

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

God's Promised Rest

Hebrews 4:1-11

I don't know how many times I've asked someone how their doing, only to get a blank stare and a one-word response, "Tired!" Are you tired? As this sermon progresses, I'll discover who is *really* tired. Sometimes Justin asks me, "Dad, why do you stare us down so much when you preach?" Well, I'm watching how many eyelids are closing! But you know, that's OK – no offense! I know that some of you are just *tired*!

A photographer was taking pictures of a first grade class at an elementary school. He was making small talk to put the kids at ease. "What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked one little girl. "Tired," she said.ⁱ

Some of our fatigue is a cultural thing. I used to love the rhythm of life in France while we lived there. Did you know that France has the second highest number of vacation days in a year of any country in the world? A worker in Italy averages 42 vacation days per year. A worker in France has 37. That's five weeks of paid vacation! And on top of that are all the other holidays. What's the average here in America? Just 13 days!ⁱⁱ No wonder so many of us are tired.

The passage we're looking at this morning is all about *rest*. But it's not talking so much about physical rest in the present as a spiritual rest in the future with implications for the present. As Alec and Vera read this passage for us, listen carefully. The line of thought is not easy to follow. Ask yourself this question: *What* is the "rest" the writer is talking about and *how* do I enter into this rest?

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.² For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.³ Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world.⁴ For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work."⁵ And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."⁶ It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.⁷ Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. Hebrews 4:1-11

Given the complex line of reasoning in this passage, I would like to approach the writer's message by asking two questions. The first is this...

WHAT IS THE PROMISED “REST” THAT WE ARE TO ENTER?

Having read the passage and asked this question, do you have any ideas? Or let me ask you this: In this passage, *who* failed to enter this “rest?” (Israel). And for Israel, what was that “rest?” Right, it at least included the idea of the Promised Land.

But in this passage, who else “rests?” Right, God himself rests from his work in the six days of creation. And finally, the writer calls you and me (the church of today) to make every effort to enter into this “rest” (verse 11).

So it seems that in order to understand what this rest is, we need to understand: (1) what it meant for God to rest; (2) what the promised rest was for Israel; (3) then to apply that to you and me today.

First, what does it mean for God to rest? After all, in verses 3b – 4 the writer refers to God’s “Sabbath rest:”

...just as God has said, “So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter *my* rest.’” And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For *somewhere he* has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.” Hebrews 4:3b -4

In citing Psalm 95 we see that, whatever this “rest” is, it is first of all “God’s rest.” “They shall never enter *my* rest,” God says. And when did God rest? God’s “rest” was the Sabbath rest following six days of creative activity. Genesis 2:2-3 says:

By the seventh day *God had finished the work he had been doing*; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he *rested* from all *the work of creating* that he had done. Genesis 2:2-3

Does that mean God just decided to “chill?” After the six days of creation, did he just lean back on his heavenly armchair, prop up his feet and take it easy? Does the Sabbath rest here speak of inactivity? Not at all! What we do see in this passage is that the “rest” God entered has something to do with his “finished work.” It says, “*God had finished the work he had been doing*; so on the seventh day he rested...*from all the work of creating...*” So the “rest,” whatever it is, follows on the heels of work well done. Genesis one concluded with this phrase, “And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good!” The Sabbath rest for God is, in a certain sense, the sign and signature of work well done. It is the positive experience of having finished the work!

Now, what about for Israel? What did the “rest” mean for them? Much of Hebrews 4 talks about Israel’s failure to enter into their promised rest. Let’s look back at the last two verses of chapter 3:

And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Hebrews 3:18-19

Several passages in the Old Testament clearly indicate that the “rest” the writer is talking about is first of all a *place*, the land of Canaan. For example, Joshua 1:13 says thisⁱⁱⁱ:

“Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: ‘The LORD your God is giving you *rest* and has granted you this *land*.’ Joshua 1:13

In this verse the “rest” and the “land” – the Promised Land – seem to be one and the same. And yet later on in Joshua we get the ideas that the “rest” is *more* than a piece of real estate. It also includes the idea of finishing the work by conquering the enemies that are in the land. Joshua 18:2-3 says this:

So Joshua said to the Israelites: “How long will you wait before you begin to *take possession of the land* that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you? Joshua 18:3

God’s rest followed the good work of creating. Israel’s rest was to follow the good work of conquering. And in conquering the land, the Israelites were taking hold of their rightful inheritance. In fact, that’s what the words “take possession of the land” mean in this verse. They mean “to inherit.” For the majority of the nation, however, they failed not only to “inherit” the land by conquering it, but they failed to even enter the land!

As we move towards applying what we’ve seen so far to you and me, we need to ask some important questions: Were the more than a million people whose bodies dropped dead in the wilderness “saved?” Were they God’s children? Did their failure to trust and obey result in the loss of salvation?

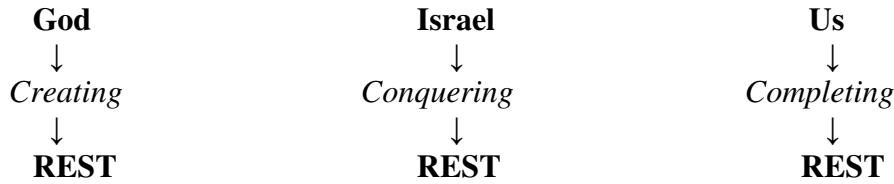
Hebrews 3:16-17 makes it very clear that those whose bodies fell in the desert were the same ones that Moses led out of Egypt: “Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?” They were the same ones that put the blood of that paschal lamb on their door post. They were the very ones who saw God’s miraculous deliverance in the crossing of the Red Sea. And more than that, they were the very ones to whom God says in Numbers 14:20, “I forgive you!” These people were God’s children!

What the generation whose bodies fell dead in the wilderness lost was *not* salvation, but the *reward* of rest. In other words, entering and conquering the land is not a picture of heaven; if it were, then Moses himself did not enter heaven, as he failed to enter the Promised Land! Entering and conquering the land – this promised “rest” – speaks rather of the reward of a work well done. Remember, for God the rest follows the work of *creation*. But for Israel it followed the work of *conquering* the land. It spoke of laying hold of their rightful inheritance.

Now, what about you and me? As believers, what exactly is the rest that we are called to experience? We better ask ourselves this question. The writer tells us it’s very important! Notice what he says in verse 1:

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, *let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it*. Hebrews 4:1

If we can fall short of it, we'd better ask ourselves what it is!^{iv} Remember, for God it was the outcome of work well done – the work of *creating*. For Israel, it was to be the reward of work well done – the work of *conquering*. And for you and me? It also has something to do with the positive outcome of work well done – the work of *completing* God's will for our lives.



This is not a new or novel teaching. Elsewhere, Paul puts it this way:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. 2 Timothy 4:7-8

The writer to the Hebrews says the same thing but in other words:

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be *richly rewarded*. You need to persevere so that when you *have done the will of God*, you will receive what he has promised. Hebrews 10:35-36

Simply put, the “rest” of Hebrews 4 is the end-time reward of work well done. It at least includes Jesus saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share your Master’s happiness” (Matthew 25:23). The book of Hebrews calls it our “inheritance.” Just as Joshua and the people he led were to “take possession of” (i.e. inherit) the land, so we today are to “take possession of” (i.e. inherit) our reward. For *all* believers there is the inheritance of heaven. But for *some* believers there is ALSO the inheritance of reward for work well done. In the book of Hebrews that reward is described as “rest.”

To put this into perspective, let me try to visualize it this way:

Non-Christian	Fleshly Christian	Spiritual Christian	Rewarded Christian
<i>Unbelieving</i>	<i>Drifting</i>	<i>Maturing</i>	<i>Resting</i>
<i>Israel in Egypt Ex. 1-11</i>	<i>Israel in wilderness Ex. 12 – Dt. 34</i>	<i>Israel conquering Land Josh. 1-11</i>	<i>Receiving the inheritance Josh 12-22</i>
<i>“natural man” 1 Cor. 2:14</i>	<i>“men of flesh” “infants” 1 Cor. 3:1-3 Heb. 5:13</i>	<i>“spiritual” “mature” 1 Cor. 3:1 Heb. 5:14</i>	<i>“rewarded” Heb. 10:35-37</i>

That's the first question: What is the promised "rest" that we are called to enter? But here's the second question...

HOW DO I ENTER THIS PROMISED "REST?"

One thing is very clear in all these warning passages – the speaker is addressing *believers*, like you and me. In other words, the danger of drifting away, of turning away, of hardening our hearts, or of failing to enter God's "rest" is very real! Be careful...it can happen to *you*! It can happen to me!

You see, you don't just "chill" in the Christian life. There's no room for "treading water." You're either moving forward, or you're moving backward. In a small men's growth group that I'm a part of, one of our members, Glenwood McGeorge, described it as paddling upstream. The moment you stop paddling, you start drifting. Ever experienced that? I did once in some of the roughest white water of the gorges of central France. What happened? I lost in five seconds of sitting on my "duff" the ground (or should I say water?) I had gained in five minutes of paddling with all my might! And believe me, it's the same in the Christian life. Are you sitting still, going nowhere? No you're not! You might *think* you're sitting still, but you're actually drifting away! So be careful...don't drift, draw near! Don't turn away, but make every effort to enter God's promised rest, his rich reward for work well-done.

That's exactly what the writer tells us in verse 11: "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience." That command "make every effort" translates only one word in the language of the writer. It literally means "do your very best and do it in a hurry." It comes from a word meaning "to use speed." Remember the well know old English expression in movies like *Pride and Prejudice*, "make haste, make haste!" The writer is saying that: "Make haste, there's no time to waste!" Today is the day!

So just *how* do you and I make every effort to enter into this rest of Christ's rich reward? We enter into this rest by *active faith*. Look at verse 2: "For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, *because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*" Israel, he says, failed to enter God's promised rest by conquering the land. Why? "The message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith." And then in verse 3 he speaks of you and me: "Now we who have believed enter that rest..." We enter the "rest" of Christ's rich reward through *active faith*.

What do I mean by that? Active faith is intentionally moving forward towards the completion of God's will in our lives. God rested after the good work of creation. Israel was to rest after the work of conquering her enemies. We will rest after faithfully completing God's will in our lives. Active faith is picking up our spiritual paddles and moving upstream towards our rich reward as we keep our eyes on Jesus. On the other hand, if you're sitting in your spiritual canoe, on your spiritual "duff," believe me...the currents within you and around you are going to take you in exactly the opposite direction. They will take you *away* from your reward of rest.

So the first way that you and I enter the "rest" of Christ's rich reward – the reward of hearing him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" – is by active faith. And according to Hebrews,

active faith is obedient faith. Active faith hears God's voice and obeys. Active faith does not harden the heart. Active faith keeps us connected to God's people, to God's "house" (3:1-6).

I believe the book of Hebrews interprets itself. So I've asked, "Where in Hebrews does the writer describe for us what active faith looks like?" And my mind went immediately to Hebrews 11 and the biblical Hall of Fame of heroes of the faith. Then, after recounting the lives of so many who chose to "paddle upstream" by faith, the speaker tells us this:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Hebrews 12:1

Here we move from the image of paddling to running. But the encouragement is the same: *don't stop!* In fact, be willing to take drastic measures to be sure that you stay on course. This involves getting rid of sin in our lives. This also involves getting rid of "weights" in our lives. We make every effort to enter God's promised rest – his rich reward for work well done – by stripping ourselves of these two hindrances: sin and weights. For some of us, we're struggling with what is outright sin. And you and God know exactly what that is. Others of us are struggling with something more subtle but equally pernicious. It's called hindrances – those things in our lives that are not outright sin, but they are keeping us from paddling upstream against the currents. They are keeping us from running the race with perseverance.

But then the writer tells us what to do next: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." Did you know that the Greek names for Joshua and Jesus are the same? The first "Jesus" (i.e. Joshua) did not lead the people to rest. They failed to enter into their full reward. But the second one is fully able to do this. Jesus said, "Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." But He tells us what that means: "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me..." The "yoke" Jesus offers us is the life of discipleship. It's the "yoke" of paddling upstream by his grace against the currents within and the currents without. It's the yoke of running the race with perseverance.

God tells you and me: Make every effort to enter my promised rest, my rich reward for work well done. What about you, do you want *real* rest?

ⁱ Submitted by J.R. Love to www.preachingtoday.com.

ⁱⁱ Bill Ray, Litchfield Park, Arizona, and Brian Lowery, associate editor, PreachingToday.com; sources: Ken Park, *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* (2006) (World Almanac Books, 2006), p. 755, and "Numbers," TIME (9-17-07), p. 20

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. "You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit, since you have not yet reached the *resting place* and the *inheritance* the LORD your God is giving you. But you will cross the Jordan and settle in *the land* the LORD your God is giving you as an *inheritance*, and he will give you *rest* from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety." Deuteronomy 12:8-10

^{iv} Remember, we're right in the middle of the second main warning passage of this book. As you can see on the chart, the first one was Hebrews 2:1-4. Verse one says, "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we *do not drift away!*" So the first danger we are warned against is "drifting away." But now we are in the second warning passage, from 3:1 – 4:16. And the main warning here is "Don't fail to enter God's rest."