

04- The Meribah Experience

In Exodus 7-13 Moses appears before Pharaoh, performs signs and ten plagues to motivate Pharaoh to release the Hebrews. The full sequence of Moses returning from Midian to appear before Pharaoh, perform the ten plagues and lead the Hebrews to the Red Sea takes a year or less.

The Hebrews had a promise found in Genesis 15:1-16 given by the Lord to their forefather Abraham around 2000 BC that they would be given the land of Canaan in the future:

“Then the Lord said to Abram,

“Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

- Genesis 15:13-16

When the Lord appeared to Moses at the burning bush in Midian around 1446 BC the Lord restated this promise and told Moses it was time to bring this promise to pass:

“Then the Lord said,

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.”

- Exodus 3:7-8

When Moses arrived in Egypt a couple of weeks later he spoke to the Hebrews and their elders telling them the Lord himself had said it was time for the Lord to fulfill this promise:

“Say therefore to the people of Israel,

‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.”

- Exodus 6:6-8

Moses shared these promises with the Hebrew people before he had spoken to Pharaoh and before the plagues had begun. But, because of years of oppression and the constant bombardment the cultural influence of Egypt the Hebrew people could not understand or trust the Word of God. The very next verse says that when Moses spoke these promises to the Hebrew people they would not listen because of “their broken spirit and harsh slavery.”

“Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses,
because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.”

- Exodus 6:9

These people’s souls had been overrun and taken captive by Egyptian thought. The fortress of their soul had become a stronghold of the world and was void of the knowledge of God.

The next seven chapters (Exodus 7-13) cover about 5-12 months and describe the Lord’s mighty works for his broken, faithless people in Egypt. Moses speaks to Pharaoh, preforms signs and calls down ten plagues that paralyze the power Pharaoh, shut down Egyptian culture and prepare his people for deliverance.

The night of the final plague before Pharaoh released the Hebrews Moses instituted the Passover meal and reiterated the ancient promises again to the Hebrew people who now had seen firsthand the works of the Lord on their behalf:

“Then Moses said to the people,

“Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the Lord brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. And when the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month.”

- Exodus 13:3-5

The next day the Exodus occurs and the Lord begins to lead the Hebrews through the wilderness to the Promised Land with his presence in a visible pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire at night. The Hebrews had seen the works of God and his faithfulness to his Word.

Immediately in the next chapter (Exodus 14) the Hebrews are trapped at the Red Sea and Pharaoh has organized his military forces to pursue them, but the Lord parts the waters of the Red Sea so his people can escape before the waters return to drown the Egyptian forces. Another mighty work had been seen and experienced by the Hebrew congregation. The community celebrates with a time of fellowship and a song service which is recorded in the next chapter. Following this praise and worship service is the account in chapter 16 of the Lord providing supernatural food (manna) for the Hebrew community in what otherwise would be a barren wilderness without food. With this community fellowship meal, all is good with the people of the Lord.

All is good, that is, until chapter 17 where it becomes apparent that even though the Israelites have seen God’s faithful works as he leads them to the fulfillment of the promises in his Word, they do not know his ways or have faith in him. Though they see God’s works, they do not know, understand or trust the Lord’s ways. Thus proving the point that besides the fact that supernatural signs and miracles do not build faith in people, neither do community gatherings, song services or potluck meals communicate the knowledge of God to build faith in the believer.

In 1445, in Exodus 17:1-7 Israel camps at Rephidim, but there is no water to drink. The biblical text says, “the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ ”

“Therefore the people quarreled (*rib* = “strive”, “contend”) with Moses and said,

‘Give us water to drink.’

And Moses said to them,

‘Why do you quarrel (*rib* = “strive”, “contend”) with me?

Why do you test (*nasah* = “to test”, “to try”) the Lord?’

But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said,

‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’ ”

- Exodus 17:2-3

The word “quarrel” is the word *rib* in the Hebrew. This word is used to refer to an ordinary argument, but it also is used to refer to a legal lawsuit being filed. (Dt. 25:1) This “quarreling” with Moses may well have been the forming of a pretrial which was a practice well documented in the Ancient Near East during this time period. If Moses, the accused in this developing courtroom battle, does not meet the legal demand, such as is made here – “Give us water to drink,” – the accused is taken to trial before the judicial elders of the people. Moses is being legally accused of breaching his agreement with the people that he promised to lead through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The charges brought before the Hebrew elders might even involve attempted murder – “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us?”

Moses counters this legal threat by asking them, “Why do you test the Lord?” It was not Moses who made the promise to Abraham in 2000 BC and it was not Moses who came to Egypt with ten plagues promising to fulfill his promises. The originator and fulfiller of the promises was the Lord. So, the people were putting the Lord on trial. The Hebrews were “testing” or “trying” the Lord in their own legal case.

Then, the Lord dismisses the entire legal case by having Moses provide water while the potential jury, the judicial elders, stand right up front to witness the evidence of the Lord’s faithfulness to his promises.

“So Moses cried to the Lord,

‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’

And the Lord said to Moses,

‘Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel,

and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb,

and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.’

And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

Moses called the place “Massah” and “Meribah” because of the quarreling of the people and their testing of the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

“(Moses) called the name of the place Massah and Meribah,
because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying,
“Is the LORD among us or not?”

- Exodus 17:7

The two Hebrew words that Moses used to name this physical location where the Israelites rebelled against the Lord were:

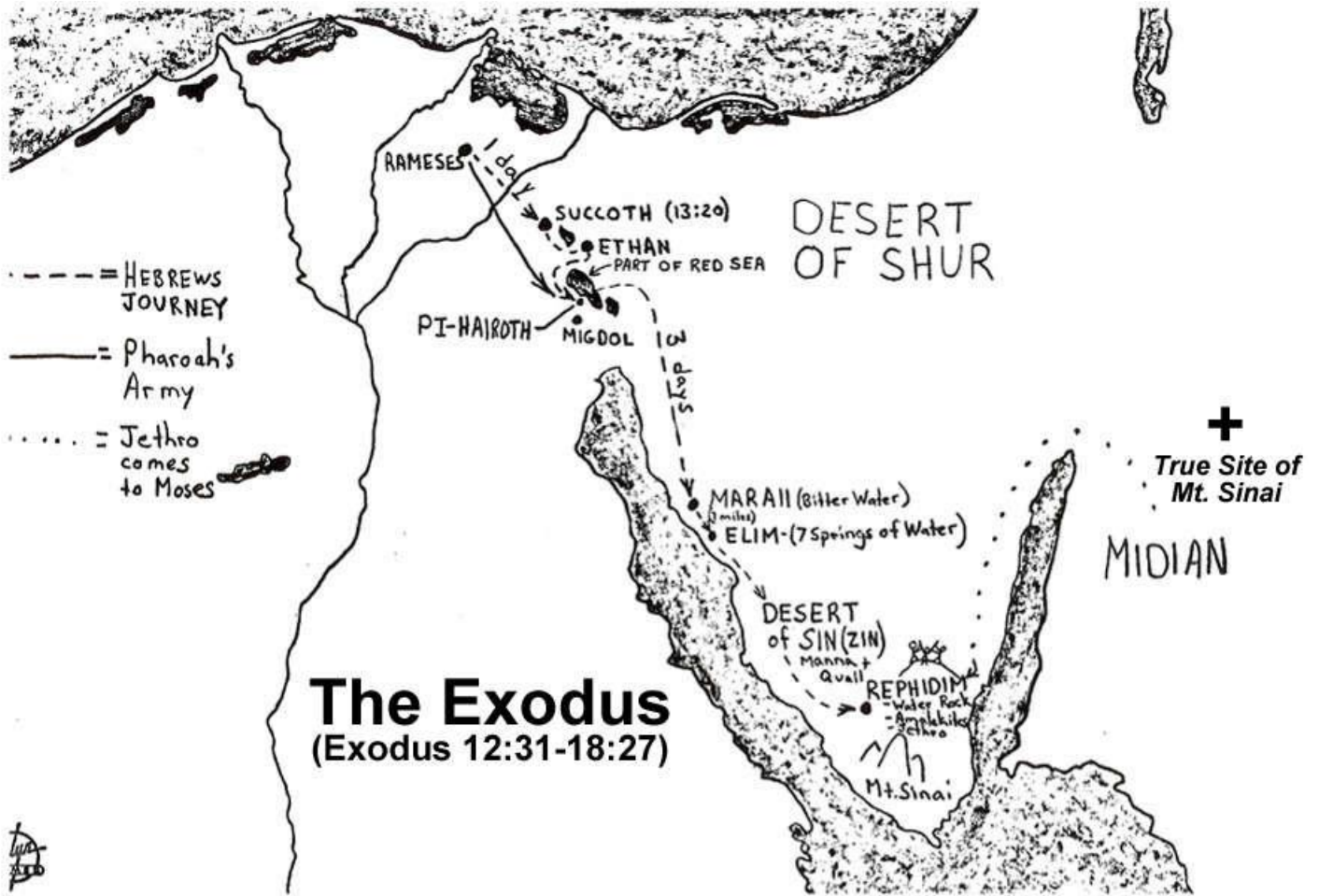
One, *Massah* which comes from the Hebrew word *nash* which means “to test” or “to try”. At Massah during their first year in the wilderness the Israelites “tested” the Lord’s faithfulness and put God on “trial” for breaking his covenant with them.

Two, *Meribah* which means “place of strife”. The location name of *Meribah* comes from the Hebrew word *rib* which, as is mentioned above, means “to strive” and “to contend”, and it is used as a technical legal term. It was at this location where the Israelites began legal proceedings against Moses, the Lord’s chosen leader.

At the end of this trial the Lord proved his faithfulness when Moses struck the rock where the Lord was standing with the same staff he had used to strike the Nile turning it to blood and death. (Exodus 7:20) Moses used the staff of judgment to strike the rock upon which the Lord was standing to provide water for the covenant people to drink.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ...
‘Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile,
and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb,
and you shall strike the rock,
and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.’
And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.”

- Exodus 17:6



Exodus 17:1-7 - after leaving the Desert of Sin the Israelites were camped at Rephidim, but they had no water for 3 days. Moses called the place Massah and Meribah. Here Moses was told to strike the rock.

Over the next forty years in the wilderness traveling and camping with the Lord the Israelites had daily needs provided and they were delivered from every difficulty and conflict. They were led by the Lord. During this forty year wilderness experience the Israelites saw the works of the Lord. But, also the Israelites were taught the knowledge of God by Moses on a daily basis. This fact is repeated in the following verses which cover 40 years in the wilderness where Moses continually taught the wilderness generation the Word of God – Exodus 20:9; Leviticus 1:1; 4:1; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 15:1; 18:1; 19:1; 20:1; 23:1; 24:1; 25:1; 27:1; Numbers 5:1, 5, 11; 6:1, 11:24; 14:39; 15:1; 15:37; 17:1; 19:1. The subjects Moses covered in his instruction were vast in that forty year period. The subjects Moses taught included the nature of God, the plans of God, the moral code of God, sins against God, sacrifices to restore fellowship with God, the governmental laws for the nation of God, the priestly rituals that would daily remind the people of the ways of God and the festivals that would encourage the people of their future with God. This and much more concerning the knowledge of God was faithfully communicated to the wilderness generation for forty years by Moses.

A great illustration of the extensiveness of Moses teaching is recorded after the wilderness generation had all died and Moses held one last national teaching session for the younger second generation in the year 1405 BC. This historic class is recorded in Deuteronomy 31-32 and Moses' notes for this class were set to music and sung by Moses to the second generation so that they might easily remember and teach it to their children. Here's the beginning of this class:

“And the Lord said to Moses,...

‘Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel.

Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel.

For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey,
which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat,
they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant.’

– Deuteronomy 31:19-20 (Deuteronomy 31:19-32:47)

In spite of the fact Moses had spent forty years teaching the wilderness generation, they did not learn or understand the knowledge of God. Their hearts were hard and rebellious. They did not inhale the words of God, so they could not exhale faith in God. So, when they were given the same “No Water” test in 1405 BC that they had been given forty years earlier in 1445 BC they failed the exam miserably with the same hardness and bitterness towards Moses and the Lord. In fact, their statements indicate their souls were delusional with worldly thinking that suppressed the knowledge of God since they remember Egypt, the land of their oppression, abuse and slavery, as good but they identify their resting place with the Lord as “this evil place”. They remember the land of their slavery as the good land with grain, figs, vines, pomegranates and water, but the wilderness, where the Lord has daily manifested God's works, Words and ways, as evil. They were calling evil good, and good evil. The account of this event is recorded in Numbers 20:1-13:

“And the people of Israel, the whole congregation,
came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month,
and the people stayed in Kadesh...

Now there was no water for the congregation.

And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron.

And **the people quarreled with Moses** and said,

“Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord!

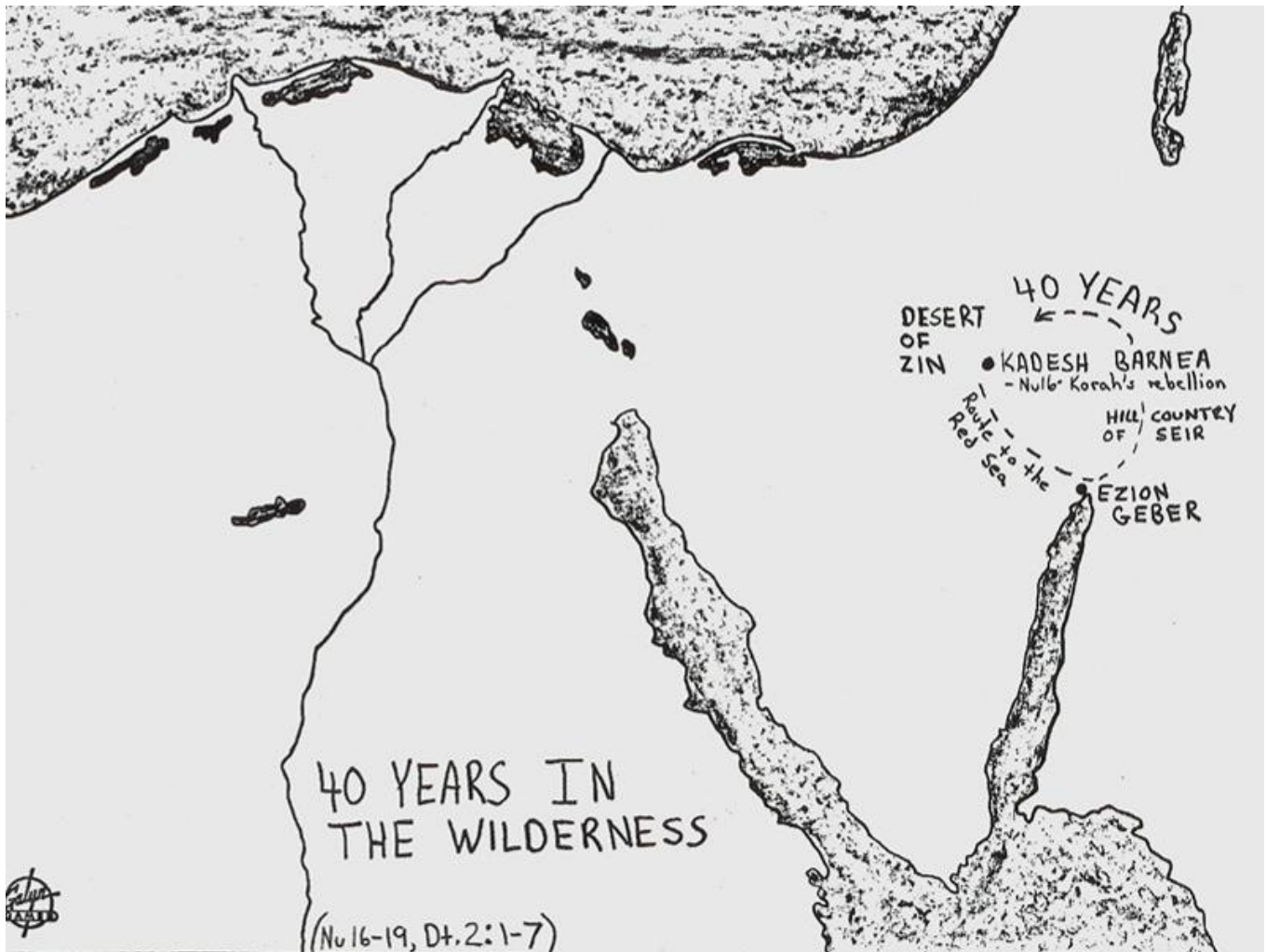
Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness,
that we should die here, both we and our cattle?

And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place?

It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.”

Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces.

And the glory of the Lord appeared to them...”



Numbers 20:1-13 occurs 40 years later. This Meribah is different than “Massah Meribah” of Exodus 17 which was just a few days outside of Egypt forty years earlier. This location was in the Desert of Zin while Israel was staying at Kadesh. Here Moses was told to speak to the rock, but instead he struck the rock. This was called the waters of Meribah because Israel quarreled with the Lord.

The Israelite believers should have faced their “no water” problem resting in faith believing that the Lord had a plan, a purpose and a provision. They should have gained confidence in their soul over the last forty years by having seen and heard the Lord’s works, words and ways. But, there was no intake of these Truths into their disillusioned souls. After forty years of instruction and experience this generation should have been able to exhale faith in God from a soul inhaling Truth and resting in the knowledge of God. But, they had failed. It was going to be impossible for this generation to enter God’s rest. It was not that God was forbidding them entrance into his rest, but they had become incapable of entering his rest. Thus, David would write from Jerusalem inside the Promised Land 400 years later to warn his generation to avoid the same mistake and not miss the Lord’s rest. When David writes, he records the Lord’s words that explain the wilderness generation’s situation, “they have not known my ways, therefore I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” (Psalm 95:10-11) It wasn’t God punishing them, but God giving up on them after forty years of trying to get them into his rest. In this case after forty years of feeding and teaching these people the Lord said, “They shall not enter my rest.” He wasn’t preventing them from entering. The fact that they could not enter God’s rest was the simple result of them refusing to learn the ways of the Lord. Since they refused to learn for forty years the opportunity was gone. It was over. They died and fell in the

wilderness never having learned to trust their Creator, Deliverer and Provider. They missed out on living their lives in God's rest and, it appears, they missed entering an eternal life of rest with the Lord, also.

In 63 AD a New Testament letter addressing the believers in the Jerusalem church, used the wilderness generation and David's advice to his generation as a platform to call the believers to secure their souls in the rest of God. The believers around 63 AD in Jerusalem had faced persecution from the unbelieving Jews and were about 36 months away from the nation instigating a war with the Roman Empire that would result in the total overthrow of their culture, land and holy city. The believers being addressed in the book of Hebrews were oppressed by their culture and were headed into national overthrow. These believers needed more than just a religious concept of a home in heaven someday, they needed a living faith that not only guaranteed eternal life at some point in the future but also would secure their souls today while they lived in union with their Savior God through daily struggles, cultural oppression and national overthrow. Sure, they may have had hope in Christ for eternity, but would they collapse and put their God on trial the moment they faced hardship, persecution or the total loss of everything they had in the world? A true faith is enduring in life and in eternity. If your faith collapses in life, it is possible you really do not have faith for eternity. If the wilderness generation could not trust the Lord for water after they had seen him deliver them from Egypt, then it is possible for us to also reject the Lord in life even though we claim to have recognized his deliverance of us from sin and death. If the Lord has delivered you from sin and death to bring you into his eternal kingdom, then he also has a plan and purpose for everything you face in your life, good and bad. If you cannot handle life, then you need to learn God's ways and make every effort to enter his rest. Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Hear his Word and learn his ways. Prepare your soul for life today.

The writer of Hebrews wrote the words below around 63 AD to the believers in Jerusalem using David's words of 1000 BC when David addressed the failure of the wilderness generation during the years of 1445-1405 BC:

“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

‘Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the **rebellion**
 (“Rebellion” from Ps. 95:8 Hebrew “*Meribah*” from “*rib*” meaning “argument” or “lawsuit”),

on the day of **testing** in the wilderness,
 (“testing” from Ps. 95:8 Hebrew “*massah*” meaning “trial”, “test”)

where your fathers put me to the **test**
 (“test” from Ps. 95:9 Hebrew “*nasah*” meaning “to test”, “to try”)

and saw my works for forty years.
Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
and said, “They always go astray in their heart;
they have not known my ways.”

As I swore in my wrath,

“They shall not enter my rest.” ’

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart,
leading you to fall away from the living God.

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’
that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.
As it is said,

‘Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’

For who were those who heard and yet rebelled?
Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?
And with whom was he provoked for forty years?

Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?
And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?
So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands,
let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

For good news came to us just as to them,
but the message they heard did not benefit them,
because they were not united by faith with those who listened.
For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

‘As I swore in my wrath,
“They shall not enter my rest,” ’

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.

For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way:

‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.’

And again in this passage he said,

‘They shall not enter my rest.’

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, ‘Today,’ saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

‘Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.’

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.
So then, **there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.**

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

For the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow,
and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
And no creature is hidden from his sight,
but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”
- Hebrews 3:7 - 4:13

Interestingly, the words of the Hebrew author can sound contradictory when he writes “strive to enter that rest”. The word translated “strive” here in Hebrews 4:11 (Greek *spoudazo*) helps create this apparent oxymoron means “to make haste”, “to give diligence”, “be swift” and is translated “make every effort”. The believers in Jerusalem in 63 AD were to swiftly be diligent to make haste to “enter that rest”!

The writer of Hebrews is telling us that as long as today is called “today” we are to make every effort to enter God’s rest. The Lord has offered this rest to every generation in history. We enter that rest when we hear, understand and continually trust the Words of God. The Word of God reveals the ways, the plans and the purpose of the Lord. The Word of God gives us a solid foundation of the knowledge of God that we can hold in our minds to keep our souls at rest. This rest is the peace that passes understanding.

But, entering this rest is not automatic for a believer in Christ. Entering God’s rest is not instantaneous, it is not an emotion and it is not separated from knowing Truth. This rest is under assault and can be overwhelmed with worry, panic and fear when our souls begin to focus on the “wisdom of this age” and the deceitful scheming of the world. The Truth of the Word of God in our soul can be replaced with lies and deception. We need to make every effort to enter that rest and maintain that rest in our souls by concentrating on the knowledge of God that empowers us.

Do not let the pressures and the afflictions of this world cause you to retreat out of the strong tower built in your soul. It is in this strong tower filled with the knowledge of God the believer can rest in the promises, plans and purposes revealed in the knowledge of God.