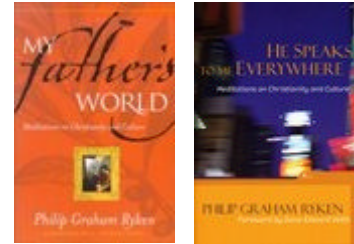


Window on the World

Window on the World is our weekly opportunity to examine our culture from the vantage point of biblical Christianity. Here you will find the text from Dr. Ryken's "Window on the World" talks from Tenth Presbyterian Church's evening service. If you missed one or wanted to send a copy to a friend, you will be able to find them here. Please note: there is no "Window on the World" on third Sundays, selected other Sundays, or in July and August.

Windows on the World before September 2005 are available in an older format. [Click here](#). Many of these are now published in [My Father's World: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2002) and in [He Speaks to Me Everywhere: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2004) by Philip Graham Ryken.



Surviving in the Desert

Dr. Philip Ryken



Series:

General

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Full Text:

When I was in Phoenix a few months ago, I had the opportunity to see the extraordinary plant collection at Arizona's Desert Botanical Garden (www.dbg.org). The outdoor gardens there feature one of the world's finest and most diverse collections of succulent plants, including many rare varieties that are native to the Sonoran Desert of the American Southwest.

The plants I saw were dazzling in their beauty and astonishing in their variety. There were thousands of different species of cactus, from the "old man" cactus with its wispy white beard to the "pipe organ" cactus that I was tempted to bring home for Dr. Paul Jones, our church music director. There were big cacti and little cacti, green cacti and purple cacti, plus variety after variety of prickly pear.

There were other plants too, each with its own unique way of collecting and storing moisture. The creosote bush is common to the desert southwest and well known for its musty, oily smell. Each scrubby bush has thousands of tiny leaves, which are ideally suited to the desert because they minimize the loss of moisture.

The mesquite tree is equally common, but has an entirely different method for retaining water. The mesquite has a single taproot—as thick as the tree's trunk—that drives deep into the hard desert ground. Typically this taproot goes 30 feet down, but some mesquite trees have been known to have taproots over a hundred feet deep.

Then there is the *palo verde* tree. With its shimmering green bark, it looks like a tree from Rivendell or some other realm inhabited by elves. The green trunk that gives *palo verde* its Spanish name is a sign that photosynthesis is taking place in the very bark of the tree. Like the creosote bush, *palo verde* has tiny green leaves that limit the loss of moisture and provide a cool canopy of shade for its trunk and branches. Unlike mesquite, it has a vast network of little roots that run out in every direction.

The same is true of the mighty *saguaro*. With its towering trunk and uplifted arms, the *saguaro* is the giant of the Sonoran Desert—the famous cactus that shows up in all the popular drawings of the American West. The roots of the *saguaro* are relatively shallow, but they go out from the main plant for some 30 feet in every direction. These roots put the plant on solid footing by grabbing hold of desert rocks. When it rains, the cactus sends out additional roots, almost like the capillaries that branch out from the blood vessels in the human body. The *saguaro* sucks up as much water as it can, filling up—accordion-like—with as many as a thousand gallons of water. Following a good rainfall the cactus will flower, and then bear fruit.

Some desert plants bloom much less frequently. The Arizona Queen of the Night, for example, only blooms once a year. Most of the time it looks more or less like a dead stick, but on some warm night in June it bursts into flower, before wilting by dawn. Then there is the *agave*, or “century plant,” which sends off an enormous stalk and then blooms only once before it dies.

As you may have noticed, talking about desert plants inevitably means talking about water. The desert climate is always arid, and plants can go for months and months without getting any fresh rainfall. But they still need water to live, and God has made each desert plant ideally suited to survive and thrive in its native desert habitat. The tour guides like to talk about evolutionary adaptations, but to me the plants seemed deliberately designed.

We too have been designed to soak up and to retain life-giving water. This is necessary for our survival because sometimes we feel like we are living in a spiritual desert. We find little joy in worship, have little enthusiasm for prayer, and show little zeal for bearing witness to the grace that God has given us in Jesus Christ. At such times it is all we can do to gasp the prayer that David spoke when he was wandering in the Judean wilderness: “O God, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps. 63:1).

In our desperate thirst, God gives us the cool water of his grace, refreshing us from his word and satisfying us in Jesus. Anytime we feel like we are dying in a spiritual desert, what we need to do—very simply—is go back to the Bible and back to Jesus in prayer, asking him to satisfy our thirsty souls. Remember what the Bible says about a person who takes his delight in the word of God, and who studies it night and day: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither” (Ps. 1:3).

On my way out of the Desert Botanical Garden, I wrote down a thought-provoking quotation from a sign along the path: “The most significant lesson that desert dwellers can learn . . . is to regard themselves not as exiles from some better place, but as people at home in an environment to which life can be adjusted” (Forrest Shreve, *The Cactus and Its Home*, 1931).

As the wilderness people of God, living on the desert side of the Promised Land, we *do* need to regard ourselves as exiles from a better place. This earthly wilderness is not our home. But we can survive and even thrive in this dry and thirsty place, if only we will drink deeply from the Living Word that is an oasis for the soul. And we can bear fruit for God here—not just once a year, or once a century, but even in the desert times of the Christian life.