

Faith's Rest, or The Sabbath Life

Hebrews 4:1 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. 2 For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard *it*.

3 For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest,'" although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh *day* in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all His works"; 5 and again in this *place*: "They shall not enter My rest."

6 Since therefore it remains that some *must* enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, 7 again He designates a certain day, saying in David, "Today," after such a long time, as it has been said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts." 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day.

9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. 10 For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His. 11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. (Heb. 4:1-11)

Restless is a word we could use to describe modern people. Distracted, dissatisfied, diverted, are the traits of the average person. People are searching for rest, but every pursuit they begin only ends in more restlessness. Sometimes the sheer edginess boils over in road rage, or fist fights. People are restless.

And lots of people are offering cures for restlessness: cruises on luxury liners, hot-air balloon safaris, more and more forms of skin and body treatments and pamperings, Eastern meditation, more immersive entertainment, stranger and kinkier forms of immorality, weirder and more potent concoctions of hallucinogens to inhale, inject or imbibe, all in a desperate attempt to find rest.

Once upon a time, the first human couple knew perfect rest. They had total freedom from worry and anxiety. They lay down with complete security, with nothing to unsettle them. They had complete confidence in God, and trusted absolutely in His goodness. They lived in His presence, leaning on Him, and living in complete rest. When they sinned, that rest ended. And the result is the restlessness around us.

But God's plan was to restore rest and give it to those who receive His Son. Jesus, the Son of God, is the great and Final answer to man's restlessness.

Hebrews is all about convincing us that Jesus is the ultimate and final form of God's Word to the world. We're in a section where Jesus is being compared to the greatest prophet Moses, and where Israel's failure to believe Moses is now being used as a warning to not do the same thing with the far superior Jesus. Much of this section is a sermon on Psalm 95, which has the story of Israel rebelling against Moses, and God swearing they would not enter His rest.

Eleven times in this section, beginning back in chapter 3:11 through to 4:11, we have some form of this word *rest* or *rested* or *ceased*. This is the New Testament passage that you go to in order to understand the meaning of true spiritual rest.

This is the tail end to a warning section that began in 3:11. But the tone shifts from negative to positive. We are given three responses to the rest that God offers us.

I. Be Fearful of Avoiding this Rest

Hebrews 4:1 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. 2 For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard *it*.

The writer is going to explain in the verses after these that the promise of rest still exists. But here

he gives the application: be fearful, be deeply gripped at the thought of missing this promise of rest. Perhaps you know that sinking feeling when you have already missed something promised. I once had a flight delayed because of bad weather, and so they rebooked me on a flight the next day. I simply assumed it was the same flight and time. But the next day, to my horror, I found out too late that they had booked me on a flight much earlier, and I had already missed that flight. You see people's anxiety not to miss an available seat on a bus, or not to miss being one of the first to see a certain movie. I watch with morbid horror at what people will do on those Black Friday sales so as not to miss a great deal. When we know something wonderful is being offered, we experience some anxiety if we should miss that.

So Scripture says we should have that fear of missing this particular promise. What is the promise? The Scripture calls it entering "His rest". What is that? It's actually at least three things.

First, there was God's own rest on the seventh day. Second, there was the rest God promised Israel in Canaan. Third, there is the eternal rest of Heaven. But as this passage will show us, even though those rests are in the past and in the future, there is a fourth kind of rest that we can enter into today. This rest, which is entering into God's rest, is a kind of combination of the other three in present experience – a sabbath rest, a Canaan inheritance rest, a heavenly rest. We'll explore that more in a moment, but initially, who would want to miss out on that?

People queue by the thousands for vacations and getaways, longing for rest for their over-busy and weary minds. The Scriptures exhort, apply the same fear you have of missing your flight to your dream destination to the possibility of missing out on this rest.

The way you forfeit this rest is given in verse 2. The people under Moses also had the Gospel preached to them. Yes, the content of the Gospel was not nearly as sharp, defined and focused as ours. But they, too heard the message that Yahweh, the God of Israel, would be their God, love them and be faithful to them, if they repented of their own works, their own idols, and turned to Him in faith. But what did they do with this good news that God alone was their salvation, that He had an inheritance for them, that they simply needed to trust and obey? We read, it did not profit them, because the word heard was not mixed with faith in them that heard.

In some variants of the Greek, the passage read, because they did not unite themselves with those who believed, in other words, Joshua and Caleb, who did believe. But either reading of the text comes to the same point: unbelief caused them to forfeit the promise of entering the rest of life in the Promised Land.

Unbelief is your greatest enemy. Not crime. Not age. Not poverty. Not sickness, not even death. Unbelief is the greatest threat to your soul, for that is what will disqualify you from God's good intentions toward your soul. All the blessings, all the pleasures at God's right hand will become could-have-beens and might-have-beens because of unbelief. Unbelief caused God to say of Israel, 16 He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you." (Ps. 81:16) 11 "But My people would not heed My voice, And Israel would *have* none of Me. (Ps. 81:11)

Unbelief in what? Unbelief that Jesus is God's Final Word to the world, that He is the full and complete Revelation of God to us, that He is the Finisher of the faith, the great End and Rightful Focus of all human religion. Israel missed the rest of Canaan because they doubted the word of the great Prophet Moses, and behold, one greater than Moses is here. Only one thing can cause you to miss this promise: and it is personal rejection of Jesus Christ, stubborn refusal to let Him in.

The writer says, tremble at the self-destructive power within you.

A.W. Tozer once put it this way: "God has indeed lent to every man the power to lock his heart and

stalk away darkly into his self-chosen night, as He has lent to every man the ability to respond to His overtures of grace, but while the "no" choice may be ours, the "yes" choice is always God's. He is the Author of our faith as He must be its Finisher. Only by grace can we continue to believe; we can persist in willing God's will only as we are seized upon by a benign power that will overcome our natural bent to unbelief."

But the passage has the fragrance of mercy and grace, because though forfeited, this promise of rest is still available.

II. Be Mindful of the Available Rest

3 For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest,'" although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh *day* in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all His works"; 5 and again in this *place*: "They shall not enter My rest."

6 Since therefore it remains that some *must* enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, 7 again He designates a certain day, saying in David, "Today," after such a long time, as it has been said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts." 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day.

9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.

Now here is a very difficult passage, but your careful attention as to its logic will repay you with warm spiritual insight. Here is the logic. Verse 3 sets it up for us, believers, present tense, enter that rest, so it must be still available. We enter the rest that was denied to unbelievers in Moses' day. Now he gives two proofs to show you that this rest is still available.

First, he adds these words: "although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all His works"; 5 and again in this place: "They shall not enter My rest."

How does this flow? One of the favourite conceptions of the rabbis was that they noticed that in the Genesis account, there is a mention of morning and evening for each of the six days. But when it comes to the seventh day, there is no mention of evening. From there, the rabbis concluded that the day of God's rest had no ending. God's rest is still available. The writer seems to be picking up that theme. God's rest began on day seven of creation, and didn't end. It is still going on.

So he quotes loosely from Genesis, and again from Psalm 95 to show that this rest which He denied to those unbelievers under Moses was not a one-time opportunity that opened up and then closed down. God's rest began at creation and is still going. It was before Moses, and preceded Moses.

He then moves to a second proof that God's rest is still available. 6 Since therefore it remains that some *must* enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, 7 again He designates a certain day, saying in David, "Today," after such a long time, as it has been said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts."

He says, this promise of rest was forfeited by those under Moses, but the psalm which commands us to not harden our hearts and to hear His voice was written by David. David lived a good 400 years after Moses. So if David, 400 years later, is referencing the scene under Moses, but still says, *Today*, hear God's voice, it must mean that the promise of rest was still available in David's day. The promise of rest was not tied to that people and that circumstance alone. That means the day 'today' is not a yesterday that belonged to Moses, and a rest of Canaan. Another day is promised. The day is today. The promise of rest is still available.

At this point, maybe someone might object, okay, Moses didn't lead them in to Canaan, but Joshua

did!

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day.

(If you are reading in the KJV, it will say Jesus. That's because the Greek form of Joshua and Jesus is the same, since they are the same name in Hebrew. But the reference here is not to Jesus Christ, but to Joshua, Moses' successor.)

In other words, David would not have written this psalm if Joshua had given them rest. If Canaan was God's rest, a one-time package refused by apostates, received by believers under Joshua, then why would David call on others to enter God's rest 400 years later?

What the writer has done is sandwich the loss of Canaan rest with before and after. God's sabbath rest was there long before Moses, and God was promising rest long after Moses. The point of all this? Verse 9: 9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.

There remains a rest for the people of God. Verse 6, there remains that some may enter it, verse 1, there remains a promise.

Why does the writer take so much space to prove that this rest is still available? Because humans are given to extremes, and when it comes to this promise of rest, we will quickly see people veering into two ditches, the pessimists, and the procrastinators. The pessimists say, "Oh, it's too late for me. I've already missed it. Maybe others could have accepted this promise. But I've already done too much, been too sinful, wasted too much time. The door has closed on any chance of my being saved. I'm already spent, already ruined, already too late.

To the pessimist, Scripture says: There remains a rest. A promise of entering remains.

The procrastinator says, "There's always more time to enter this rest. What's the hurry? Why put all your eggs in one basket, when there's so much to do, so much to see? I'll get to the commitment to Jesus thing one day, soon enough. Give me the portion of goods that falls to me, and let me journey to a far country, and there spend my life with riotous living, before I return to the Father's house, confess my sins, and ask to be made as one of the hired servants.

To the procrastinator, Scripture says: He designates a day: Today. Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your heart. Today, enter in. God's today still exists, and the promise is available, but it does not last for ever. Life comes to an end, the promise can be missed.

In the end, both the pessimist and the procrastinator are doing the same thing: looking for excuses to avoid Jesus Christ, looking for reasons to not embrace God. God offers rest, but the rest He offers is His kind of rest, and offered on His terms. So the writer says, you should be fearful of avoiding this rest. Be mindful that it is still available.

III. Be Diligent to Accept This Rest

9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. 10 For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His. 11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

Now first, a word about what this rest is. In verse 9, the rest which remains for the people of God is given with a different Greek word to the word used in the rest of this passage. In fact, it is a word used nowhere else in the New Testament. It is the word *sabbatismos*. A sabbath rest. But he does not mean the Jewish sabbath, which passed away with the Law. He doesn't mean that the Sabbath day is transferred to Sunday, either.

The next verse tells you what kind of rest he means. The one who has entered God's rest has ceased from his own works, the way God did from His. God completed His works on the sixth day, and entered His rest. The person who enters God's rest is doing something similar.

What does that mean? One interpretation is that since this is being compared with the good work of creation, it must be referring to Christ doing the good work of redemption. He completed His work on Earth, and then entered into His rest.

But I think the context here refers not to Christ, but to us and our works. And in Hebrews, whenever reference is made to human works, it uses the term dead. Dead works. What are dead works?

Human efforts to save ourselves. Human works to impress God, and appear more righteous, and balance out our sin, and clothe ourselves with our own good works. Dead works are the works that the Pharisees tried to burden people with, man-made traditions built up around the law. Jesus said of them "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; (Matt. 23:4)

To those people labouring to please God by their own efforts, Jesus said then, and He says now,

28 "Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30)

You see, when a person ceases from his own works, and is diligent to come to Christ, and take His yoke, that person enters the sabbath rest that is Jesus Himself. The sabbath rest for the people of God is Christ. In Christ, the anguished exhaustion of man-made religion ends. In Christ, the burden of carrying your guilt and trying to relieve it ends. In Christ, the work of trying to deliver yourself and save yourself comes to an end. In Christ, you enter a place freed from the worries that torment unbelievers.

But Christ's rest does not only deal with your past. Christ gives you rest in the present. In Christ, you experience what it means to lie down in green pastures; to be led beside the still waters, to have your soul restored, to be led in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake, to fear no evil though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort you. (Ps. 23:2-4)

Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you."

To live a victorious Christian life, freed from anxieties, fretting, no longer tormented by failure, no longer haunted by fear, no longer controlled by anger or bitterness. This life in the present is the spiritual equivalent of entering Canaan. You cease from your own works of trying to have Heaven before its time, and confess you are a stranger and a pilgrim, and live in the riches of your inheritance in Christ now.

But Christ's rest is also future. When we enter Heaven we will not cease to work, but we will cease to battle, cease to struggle, cease to suffer. There is a kind of rest we will only find in Heaven. As C.S. Lewis put it, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect! O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect!
In mercy, Jesus, bring us to that dear land of rest, who are, with God the Father and Spirit, ever blest.

Brief life is here our portion; Brief sorrow, short-lived care. The life that knows no ending. The tearless life, is there.
O happy retribution: Short toil, eternal rest; For mortals and for sinners A mansion with the blest!

You see, the Christian life is a life of rest. I mentioned at the beginning the three kinds of rest: God's own rest on the seventh day, the rest God promised Israel in Canaan, and the eternal rest of Heaven. The Christian life has all three. We enter the sabbath of Jesus the day we are saved, our past taken care of, ceasing from our own works, rest from the penalty of sin. We then live in the riches of Christ, our inheritance, which is Canaan now, the victorious Christian life – rest from the power of sin. And one day, if Jesus does not return first, our eyes will close in death, and as one imagined it, we'll behold white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise rest from the presence of sin.

How do we avoid missing this still available promise? The strange wording of verse 11 is this: we must be diligent, labour to enter that rest. These words *be diligent* means to be eager, conscientious, make every effort. Does he mean we must work to be saved? No, he already told us how you enter in, in verse 3: we who have believed enter that rest. Believing is not a work, not a human work, at least. So what does he mean? He means apply every faculty you have to resting on Christ. It sounds like a contradiction, but it is simply a paradox. Give yourself to receiving Christ.

Joh 6:27 "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."

Luk 13:24 "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able."

2Pe 1:10 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;

Our friend Spurgeon helps us: "I think he means, let us labor not to labor. Our tendency is to try to do something in order to save ourselves. But we must beat that tendency down and look away from self to Christ. Labor to get away from your own labors! Labor to be clean rid of all self-reliance! Labor in your prayers never to depend upon your prayers! Labor in your repentance never to rest upon your repentance and labor in your faith not to trust to your faith, but to trust only to Jesus!"

And this is why the pessimist and the procrastinator want to avoid it. Because it takes all of you. You must trust Him entirely. You must give up your whole being. You cannot play fractions with Christ, and trade with Him. You must lean on Him wholeheartedly or not at all.

I think you can tell the quality of a man's inward rest, by how much he labours to trust in Christ. If you are diligent to be deepening in reliance, running to Christ, earnestly cleaving to Him, we will see a quality in you of inward rest. You are at rest about your past. You are at rest in the present. You are at rest about the future.

Perhaps you might paraphrase the psalmist this morning and ask, "Why art thou restless, O my soul? Why are thou disquieted within me?" Are you restless about your past? There remains a rest. Are you restless in the present? There remains a rest for you in Christ. Are you restless about your future? There remains a rest for the people of God. Cease from your own works. Come to Christ, and you will find rest for your soul.