

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**Hebrews 3:7-19**

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Among the most amazing feats in history, none rival the Exodus.

The odds stacked against the Jews escaping Egypt were astronomical: A rag-tag rabble of slave, without weapons or military training, were led by an 80 year-old shepherd. Standing against them was a global superpower, boasting the greatest military machine in history, led by a god-king who would rather die than let those slaves go free.

Yet these slaves escaped Egypt while the world's greatest army drowned in the Red Sea. But if their chances of getting out of Egypt were improbable, their odds of surviving the Sinai were impossible.

The size of that exodus was immense. The Scriptures say that there were more than 600,000 fighting men. Add their wives, assume four children per family, plus Egyptians who went with them, and we can safely estimate that there were as many as 3.6 million people in this monumental trek.

If each family, together with their livestock, were allotted 50x50 feet apiece the total space needed for the Jewish encampment would be 10 ½ square miles. If people and livestock were lined up fifty abreast, the length of their line would stretch back 100 miles. Moving at a normal pace, the Israelites would take 50 hours to march past the same point!

It would require the equivalent of 160 railroad box cars of food and 1,000 tank cars of water every day for that hoard to survive trackless deserts and mountain ranges as barren as a moonscape where temperatures soared to 110° Fahrenheit during the day and plunged below freezing at night.

Yet, in the most desolate wilderness on planet earth, God supernaturally met the astronomical needs of 3.6 million people not just *one* day—but *every* day for 40 years until they got to the Promised Land. In spite of all that, no people ever worried or complained more than those Jews. The book of Hebrews talks about the restlessness that afflicted them in the wilderness. It seems that of God's people in every age struggle to rest in him. No matter how many blessings he showers on us, we still worry about tomorrow. In Hebrews 4:9-11 God calls worriers and whiners to enter *his* rest:

“There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Anyone who enters that rest also rests from his own work, just as God rested from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest...”

Life is a faith journey. For the Jews it was traveling from Egypt to a Promised Land. For Covenant it is a journey from where we have been to where we are going as a church. Every one of us is on a pilgrimage from where God found us to where he is taking us. We need to remember this:

**Between where we've been  
and where we are going,  
God calls us to rest in him.**

Are you resting in him today? In Matthew 11:28&29 Jesus says,

“Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

When Jesus speaks of taking up a yoke, he is talking about oxen: beasts of burden who labor from dawn to dusk, pulling heavy loads. All of us in this fallen world are like oxen. As hard as we plow forward we are never satisfied with our lot in life. We work hard to please ourselves, but we never feel fulfilled. We wear ourselves out performing for others, but we never do enough to make them happy. Nor are we satisfied with what they do for us. Above all, we can never do enough to please a holy God. Nothing and nobody is ever quite good enough in a fallen world. Before she committed suicide, Marilyn Monroe said to actor Peter Lawford, “As hard as I have tried, I can’t think of a single person I’ve ever really pleased.” Jesus was right: like oxen, we pull heavy burdens in this life.

But Jesus speaks of his yoke I think about that heavy crossbeam he lugged on his shoulders to the place of his crucifixion. Later he was nailed to that beam, and on his shoulders was laid the cosmic weight of all our sins and all their consequences. He took the infinite burden of God’s wrath and pulled it like an ox into the bottomless pit hell. He alone carried the weight of our redemption. He alone pleased a holy God. He alone got rid of the load of sin, guilt, and worry that we carry. On the Cross he cried, “It is finished!” And yet we still think we have to pull the load.

He says, “Take my yoke...and you will find rest...” He is saying, “Take up my cross.” In other words, die to self. Die to striving to make things happen. Live your life in Jesus. Let him plot your future and pull your load. The Sabbath rest that Hebrews 4:9 is talking about is at the very heart of the

gospel: we trust fully in his finished work not only for our salvation, but for every step of our life on this earth.

We are all on a journey from where we have been to where we are going. It's risky to move forward. Some of you are facing areas in your life where you know that you have to move forward. You can move forward with a sense of peace and confidence. God has called us to a Sabbath Rest in Christ. These are the truths the writer of Hebrews would want us to grasp:

**1. Watch out for the lure of Egypt. Don't look back with nostalgia for the security of the past.** Hebrews 3:7-9 says this about those ancient Jews in their Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land:

“So, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, and for forty years saw what I did...’”

There are three phases in the journey for God's people: 1) **Getting out of Egypt.** For 400 years the Jews had labored in slavery, crying out to God for deliverance. They experienced no greater joy than when they stood on the other side of the Red Sea, free from bondage. 2) **Crossing the desert.** There was no way they could avoid it. They abhorred their past and longed for their promised future. But standing betwixt and between the two was a desert crossing. Verse 8 calls it “the time of testing.” When they crossed the Red Sea they weren't yet ready for Canaan. God had to grow them up. 3) **The Promised Land.** I Corinthians 2:9 says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” Things too wonderful to imagine await us in the future, but we aren't ready yet. We still have some testing times ahead to grow us up.

When the testing times come, we want to go back to Egypt. In the desert the Jews constantly complained, “It was better in Egypt.” Life in Egypt was miserable, but at least it was predictable. The most dangerous time for any dysfunctional family is when they start the healing process. Everything is turned upside down. Nobody was happy before, but at least they knew how to operate in the old dysfunctional system. The alcoholic dad gets sober, and suddenly the whole family faces a crisis of how to function in the new dynamic. They secretly wish things could be the way they used to be.

Churches are often dysfunctional families. Sometimes when a church takes off in a new and exciting way, old members complain that they miss the way

things used to be. It might have been a church going nowhere, but at least it was predictable. This week every one of us will face temptations to return to some old sin, or habit, or dysfunctional way of thinking. Egypt always beckons in tough times. We are tempted to exchange an adventure with God for the security of the familiar—even if it leads to bondage. Freedom is a risky business. Change takes us to uncomfortable places. But, unless we venture out into the desert with God, we will never find our Promised Land.

**2. Embrace the challenge of the desert crossing. Most worry is present deserts is *wasted* worry.** The desert between Egypt and the Promised Land is a faith adventure. There will be plenty of reasons to worry and complain. God is testing us. He is pushing us to give up our striving and enter his Sabbath Rest. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” And what is faith? Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Faith is to believe in God even when we don’t see him; to rest in his promises even when we don’t see them being fulfilled; to rest in his presence even when we don’t feel it; to obey him even when it doesn’t pay immediate dividends.

In verse 8 he says, “...do not harden your hearts...” Keep your hearts soft and pliable. Don’t become cynics. In verse 2 we read about the “rebellion” when God’s people, according to verse 3 “tested and tried” God. The writer is quoting from Psalm 95. There were three times of rebellion in the desert:

### ***Massah: the place of Grumbling***

You can read about it in Exodus 17:1-7. God called that place *Massah* which means “the place of testing.” 3.6 million people and their livestock were dying of thirst. They complained bitterly against God, and picked up rocks to stone Moses. In the midst of that uproar, God supernaturally brought a river of water out of a huge rock. He changed the name of that place to *Meribah* which means “the place of quarreling and complaining.” Hebrews 3:8 says, “Don’t harden your hearts...” It is a hard heart that complains and grumbles against a gracious God. If you think about it, every time we complain about anything—whether it’s our husband, boss, or life’s circumstances—we are really grumbling against God. The Scripture is clear: whiners and complainers test God’s patience. St. Paul said in Philippians 4:12, “I have learned the secret of being content in every situation...” And what is that secret? It is to rest in God’s sovereignty. Paul says in Romans 8:28, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Grumbling is an outward manifestation of a heart that’s not at rest with God.

## ***Kadesh: the place of Doubt***

You can read about the second desert place in Numbers 12:26-14:4. It was at a place called *Kadesh*, at the entrance to the Promised Land. Twelve spies were sent into Canaan. They came back with a mixed report: "The land is flowing with milk and honey, but it is also populated by giants." God's people had two choices: either they could focus on the promise of the land, or fixate on the giants. Actually they had a third choice: they could focus on their God. The bigger the giants became in their imagination, the smaller their God became in their hearts. We need to constantly rest in the promise of Scripture: "Greater is He in you than he who is in the world." (I Jn. 4:4) Doubt and worry go hand in hand. Doubt is also a mark of a hard heart. At *Kadesh* it led to open rebellion. The people refused to enter the land. As a result they wandered in the wilderness for 40 more years. In Hebrews 3:11, God says of these doubters, "So I declared on an oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

## ***Meribah: the place of Impatience***

After *Kadesh* they returned to *Massah* whose name had been changed to *Meribah*. You can read about it in Numbers 20:1-13. Again the people grumbled about their thirst. This time Moses lost his patience with their whining and complaining. God told him to speak to the rock. Instead, in a fit of impatience, he hit it with his stick. After years of listening to these whiners, Moses finally had a gutful of their complaints. His heart hardened, and he rebelled. Anxiety and dissatisfaction always leads to a hard heart: whether it is in the church, or in an unhappy marriage, or a dysfunctional family, or any other difficulty. Hardness of heart always leads to a rebellious spirit. Impatience is a sign that we are not resting in God. Invariably impatience leads to taking matters into our own hands. To rid us of our grumbling, doubt, and impatience God takes us into impossible desert situations so that we might be forced to rest in him.

**3. Keep focused on the promise of Canaan. Weary feet need hearts at rest.** As we move forward, both as individuals facing trying times and as a church building a *Bridge to the Future*, here are some travel tips:

### **1) Halfway is not for the Half-hearted**

Verse 12 says, "See to it brothers that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the Living God." The writer of Hebrews is calling us to focus on God, because the journey is beyond our capacity. It

will bring out the worst in our “sinful, unbelieving hearts.” Our thirst in the desert, our doubt in the face of giants, and our impatience when we’ve finally had a gutful will harden our hearts and pull us away from the Living God. Halfway is always toughest. Any runner will tell you that the hardest part of any race is the middle. Every project is toughest when the excitement of beginning morphs into the long haul of reality. Almost always, people give up halfway home. Verse 12 says that no matter how hard it gets, don’t stop! There’s a Promised Land for those who persevere.

## **2) Keep your eyes focused in the Guide**

Verse 12 says that we shouldn’t turn away “from the Living God.” We are too easily distracted by deserts, and giants, and the thirst that gnaws at body and soul. We get fixated on problems, dissatisfied with results, and disillusioned with people. We grouse to ourselves, complain to others, and lay awake worrying. No wonder we’re so weary. At the root of weariness (even for those of us wear out serving God) is the fact that we have taken our eyes off of the One who promises to supply all our needs.

## **3) When the going gets tough, the tough go *together***

In verse 13 we read, “So encourage one another daily as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” We are on this journey together. It is a fact of life, that one complainer or doubter has more influence over a group’s attitude than a hundred positive people. If one person falls into sin, it affects the whole body. Hardness of heart and rebellion is contagious. We can’t sit idly by when a brother or sister spins deceit: “...we’ve got to get back to Egypt...” or “...we’re all going to die in this desert...” or “...the giants are too big...” Verse 13 says that we need to *encourage* each other: in other words we need to put courage in one another. When people worry, or grumble, or get impatient, or rebel against God we need to point them in the right direction lest their hearts harden and the rest of us go down with them.

## **4) Nostalgia is only a mirage**

Verse 13 ends with this phrase: “...sin’s deceitfulness...” There was a constant deceit in the wilderness: if we go back to Egypt, things will be better. We like to think that things *used* to be better. So we return to the old sins, habits, traditions, and ways of thinking. But the good old days never were as good as we imagine. St. Peter says that if we go back to our sinful past we will be like a dog returning to his vomit (2 Pet. 2:22). The food of

Egypt never tastes as good as we remember. It goes down far better than it comes up. We have no choice in the Christian life: we have to keep moving forward. As tough as the journey “betwixt and between” it’s far better than what we left behind, and leads to something far better than we can imagine.

### **5) Conquerors never lose Confidence**

Verse 14 says, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end and the confidence we had at first.” What is the great confidence of our Faith? Romans 2:29 states it: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” I John 3:2 says, “What we will be has not yet been made known, but we know: when we see him we shall be like him.” Those that God has justified, he will glorify! Don’t lose that confidence in Christ! The desert in between may be tough, but you can’t give up the Promised Land for that deceit called Egypt. We are destined (no, we are predestined) to be more than conquerors in Christ!

### **6) Compilable hearts rest even in risky times**

We can’t let our disappointments and troubles harden our hearts. God says of those rebellions worriers and whiners in verse 11, “They shall never enter *my* rest.” Some Bible commentators interpret that to mean that they would never enter the Promised Land. I don’t agree with that interpretation. The Promised Land wasn’t anymore a place of rest than the wilderness. Once they got into Canaan there were still giants to be faced and battles to be won. Canaan wasn’t going to be any easier than the desert or Egypt. God here is talking about soul rest. That kind of rest can be found in Egypt, or in the Sinai desert, in the conflicts in Canaan. You can be fighting the battle of your life, and still resting in God. You can be busier than you have ever been in your life, and still be worry-free. Everything can be falling apart, but you can face it with a smile and an “all-thing-work-together-for-good” attitude because you’ve given the load to Jesus.

This church has left where it’s been, and we are on a faith journey to where we will be in the future. Are there deserts yet to cross, and giants yet to face? You bet! But we can move forward with Sabbath hearts knowing that the battle is his to win and ours to enjoy!