consider your ways.  
I delight in your decrees;  
I will not neglect your word.*

In what ways would the psalmist's experience with God's words teach and encourage you as you sought to walk in God's ways?

In what ways would this psalm take you back to the experiences of the Israelites in the desert, where God gave his words (his laws or commands) to his people?

How would being part of a community that had a passion to diligently study and live by God's words help you to know his words and obey them?

Now fast-forward to the present. In what ways does this psalm speak to your life, your passion to know God's words, and your commitment to walk with him?

What specific changes might you need to make in your lifestyle in order to know and delight in the Word of God and faithfully obey his commands in all areas of your life?

## **Memorize**

*Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.*

*Joshua 1:8*

## DATA FILE

### A Brief History of the Essenes

In about 331 BC, Alexander the Great's armies swept through Israel and continued his campaign to bring Greek culture to every part of the known world. The Hellenistic culture deeply offended and disturbed devout Jews, but other Jews were seduced by this secular worldview that glorified the human being through philosophy, athletics, religion, and the arts.

Initially, Alexander's successors — the Ptolemy family from Egypt — allowed significant religious freedom for the Jews. During their rule, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the translation we know as the *Septuagint*. Later, the Seleucids — Syria's Greek dynasty — brought Israel into their empire. They aggressively promoted Greek culture, defiled the temple in Jerusalem with pigs' blood, and dedicated it to their god, Zeus. They banned the Torah, the Sabbath observance, and circumcision. To violate these bans meant death. They even sold the position of high priest.

This was too much for the faithful Jews. Led by the Hasmonaean family (also known as the Maccabees), they revolted and drove out the pagans. For the first time in nearly five hundred years, the Jews were independent. The temple was cleansed and rededicated, and worship of Yahweh resumed. Their great victory became the focus of the Feast of Dedication, known today as Hanukkah (John 10:22).

The Hasmonaean descendants, however, became thoroughly Hellenistic. They openly flaunted pagan practices and fought bitterly with followers of the Torah. This conflict led to the beginning of several sects or "schools" including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and Herodians.

The Essenes established a religious movement dedicated to the restoration of the true worship of God. Their mission was to prepare the way for the Lord, so they sought to obey his every word and keep their hearts and minds pure and their practices obedient. They established many practices that set the stage for Jesus' arrival and teaching. Although small in number, they exerted significant influence on the religious community of their day.

In 68 AD, the Romans destroyed the Essene community at Qumran. It is possible that the Essenes placed their sacred scrolls in jars and hid them in nearby caves as the Romans approached. Although this community has disappeared from history, its legacy is only now being realized.

## day four | A Passion for Obedience

### The Very Words of God

*And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?*

*Deuteronomy 10:12–13*

### bible discovery

#### **No Sacrifice Is Too Great**

The Essenes' passion to walk in God's ways (path) by obeying his every word was exemplary. They willingly sacrificed the comforts of life and the pleasures of culture in order to live in the desert wilderness and focus their full attention on knowing and obeying God's words. But they had a problem in the desert. In order to fulfill their interpretation of God's commands, they needed "living" water — fresh, free-flowing water from a spring, stream, or rain — to use in their purification rituals.

How would they obtain such water in the desert? It wouldn't be easy! But they were committed to doing whatever was required — to raise up every valley and level every mountain — to prepare a way for God (Isaiah 40:3–4). So they undertook an ambitious construction project. Using only hand tools, they created catch basins, built dams, chiseled a tunnel, and made an aqueduct on a steep, rocky mountainside to carry runoff from occasional floods into their settlement. The evidence of their hard labor still testifies to their intense,

sacrificial devotion to obey God. Consider the words of God that inspired such passionate obedience among the Essenes.

1. The “way of the Lord” is obedience to his commands, and the Essenes studied the Hebrew Scriptures in order to know how to obey God’s commands completely — to walk (Hebrew: *balak*, “walk,” “live,” “obey”) in God’s “way” or “path” (Hebrew: *derekb*). Take some time to read and meditate on the following passages of Scripture about God and obeying his words. As you “take in” God’s words, how much passion and love for walking in God’s ways do they inspire in you?

Text	My Insights, My Response
Deut. 5:28–33	
Deut. 10:12–13	
Deut. 13:4	
Deut. 26:16–17	
Deut. 30:15–16	
Ps. 25:4–5, 8–10	
Hos. 14:9	

2. God desires more from his people than intellectually *knowing* the right path. The practical application of the way or path of God — the text of the Hebrew Bible — is to walk obediently in God’s way. This kind of faith is not only a set of

beliefs and doctrines; it is God's words lived out in daily life. What kind of effort does God desire his people to expend in obeying his words? (See Deuteronomy 10:12; Psalm 15:1 - 4; 119:30 - 32; Isaiah 57:14 - 15.)

What impact do you think that these and similar passages of Scripture had on the Essenes' commitment to work diligently and put extreme effort into all aspects of their walk with God?

If you had been an Essene — tired, sweaty, dirty, thirsty, hot from laboring in the desert's burning sun — which of these passages would have been going through your mind as you chiseled rock or carried stones to build a dam in order to bring living water into your community?

## **DATA FILE**

### **“Living” Water in the Desert**

The Essenes followed a holy God and were committed to obeying all of his commands. They recognized that participating in sin would make them spiritually unclean, so they went into the desert in order to focus on living the righteous life God desired. They also followed the Torah commands for ritual cleansing of the body following contact with something unclean (body fluid, disease, contact with a corpse, etc.).

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### ***Mikveh* at Qumran**

In their community, they regularly practiced a ritual bath—a type of immersion or baptism—that symbolized the purification of heart and soul God provided as a result of a person’s repentance and commitment to obey his words. The ritual cleansing was done in a *mikveh* (*mikva’ot*, pl.). According to the Essenes’ interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, the water needed to be “living” water—fresh, free-flowing water from a spring, stream, or rain.

There is no “living” water near Qumran. The Essenes could have transported water by donkey or cart from the springs of Ein Feshka several miles away, but it would not have been “living” water. Instead of compromising their beliefs and practices, the Essenes exerted great effort to capture flood waters in the mountains above their settlement and direct it into their community.

Using only hand tools, the Essenes created catch basins and a dam in a steep, rocky mountainside where runoff from occasional floods cascaded over a cliff. They tunneled through more than one hundred feet of dolomite (hard limestone) to bring that water to the cliff’s edge, then directed it through more than a thousand feet of plaster-coated channels and aqueducts until it reached their settlement and ran into reservoirs and *midva’ot*.

Just imagine how difficult it was to bring “living” water into Qumran. Imagine the time spent laboring under the burning, relentless sun. Imagine the hours

spent on hands and knees to chip out a tunnel. Imagine the fatigue of moving rocks by hand to build dams and channels. And the Essenes did all of it because they lived by a passionate commitment to obey God—to prepare his path in the desert—with all their heart, soul, and strength.



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## Reflection

It is important to remember that the Essenes did not make this passionate commitment to earn salvation. Rather, like their Hebrew ancestors at Mount Sinai, obedience was a response to God's deliverance. Jesus will teach the same lesson (John 14:15). As you reflect on what the Essenes sacrificed in order to fulfill their passionate commitment to obey every word from the mouth of God, please allow me (Ray) to share some of the impact their example has had on me.

It is hard to describe how harsh the conditions are in the Judea Wilderness. The scorching sun, the intense heat, the dust, and the scorpions make this a hostile place. A part of me is amazed that the Essenes left behind the comfort and luxury of a Hellenistic culture in order to endure the hardships of the desert so that they could live the righteous, obedient life God desires. Their level of devotion to God and to his words inspires me.

For a long time I struggled with the Essenes' devotion to the Bible in comparison to mine. I prayed often for God to give me their fire and level of devotion. Then a Jewish friend told me I had it backward! "Read Jeremiah 20:9," he said. I read it, and I understood.

I had wanted the fire in me to bring discipline and power to my reading and study of the Bible, but the fire is in the Bible! The fire is in God's words. So I began to read and study much more. I may not yet have the level of devotion of the Essenes, but the fire is burning.

Do you, like the Essenes, have "God's fire in your bones"?

How much do you want that fire?

What are you willing to do to "fan the flames"?

As you devote yourself to reading and studying God's Word, when have you felt the "fire" igniting in your heart?

What was it like, and what did it compel you to do?

In what ways has the Essenes' extreme obedience and devotion to God and his words, as demonstrated in part by their industrious water project, influenced your commitment to knowing and obeying the Word of God in all areas of life?

How willing are you to sacrifice your relatively comfortable lifestyle in order to carry out the mission — in order to build the "tunnel" — God has for you?

What is the "tunnel" that God may be calling you to build as an act of faithful obedience to him?

What personal cost are you willing to bear in order to build the "tunnel" that will impact your culture for God?

## day five | Live the Text and Wait for God's Glory

### The Very Words of God

*When the time had fully come, God sent his Son.*

*Galatians 4:4*

### bible discovery

#### *The Revelation of God's Glory Comes*

The Essenes took to heart God's command in Isaiah 40 and went into the desert. They separated themselves from the prevailing Hellenistic culture in order to know and worship God. Their devotion led to new ways of living the text and preparing God's way by obeying his words in all aspects of life. Knowing that God had promised to come and walk among his people, they diligently worked to prepare the "way," and eagerly awaited the day when his glory would be revealed. And just as God had promised, his glory was revealed at the coming of Jesus the Messiah!

1. In light of what you have learned through this session of studies, reread Isaiah 40:1 - 11 and consider the Essenes' example of heartfelt commitment to "live the text."
  - a. Scholars believe this reference to Jerusalem's suffering to be Assyria's destruction of Israel (722 BC) or the Babylonian captivity (586 BC), which resulted from the unwillingness of God's people to "walk his path." What insight into God's character might the Essenes have gained from this text, and how might it have inspired their devotion to walk in God's ways?

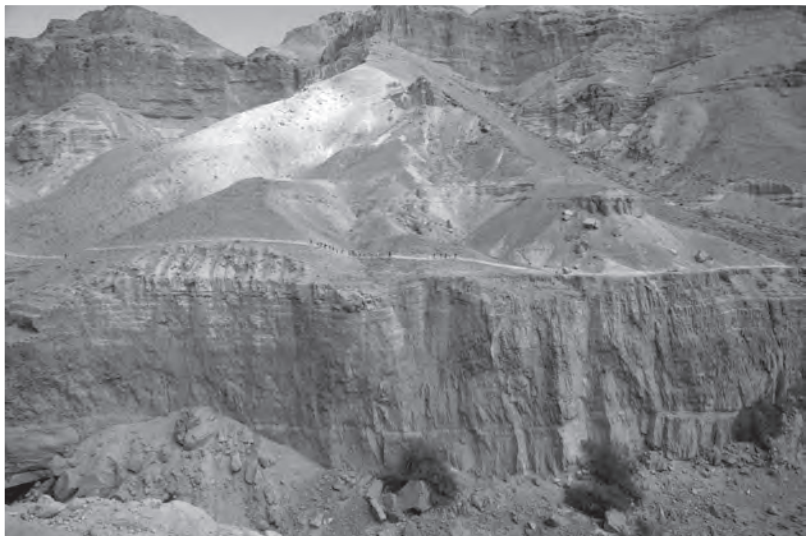
- b. In the ancient world, it was customary to provide a special road for the coming of a king. How enormous a job is it to make a road fit for a king? What kind of commitment and effort does it require — especially if the path is to be prepared in the desert? How might that explain the effort the Essenes expended to obey God’s words completely?
  
  - c. Why do you think the Essenes believed that the way to prepare God’s highway was to study God’s Word and passionately obey it?
  
  - d. The amazing promise in Isaiah’s prophecy is that when the path was prepared — by repentance and rededication to righteous living — the presence of the Lord would appear! What does the Essenes’ willingness to cast aside everything and devote themselves to knowing and living the text reveal about the depth of their desire to be with their God?
2. In what ways had the “glory of the LORD” been revealed to God’s people in the past, and what did it represent? (See Exodus 24:15 - 17; 25:22; 40:34 - 35; Leviticus 9:23 - 24; 2 Chronicles 5:13 - 14; 7:1 - 3.)



## THINK ABOUT IT

### Prepare the Way By Living It!

There are few flat and open places in the Judea Wilderness, so it would take an enormous effort to make a way—a highway—here. The height of the mountains, the depth of the valleys, and the harsh terrain and desert environment made preparing a path for God in the Judea Wilderness a monumental task.



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Clearly God's challenge to his ancient people—and to his people today—is to expend superhuman effort in our desire to walk in God's path. Yet because the Christian text emphasizes salvation by grace (Acts 15:11; Ephesians 2:8–9) for which we praise God, the call for his people to be passionately committed to walking his path by obeying him is sometimes muted. All too often, we study the path—define it, proof-text it, enshrine it in creeds and statements of faith, teach it, memorize it, and even separate from other people over it—but put little effort into *living* that path.

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Jesus and his disciples knew that genuine faith demands more than knowing about the path. It demands *halakah*—obediently walking in God’s way, practically applying the path of God in daily life (Matthew 7:21; John 14:15; James 2:14–26). God is not satisfied when we simply know the truth. After all, even the evil one knows it! God desires us to live the truth in our daily walk—to walk as Jesus walked (1 John 2:3–6).

4. The oldest Greek manuscripts of the Christian Bible (New Testament) often reflect the idea of preparing the way of the Lord, as the Essenes did, by “walking” (obeying) his word on the “path” or “road” of daily life. How do the following passages impress on you the importance of walking in the way of God? (See Matthew 7:13–14; John 8:12; Acts 18:24–26; 24:14–16; 1 John 1:5–7; 2:6.)

## Reflection

The Essenes’ commitment to the Scriptures is astounding. Rarely in the history of God’s people have they left comfortable lives to live in difficult conditions in order to copy, study, interpret, and seek to obey the Word of God and prepare the way for his coming. The Essenes did not interpret all of Scripture correctly, but their devotion to God’s ways and words should be an example to all of us.

The prophet Isaiah, whose message drove the Essenes to labor diligently in the desert preparing the path for God, also has a compelling message for those of us who follow Jesus today. Isaiah 2:1–3 foretells that during the last days people from all nations will go to God’s mountain, saying, “He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” Just as the Essenes had a role in preparing the way for the Messiah because they obediently lived for God, those of

us who have a personal relationship with God through Jesus must be fully committed to walking God's path so that we can fulfill our role in his unfolding story of redemption.

We are called to prepare the way so that people who are living in spiritual darkness will be drawn to God and his Word. Is this a compelling motivation for you? Why or why not?

How carefully are you seeking to obey God in every area of your life each day?

How passionately do you devote yourself to in-depth study of God's Word? Are you willing to stay up late or get up early just to learn the words of God?

How hard will you work to keep your heart and mind pure before God and your lifestyle obedient to his commands?

You have a path to prepare! God wants all the world to know him, and you are his witness. So go, live by his words and walk in his ways.

## Memorize

*This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."*

**Jeremiah 6:16**