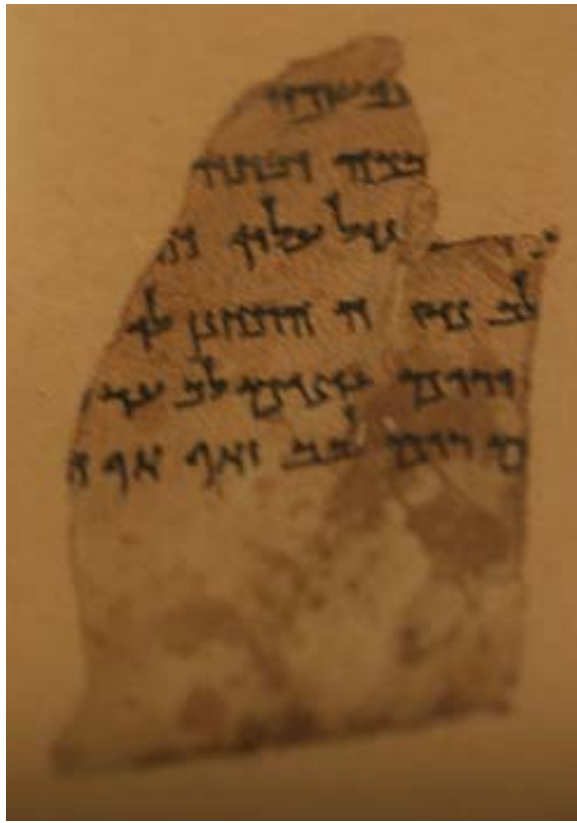


The Covenant Pulpit



EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

“RESENTMENT”
EXODUS 17 & NUMBERS 20

Covenant Presbyterian Church
6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108
(239) 597-3464
www.covenantnaples.com

No one would have guessed that Leonard Holt was a ticking time bomb. He had worked as a lab technician at the same Pennsylvania paper mill for nineteen years. He was respected as a Boy Scout leader, devoted father, member of the fire brigade, and regular churchgoer.

But on a cold October morning, Leonard stuffed a 45 automatic and a Smith and Wesson .38 in his coat pockets. After driving his station wagon to the mill, he stalked the shop, shooting with calculated frenzy as he executed people he had known for more than fifteen years.

His community was left bewildered that a mild-mannered man could become a mass murderer. The investigation that followed pieced together a profile of seething resentment. Several of his victims had been promoted over him while he remained mired in the same position. Some of his car pool had quit riding with him because of his reckless driving. A neighbor had been punched by Holt after they argued over a fallen tree. Resentment had been building up for years until it exploded in rage. Three words appeared beneath his picture in *Time* magazine:

RESPONSIBLE, RESPECTFUL—AND RESENTFUL.

Leonard Holt was a forerunner in what has become an all-too-common phenomenon of rage turning college dorms, shopping malls, school playgrounds, and even churches into killing fields. We have invented a whole new lexicon of words to describe it: coming unhinged; going ballistic; doing a Columbine; going postal.

We may look with horror at suicide bombers in the Middle East. But every day in America, ticking time bombs walk among us. They may not explode into a killing spree. But the marks of their rage are found in battered children, broken marriages, and souls withered by ugly, caustic words. No wonder Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "Nothing on earth consumes a person more quickly than the passion of resentment."

Resentment is anger stuffed inside. Christians are especially susceptible to this. We pretend that everything is okay, masking our hurt with gooey "god" talk. But pretending never heals pain. We may think that these smoldering embers of resentment are under control. But it only takes a sudden breeze to fan them into a flash fire. A woman confessed to evangelist Billy Sunday, "I have a terrible temper, but it only lasts a few seconds." He replied, "Madam, a shotgun blast lasts but a moment, but it leaves behind a lifetime of ruin."

Even prophets like Moses can go postal. For more than 30 years he was a paragon of respectability. When everyone around him was coming

unhinged, he stayed calm. He endured the insufferable grousing, grumbling, and complaining of 3.6 million crybabies. He couldn't remember how times they threatened to stone him to death. Even his own family conspired against him. Yet he handled it all with uncommon grace and unflinching resolve. It was no exaggeration for Numbers 12:3 to record, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone on the face of the earth." But the line under Leonard Holt's picture in *Time* magazine could have been inscribed under Moses' photo:

RESPONSIBLE, RESPECTFUL—AND RESENTFUL.

For years Moses stuffed his anger. When they came to yet another desert, the rabble began to complain again. The old man despised the whining of these sniveling ingrates. You would think that, after 30 years of never-ending miracles, they'd quit their whining. God patiently whispered to Moses in Numbers 20:8, "Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water..." Instead Moses went ballistic. We read in Numbers 20:10, "Moses said to them, 'Listen you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff..."

On the surface, it was another miracle. In fact, it was an ugly display of resentment gone wild. Moses may have been hitting the rock, but he really wanted to whack his parishioners. He might as well have been Leonard Holt shooting people in the shop. How seriously does God take Moses' outburst of rage? He says in Numbers 20:12, "Because you did not trust me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

Wait a minute! Doesn't this seem monstrously unfair? For 70 years Moses has been faithful to God. By faith he walked away from a palace to identify with slave people. By faith he endured 40 years of lonely exile. By faith he stood up to the Pharaoh and freed 3.6 million slaves. For 30 years his unflinching faith led them across a string of deserts. And now, he forfeits his dream while those ingrates get to waltz right into the Promised Land?

God's harsh judgment on Moses has puzzled saints and down through the ages. There must be something far deeper than an outburst of rage. Today I am going to unlock the mystery. What Moses did really *is* a big deal. In fact, it cuts the very heart out of the gospel. How we handle resentment says everything about whether or not we have grasped the meaning of our salvation in Christ. There are few things more critical for our faith journey than the eighth principle of the Exodus:

**Nothing on earth consumes the promise of life
more quickly than the passion of resentment.**

May I speak to you frankly? No one ever dreamed that Leonard Holt had a problem with resentment. And nobody dreams that *you* do either.

At least not yet...

Why is it so essential that you deal immediately with resentment? Hebrews 12:15 says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." The writer warns us that bitterness causes us to miss the grace of God. Grace and resentment cannot occupy the same space. That's why Ephesians 4:26&27 says, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. And do not give the devil a foothold." Our ancient Enemy only needs an inch of resentment to establish a beachhead in our lives. What starts out as a root of bitterness will grow into a tangle that strangles grace and suffocates hearts. If we are going to prune those roots of resentment, we need these 4 transforming truths:

1. The road out of the desert goes *through* the desert.

We have repeated this principle more than any other: the road to your Promised Land leads through the desert. God could have taken his people on the easy, short route down along the Mediterranean Sea. But he needed to organize a mob into a nation, and grow moral pygmies into spiritual giants. He needs to do the same to each of us. So he strips us of everything we depended on in Egypt and leads us out into deserts where we are agonizingly thirsty and hungry. There God provides "bread from heaven." Only by feeding on Jesus do we become increasingly like him. After all (as the old saying goes), "You are what you eat."

But, though the Israelites needed the desert, they didn't have to stay there 40 years. They had a chance to go into the Promised Land earlier, but they didn't possess the faith to possess the land. That forced them to wander through even more deserts. If we don't learn from our desert experiences, God has more deserts waiting for us. His perfecting grace will not let go until it has accomplished its purpose to conform us to the image of Christ.

In today's episode of Exodus we see two desert experiences separated by 30 years. The first is in Exodus 17. The Israelites have only been following the Lord for three months. They are still baby believers. You are not surprised when they grumbled and cried out in verse 3, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children die of thirst?" But you would expect better thirty years later in Numbers 20. Instead you read in verse 4&5, "Why did you bring the Lord's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place...?" In the years since their first desert, they had

seen at least 10,900 miracles. But their complaint is almost verbatim what it was 30 years earlier. Their deserts have taught them nothing.

What is it that God wants to teach both Moses and his people? It is the same thing he wants to teach all of us: **amazing grace**. Let me ask you a question: If grace is at the heart of our faith, then what is the most mature way we can show it? I would answer with one word: **gratitude**. The word gratitude comes from the Latin word *gratia* which means grace. Grace is getting what I don't deserve. Gratitude is being thankful for it. These Israeli slaves got what they didn't deserve: freedom and a Promised Land. They were fed every day in the desert. They were given one of the greatest leaders the world has ever seen. But they constantly criticized Moses. The truth is: they were criticizing the Lord who gave them their leader. When they complained about the desert, they were complaining about the God who led them there. Instead of saying *grace* over their daily manna, they groused about how boring it was.

And Moses had the same problem. God had showered him with grace too. God rescued him from exile and gave him the opportunity to lead history's greatest faith adventure. He performed spectacular miracles, talked to God face-to-face, watched the Ten Commandments etched in stone, designed the tabernacle, wrote the first five books of the Bible, and shepherded God's people. But he too was ungrateful. The people rejected him, and he resented them. They may have made their complaints to one another in public, but he repeatedly complained about them to God in private..

In Numbers 20:10 he screams, "Listen you rebels..." He might as well be saying, "I hate you all!" He is cursing the very people that God has given to him as a gift. He doesn't even realize that he is repudiating the grace of God. So are we when we lash out at loved ones or complain about circumstances.

Are you a complainer—ungrateful for your spouse, your parents or children, your circumstances, your church, or the way God has wired you? You might as well scream at heaven, "God, you made a mistake!" The desert is full of sourpuss Christians. Do you want to get out of the desert? In the words of an old gospel hymn, you need to "count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessings, see what God has done." Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus "...for the joy set before him endured the Cross..." I believe that that we will only be conformed to the image of Christ when we are grateful carrying a cross in a desert.

2. Bring your resentments to the Rock.

In Exodus 17:3 the people lash out in resentment against Moses: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt...?" And in Exodus 17:4 Moses lashes out in

resentment against them: "What am I to do with these people?" But there is a big difference. They carry their complaints to one another. Moses carries his complaints to God in prayer. Are you harboring some resentment? Take it to the Lord, and wrestle with him until the bitterness is gone.

Moses cries out, "How am I going to find water for these people?" God answers in verse five, "Go to the rock." In verse six he says, "Strike the rock and water will come out of it for my people." So Moses took his staff and struck the rock, and water came gushing out. This was pure grace on God's part. Neither Moses nor his people deserved it. Notice in verse seven that Moses called that place *Massah* which in Hebrew literally means, "The place of testing." There ungrateful people tested the patience and grace of God.

Do you see the gospel in at *Massah*? If you look carefully you will see the Cross. All through the Bible God is referred to as "the rock of our salvation." Jesus is again and again referred to as the Rock. The hymn writer calls him the "Rock of Ages." Jesus came to earth because we have tested God with our sins. We had turned Eden into a desert of *Massah*. We hungered and thirsted for righteousness, but there was none to be found—not within us or anywhere else in this sin-sick world. So the Rock came to a hill called Golgotha. There he was hung on a tree. Our sins were placed on him. And a Holy God exacted justice. He beat Jesus as surely as Moses struck that rock at *Massah*. The prophet Isaiah said, "He was wounded for our transgressions." One of his executioners jammed a spear into his side, and blood and water came gushing out. Jesus knew that was going to happen when he poured wine into the cup at the Passover Feast the night before. He said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you."

At the rock at *Massah* God is giving a preview of the crucifixion. This is God's unmerited favor. Resentful and ungrateful people are given water that gushes from Christ's wounded side. They are forgiven because he has been struck and stricken in their place. Do you have any resentments? Bring them to the Rock. Lay them on Jesus. He alone bears the guilt, endures the punishment, and washes everything new.

3. But whatever you do, don't hit the Rock twice.

Fast forward 30 years to the rock in another desert. In Numbers 20 the people are again testing God. They still haven't grasped the grace of God, and Moses has lost sight of it. The spirit of Leonard Holt is stalking the Israeli camp. Some 30 years before, God told Moses to strike the rock with his staff. But this time, in verse eight, he says, "Speak to the rock..."

Moses' staff is a symbol of God's power and judgment. Moses' staff turns into a snake that devours. It spawns plagues. It brings the seas crashing

down on Pharaoh's army. When he struck the rock 30 years earlier, it was a picture of God's judgment on sin striking Jesus on the Cross. But that only happened once in history. When Jesus cried, "It is finished!" God's judgment on his people was spent. He was punished for every sin you will ever commit, and every sin that any other believer commits against you. The Rock never needs to be struck again! We don't have to beat ourselves up anymore, or beat up those who have hurt us. We no longer have to punish those who have hurt us by nursing grudges against them. To do so denies the Cross. Vengeance is mine!" says the Lord, and he has beaten his Only Begotten Son with the rod of his vengeance. So now we only have to speak to the Rock. Just a simple prayer, and, along with salvation his grace will give us everything else we need. But when Moses hit the Rock twice, he cut the very heart out of the gospel of grace. Here's how he did it:

1) Disobedience denies love. God commanded one way, Moses did it another. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:12) He repeated, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." (John 15:10) At the heart of grace is submission. There would be grace if Jesus didn't submit to the will of his Father. When Moses pulled his staff back in disobedience to hit the rock, grace had already fled. It was gone the moment he cursed his people with, "You rebels..." Grace and disobedience are diametrically opposed. When a pastor doesn't submit to God's holy commands, when mom and dad don't submit to one another in love, and God's people don't live in obedience to Christ, grace is hidden from those watching. Moses did a terrible thing to God's people that day!

2) A double-hit denies God's grace. Again, Christ died once and for all on that Cross. When he cried, "It is finished!" it was finished. It was a day of unspeakable violence for Christ. Isaiah 53 uses pungent words to describe the brutality of his crucifixion: "sorrows; stricken; smitten; afflicted; pierced; crushed; wounded; oppressed; cut off." His punishment was enough for us, and everyone else. When Moses lashes out at the people, "You rebels..." and you get angry and lash out with piercing, caustic words at those who have hurt you, isn't it hitting Jesus again? Didn't Jesus already take enough verbal abuse for us all? When you get bitter at yourself and others and spend time beating yourself or them up in your mind, aren't you trying to re-crucify Jesus all over again? A second hit is redundant. It cuts the heart out of grace. Moses didn't need to hit the rock again to get water. He was hitting the rock because he wanted to hit those who had deeply hurt him. When we punish ourselves or others, we have denied the work of the Cross and have thrown the gospel overboard. Moses did a terrible thing that day.

3) Woe to the leader who brings confusion to grace. I want you to see something else that Moses does in his anger. He cries out in Numbers 20:10, "Listen you rebels, must *we* bring water out of this rock?" Did you see that

pronoun *we*? Moses is saying that it is his work that brings water from the rock, rather than God's miraculous power. Woe to spiritual leaders who lift themselves up in the place of Christ, who promote their own talents or achievements, or act like they are indispensable to God's work. Sometimes, like Moses, we get resentful at slackers. We feel like we are carrying the whole load in the church, or on the job, or in our marriage. Like Moses, we resentfully cry out, "Do I have to do it all myself?" The minute those thoughts come to mind, we forget that Jesus is the rock of our salvation. His grace accomplishes everything. There's no grace unless we can say "To God alone be the glory!" Moses did a terrible thing when he tried to steal God's glory and confused all of his followers about the meaning of grace.

4) Resentment is always aimed at the Rock. When Moses whacked the rock, he was really hitting God. The truth is: he was angry at God for putting him in one bad situation after another over the years. He was angry at God for making him a nursemaid for a bunch of rebels. He was wishing that he never got the assignment of taking these ingrates to the Promised Land. So God said, "Okay, I'll grant your wish. You aren't going in to the Land." Beware of ingratitude. If we complain long enough, God might just remove the glory from the church we groused about, or the pastor we picked at, or the spouse that could never satisfy us, or the children that were never good enough, or the job that was never good enough, or even a Promised Land that has become a burden. Indeed, Moses did a terrible thing that day when he raised his stick against the God of goodness and grace.

When you stumble at the rock, you can still stand on the mountain.

Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a Living God." God says to Moses in Numbers 20:10, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring the community into the land I give them." God is holy. He will not allow us to drag his grace through the filth of our disobedience and ingratitude. There is nothing sadder than Moses going alone up to Mount Nebo to die. It breaks my heart to see him standing alone, watching his people going into the Promised Land without him. If we leave the story there, we have forgotten the meaning of grace at the Rock.

Grace was also sufficient for Moses. 1400 years later, Moses did enter the Promised Land. Matthew 18 tells us that he stood on a mountain in Israel with Jesus. Jesus was transfigured in glory, and a glorified Moses and Elijah stood there with him. Standing there in glory with Jesus was better than entering in with Joshua and those rebels. No sin is so great that we can't take it to the rock of our salvation and continue on to the Promised Land!