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## REST IN THE WANDERING— GOD'S WAYS ARE DESERT WAYS

### *Entering the Desert*

Structures of sin . . . are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them, and make them difficult to remove.

—St. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

I was an evangelical Christian and a young mother still wrangling my first toddler when the comfortable edifice of my spiritual idealism was utterly demolished by the political maneuverings of the very people who had nurtured my fledgling faith, people I had trusted implicitly. I remember surveying the one hundred-person denominational community one Sunday morning and thinking, *Church shouldn't be this way. Christians aren't supposed to be so deceitful.*

It began with a whisper campaign against the young pastor. Petty disagreements swirled up and around, fueled by Bible study small groups that nitpicked his sermons, his off-day overalls, and his wife's hat-wearing. Everyone took sides and justified them with perfectly suitable Bible verses. But their ugly gossip, full of poison, made them seem more like a pit of vipers than a flock of sheep.

I wasn't above reproach either. In fact, I remember very clearly when the Lord pointedly corrected me as I was airing my own complaints to him about the pastor. *Obedience is infallible*, he said to me.

In the end, it was a lesson I barely got to practice under that pastor, because he got fed up with us, took another position, and left; our church broke in half afterward. But that experience touched off a sandstorm that caused a great desert in my life, and it was in this desert that I learned the difficult but necessary life lessons—just like the Israelites in the story of the Exodus—that led me through the suffering and wandering (and dewfall) directly to my promised land.

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Let me start from the beginning.

## Entering the Desert

My own desert wandering began in earnest on April 9, 2000. I know the day because my whole “desert chronicle” is in journals I kept over that decade. Like the Israelites, my desert was connected to a promise: during my daily study time in the scriptures, the Lord taught me about “the secret place of the Most High” (Ps 91:1 NKJV) and impressed upon me the desire to write a study on it. Also like the Israelites—who previously saw themselves as possessions of Egyptian taskmasters, but whose promise inspired them to consider themselves the Chosen Ones of the God of the universe, motivating them to face the desert ahead with greater courage—my promise gave me new identity, new purpose, and new boldness.

I wrote the study. Then I tried to get it published—and it was turned down by every Christian publisher in America. I kept working on it, sure that God had promised me a “land of victory.” As the years passed, the failed attempts swirled around me like real-life sandstorms. I worried, *What if I'm wrong? What if I never really received a promise from God?*

With great excitement, I had followed a promise on an unfamiliar road straight into the desert, just like the Israelites.

In the Bible, the word *desert* means to lie waste. It's a desolate term, signifying "confusion, empty place, without form, nothing, vain, vanity, waste, wilderness."<sup>1</sup> What in your life is wasted, confused, empty?

By definition, the desert is barren and inhospitable, often the abode of wild animals and subject to extreme temperatures; it is an environment that most human beings step into reluctantly and fearfully. Only rarely do we enter deliberately.

But what if we were to stop dreading and resisting the desert and accept its necessity and inevitability? What if we welcomed the time we spent in those wastelands? What if we moved forward rather than looking back, confident that God is persistent in offering us such desert seasons because he wants us to submit to a kind of purifying purgatory, here and now, while we can still lean on the sacraments and prayers and support of others? What if leaning into those desert lessons is the key to the permanent—even eternal—transformation we need?

## A Fruitful Wasteland

I'm not going to kid you—I did not enter the desert willingly or joyfully for my spiritual "extreme makeover." I spent three Lents with my hands up in surrender, wailing, "What more can I give up, Lord? You've already taken everything but my health and my family!" Indeed, I was sure I had entered into the spiritual equivalent of the Sinai Desert, a "great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water" (Dt 8:15).

But I now experience deprivations much more restfully, because the Israelites' desert taught me that God's ways are desert ways. I know that it is in these deserts that he moves and creates most powerfully. If I am experiencing desert deprivations or repetitions that resemble the Israelites, I know something wonderful is trying to happen. But before I could get comfortable enough with deprivations to cooperate with them, he had to teach me what rest really is. As we read in the third chapter of Hebrews,

Today, when you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
where your fathers put me to the test  
and saw my works for forty years. . . .  
As I swore in my wrath,  
“They shall never enter my rest.” (Heb 3:7–9, 11)

After years of captivity and forced labor, the Israelites needed to rediscover what it really meant to rest, too. It was for this very purpose that the Lord brought his people through the desert and left their experiences in the scriptures for us. God calls us to rest every day, and it is in their desert experiences that we learn where to find rest and draw from it—rest in thoughts, emotions, body, and in the depths of the soul.

Now, the desert the Israelites knew was not a big sand pile, like the Sahara. Most of the land in the Sinai and Palestinian deserts only needs water to make it fruitful, and this is why daily dewfall is so important in that area. The annual season of scant rain demonstrates their latent fertility, when the deserts grow carpets of herbs and flowers, almost overnight. Even today many desert dwellers are nomadic, since staying in one place too long will exhaust what few resources the desert can offer.

Israel first met the Lord in the desert, and thereafter the tradition was forever set that others might also be transformed there. In the desert they were challenged to establish an awareness of and connection to the Source of all that is—he who is light and life, who gives a rest Adam and Eve understood and maintained effortlessly in a garden paradise before the Fall. The Bible itself tells us that the lessons God taught the Israelites in the desert also serve as a warning and template for us in our own desert deprivations: “Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction. . . . Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:11–12).

The deserts we encounter are places of transition, places to pass through. When the struggle is finally over, the desert will be transformed by the dew of heaven:

The desert and the parched land will exult;  
the steppe will rejoice and bloom.  
They will bloom with abundant flowers,  
and rejoice with joyful song. (Is 35:1–2, NAB)

And so it is for us as well: once our lessons have been learned, once love has triumphed over fear and the struggle has effectively been decided, our deserts will transform and blossom. That is the ancient knowledge of the desert I want to share with you through the scriptures, specifically through the Exodus story as it's found in Hebrews 3–4. Yet as we meander along this ancient road with the Chosen People, we have the unique benefit of modern science to help sustain us with its dew. We know something extraordinary by the scientific method that they could not measure then: this desert emptiness contains the same power that created and sustains the entire living, undulating universe.

Literally!

## The Desert Is a Living Emptiness

When he was pope, St. John Paul II appreciated and supported collaboration between the sciences, theology, and philosophy. “The unity we perceive in creation on the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of the universe . . . seems to be reflected and even reinforced in what contemporary science is revealing to us.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed.

Contemporary physics shows us that the atom—the smallest unit of ordinary matter, invisible to the naked eye—is about 99.9 percent open space.<sup>3</sup> Proportionately, the space around the nucleus of an atom has been compared to a cathedral containing a single grain of rice. But the space in the atomic cathedral is not empty or dead. Rather, it appears alive with whirling activity, spinning around the grain-of-rice type nucleus. What we see and touch is a sort of condensation—a collapsing, if you will—of quantum states. At the subatomic level, the chair you are sitting in is a whirling, buzzing vortex of processes. Forests, wind, sound, color, oxygen, thoughts, emotions, your house, your car, your

physical body, the stars, your dog, your ability to see, hear, smell, taste, touch—everything is interconnected by quantum processes.

What the Bible, Jesus, the apostles, and the Church have told us is true: all things are connected. Literally. Everything at its deepest level is a continuously vibrating process of energy that is intricately interconnected with everything else. Everything exists in a quantum state with particular energy. There is nothing that does *not* possess this energy. But the most astounding reality is that this base energy contains all possibilities at once, and in one interpretation of quantum mechanics, consciousness determines if or how the energy will collapse and become reality. This means that what seems to be dead, empty space in the desert also contains this energy, along with every possibility of what it could become.

## Intention Matters

One model of the universe posits that we live in a world of non-physical space, within a quantum energy field that underlies the processes that make up the entire universe. It is a world that rests within a permeating reality, undulating and condensing in a way that creates what we perceive to be things.

This hidden reality exerts a continuous, complementary influence on the physical world, similar to the way your own consciousness affects your physical body. Your hand does not cause your finger to move; your brain does. This is exactly the idea St. Paul was conveying with his “Body of Christ” imagery in 1 Corinthians 12, in which each of us is an “organ” or member of the Body of Christ, who is our head. The parts operate together as their own distinct process, so that the whole is greater than the parts and is directed by the Holy Spirit, the mind of Christ.

Similarly, consciousness may be the means by which all visible reality exists and interacts. Physicists such as Raymond Chiao propose clearly that God is the ultimate conscious observer of the universe (think Big Bang); he and others hold that our own free choices (consciousness) also affect processes in time and space. Chiao’s theological conclusion—that God is the omnipresent,

omniscient, and omnipotent universal Observer, as presented in an essay<sup>4</sup> on quantum mechanics that I read with pounding heart and blurry eyes—will be the basis for our exhilarating exploration of the Israelites’ and our own desert experiences. It reflects and reinforces what our faith and the scriptures have told us all along: we are cocreators with God of our own reality. Only focused attention, or consciousness, will cause energy to collapse into a thing. What will my focused attention draw forth in my desert? Will it be fear and deprivation, or will it be faith and provision?

There are many interpretations of the science, but there is widespread agreement on an interconnectedness to the universe that cannot be isolated into smallest units. The cosmos can be imagined, rather, as a complicated, organic network of energy that fuels relationships between individual processes and always includes the observer in an essential way. So we can never speak about the universe without speaking of ourselves, and every choice and action immediately and concretely impacts *the entire whole*.<sup>5</sup> Although we see and experience matter as solid, underneath it’s whizzing around at these colossal velocities in a constant state of dynamic movement. It’s only the forces between atoms that gives us the impression that anything is actually solid.

To put this quantum reality another way, anything and everything which exists in the entire cosmos, when broken down and analyzed in its purest and most basic form utilizing sophisticated scientific tools and instruments, is a combination of quantum states. The energies of these states, when observed, determine our perception of reality. As a result, our perception of reality, and that alone, determines what we experience as individuals in the physical world.

Think of your thoughts and emotions as focused spiritual energy that creates reality, either of rest or unrest. We are indeed cocreators with God. Everything visible emanates from the invisible in a constant interaction between the two.

God’s ways are desert ways because the desert “emptiness” actually contains everything we need; we are meant to learn how to consciously cocreate with God all that we need in the desert,

rather than allowing our own (often unconscious) negative energy to continue creating a defeating reality where we lack what we need and flail around in fear and unrest. Like the Israelites, we enter the desert to learn how to stop focusing mental and emotional energy on the emptiness. Instead, we focus our faith on the possibilities present in the spiritual light and love that animates and connects the universe. This faith focus is consciousness, and consciousness manifests all reality. Rest in thoughts and emotions is vital, because when we are not at rest interiorly, we manifest unrest exteriorly.

### Back to the Desert: Repetitions and Deprivations

I readily and humbly admit that what I have presented here is a tremendous oversimplification of the science. However, even a simple description is necessary for this study, because it provides important context to the Israelites' wilderness journey and affects how we react in our own deserts—what we will or will not receive there, not just in moments of temporary physical deprivation, but also in emotional and spiritual wastelands as well. As we have said, God uses these desert encounters—in all their repetition and deprivation—to lead us to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual rest.

St. John Paul II maintained that “both religion and science must preserve their autonomy and their distinctiveness. . . . Christianity possesses the source of its justification within itself and does not expect science to constitute its primary apologetic.”<sup>6</sup> There is truth and beauty in science, but ultimately “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). Most of us cannot and do not need to know all of the science. But knowing just a little opens up an entirely new world of rest and desert possibilities.

We can trust that God's wilderness ways have a unique and necessary purpose. We are truly, intimately connected beyond space, distance, nationality, or time to God himself and everything we need, to the children of Israel, and to all the saints that followed, experienced, and witness to desert truth (Heb 12:1). We



must not abandon ourselves to despair in desert deprivations. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who know how to help us reach the inner Sabbath and how to receive dew in the desert.

## The Call to Rest

The realities of my own perennial desert experiences—including the reasons for their existence—are something I ever so slowly and haltingly came to accept and understand through a personal time of intensive rest lovingly “forced” upon me by our heavenly Father.

After a second church split (more about that later), we left our home church. Whereas in the past I had been busy and vigorous in serving the church, I now found myself completely removed from serving at all. Lost, bewildered, and feeling a little punished, I questioned the Lord. After all, I had written a study in obedience to his promise. Why wasn’t anything happening with that? Why was there absolutely no way to move forward?

What do you suppose happened next? I found myself in a daily study of the book of Hebrews.

A cursory read-through of Hebrews 3 and 4 hit me hard. I heard God clearly say that I must “be” rather than “do” for a while, that the downtime he had given me was a gift and that I must learn real rest in preparation to receive my promise. Even so, I struggled against the lack of action and “productivity.” I objected, *But I’m not tired!*

As the days dragged on, I begrudgingly dug into Hebrews 3–4 and allowed the Israelites’ example to instruct me. I finally began to understand that although I was ministerially inactive, I was not *at rest*. I was afraid—of uselessness, of wasting time, of loneliness, stillness, and boredom, and of missing my opportunity, because *What does it mean if I just stop trying to make my promise happen?* I thought often of what St. Josemaría Escrivá articulated, “To be idle is something foreign in a man who has apostolic spirit.”<sup>7</sup> I felt untethered, floating in some terrifying, dark emptiness that led nowhere.

## Why Does God Want Us to Rest?

God wants us to know rest, because rest is actually part of the definition of salvation. To have rest is to have God.

As I began to understand this, and to accept and practice God's view of rest, it changed forever my view of life, service, and ministry. Darkness in prayer, feelings of abandonment and detachment—none of that sways my intention now. Seasons of vigorous, even exhausting, activity and attacks on peace and rest are inevitable, but I am no longer tossed about by conflicts in focus and I recover as quickly as the unrest is identified.

I do not fret consistently for my husband or children's spiritual or physical safety. I know he loves them more than I do. I no longer worry about him providing for us; I know he will; and what he doesn't provide, I know we don't need. I do not fear failure, calamity, or scarcity; it will come, and he will work it into good (Rom 8:28).

I do not struggle with delays, lack of advancement, or "nothing happening" at work; I know his timing is strategic. I now view unexpected pauses in activity and work as God's great providence for me at that time in my life. In fact, I expect—and this is a biblical expectation, one that frees me to exert every possible effort during busy seasons—that he will provide those pauses for my rest. The isolation and silence he provides help me recover my stamina and prepare me to return to the active world of evangelization.

That first, terrible desert nurtured a deep, connected peace in me with both God and neighbor that continues to grow. Such mysterious peace is the dew of heaven—the grace of true, deep, biblical rest—and is the inner Sabbath promised to every single child of God.

## What Is Rest?

In deprivation and suffering we experience our greatest challenges to rest and purpose. Why, then, does God convict us of unrest in our focal passage for this study, Hebrews 3:7–4:13 (included in

the front of this book)? The passage warns of “evil unbelief,” and the context is fear in desert seasons of deprivation: “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Heb 3:12).

I have practiced a daily quiet time in the scriptures for decades; I know when God is using a passage to speak directly to me, so I was stunned and disturbed by the implication when reading this passage that I was personally in danger of evil, of an “unbelieving heart,” and of “falling away” from God. Those are dire words! I confess I was a little offended that God would so unfairly apply that verse to me.

When the Holy Spirit used these verses to convict me of unrest and teach me to understand rest from his perspective, I had served in church joyfully and faithfully for years—choir, leadership, mission trips, Bible study, Sunday school, VBS. I loved every minute; I prayed and studied my Bible every day; I wasn’t resentful, I wasn’t burned out, and I wasn’t tired.

I made the mistake of judging the Lord’s rest based on what most of us call physical rest. But God is not a man, and God’s rest is not physical rest from weariness. We know, first, because God is spirit (Jn 4:24). Not “a spirit,” as though he were one of many, but he is pure Spirit, pure existence, the I AM. Existing outside of time and space, there is nothing to see, hear, or sense of God unless he makes himself felt or sensed. Second, “The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary” (Is 40:28). The Lord does not rest because he is tired, and his rest is not physical, but spiritual, since he is Spirit.

I didn’t feel physically tired, but I soon understood God wasn’t talking simply about physical rest. He addresses “evil unbelief” in several other prominent areas that become clear in the Old Testament narrative. As such, the Hebrew passage did apply to me, and it applies to all of us, every day, but especially now in our unique moment of history where instant, constant communication and social media unrest are the background noise of our lives.