

THE SABBATH REST

Hebrews 4:1-5

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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 (Heb. 4:1).

One of the striking characteristics of the Book of Hebrews is the distinctive view of history it sets forth. We have been encountering this in the long exhortation that began in chapter 3 and continues through chapter 4. This exhortation centers around the writer of Hebrew's use of Psalm 95, with the key verse, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

The key term is "Today," which the writer says applies to his 1st century readers just as it did to David's readers a thousand years before, just as it did to the Exodus generation he is referring to. "Today" is the time when the promise that all believers will enter God's rest is still open and available. "Today" in that sense, is our time just as it was theirs.

The backdrop, as we have seen in previous studies, is the Exodus wanderings of Israel in the wilderness. That generation failed the test; they complained and disobeyed God, not turning to him in faith. As a result they did not enter into God's rest -- that is, into the Promised Land. The author of Hebrews now emphasizes: "You need to realize that you are in a similar situation. Your trials are like their trials; how you respond to them will determine whether or not you will enter into God's salvation."

This is what I mean by the Book of Hebrews' view of history. As far as salvation is concerned, we are in essentially the same historical setting as the Israelites. This is especially true when it comes to those early Christians who first received this letter. Like them, we are living after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, after he has ascended into heaven and taken up the seat of authority there, and before the time of his coming when the opportunity for salvation will be gone and the harvest finally gathered. Therefore, how we now respond to the gospel "today" is the most decisive element in our lives.

THEREFORE TAKE HEED

It is in that context that we read the words of verse 1: "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." The Greek text literally says, "Let us be afraid." The point is to say: "Therefore, let us be alarmed at the prospect, given this decisive age of opportunity and testing, that any of you should not press on to salvation."

We see a couple of emphases here that are central to the overall message of this book. First is the demand for perseverance under trial. That is what he is getting at by saying "lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it." The metaphor is an athletic one, and the idea is of finishing the race." Perseverance is an essential element of the Christian life. Indeed, running the race to the end is the hallmark of genuine, saving faith, while falling away is the mark of a spurious faith that does not lead to salvation.

The second emphasis is that of corporate or mutual responsibility. We saw this a few verses earlier: "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13). Here we have the same point of view. "Let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it." Notice that the subject of the sentence is plural -- it is "us" who must be careful -- while the object is singular -- lest any one fall away. That is the attitude we need in the church today, one that says: "Yes, I am my brothers' keeper, I have a stake in the spiritual affairs of others here and a responsibility not merely for my own salvation but for theirs as well." That is not an invitation for destructive meddling but

for the mutual building up that is to define life in the church. Simon Kistemacker is right when he observes:

We ought to take careful note of members who may be drifting from the truth in doctrine or conduct and then pray with them and for them. We are constantly looking for spiritual stragglers.¹

Hearing those words I cannot help but recall my days as an officer in the United States Army. Early every morning all the units would be out doing physical fitness training, hundreds of little units running in formation, often for long periods of time and until the men were utterly exhausted. You could tell everything you needed to know about the morale and the leadership and even the combat effectiveness of a unit by the way they ran in formation. A good unit was all together, even if they had to slow the pace a little bit. There was mutual encouragement going on. If a man fell out – and that is the very language in verse 1 – if a man was exhausted or dispirited and lagged behind, a good unit would turn around to retrieve him, to exhort and bring back his determination. Not being a particularly gifted long-distance runner, I can remember times when I thought I could go no further, but was literally carried by the encouragement of my fellow soldiers until my legs regained their strength. That is what it is like to be part of a real team.

The opposite was true of lesser outfits. In poor units you would see soldiers straggling way behind, falling out and even quitting altogether, while the main body went on oblivious. Soldiers who would have persevered in more cohesive outfits fell by the wayside -- they fell short.

That is what the writer of Hebrews wants us to avoid, especially since the stakes are so much higher in the matter of salvation. A good church, therefore, will not be defined by the size of its building, nor by the number of people attending or the amount of money raised. By this standard a quality church will be one that leaves no stragglers to lag behind or perish in unbelief. The kind of church the writer of Hebrews is looking for is one where the *discouraged* are propelled forward by *encouragement*, where the weak find strength in the care of others, and those in danger of being deceived are recalled to the truth in a spirit of love.

¹ Simon Kistemacker, *Hebrews*, p. 104.

SALVATION AS REST

The matter the writer of Hebrews has in mind here is nothing less than the eternal salvation of our souls. He has been referring to this with a term we have not yet discussed in detail. Consistently, and drawing his terminology from Psalm 95, he describes salvation as the “*rest*” offered by God.

What does he mean by this kind of language? The first way to answer that is to look at the context, namely, the Exodus of God’s people from Egypt to the Promised Land. As one commentator explains:

The concept of rest in the context of the promise to the Exodus generation had the connotation of entrance into Canaan (the Promised Land), where Israel would experience relief from turmoil and security from their enemies.²

In what sense, however, does this concept to the writer of Hebrews’ readers? He does not mean that they will lead lives of material riches and temporal peace, since this letter was written to those facing persecution, with all the deprivation and danger that implies. The New Testament does not promise believers that they will be free from strife in this world. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (Jn. 16:33).

Obviously, then, the meaning is spiritual. It is our souls that will be provisioned and kept safe. Surely this is what Jesus had in mind in his great Bread of Life discourse, recorded in John chapter 6:

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty... This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. (Jn. 6:36, 39).

Jesus offers our souls the same benefits offered to Israel in the Promised Land: bountiful provision and complete security. Indeed, the language Moses used for the Promised Land may be directly applied to our spiritual blessings in Jesus Christ:

A land flowing with milk and honey... A land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the LORD your God cares

² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, p. 98.

for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. *Deuteronomy 11:9-12*

Christians experience trials of all sorts, just as Israel's faith was challenged in the Promised Land. But Paul could write of God's salvation rest words that God's faithful people have always found true: "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

GOD'S SABBATH REST

All of that is clearly implied by the writer of Hebrews' reference to the Exodus wandering and the offer of rest. That is what he is emphasizing by repeating the quote from Psalm 95 in verses 3 and 5: "They shall not enter my rest." The point is not just to reiterate the failure of the unbelieving Israelites, but to emphasize the reality of the rest that was and remains offered.

In the latter part of verse 3 and in verse 4, however, the writer of Hebrews adds another Old Testament reference to expand his definition of the salvation rest. Here the citation is from the creation account at the beginning of Genesis: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." The point here, and it is a weighty one indeed, is that the rest God offers to us in salvation is nothing less than the very rest he himself has enjoyed since the completion of his creation work.

We remember from Genesis 1 that God labored for six days, each day adding more to his creation wonder. Then on the seventh day God rested. This rest was not a temporary state but God's abiding condition. The first day was concluded with these words: "There was evening, and there was morning, the first day" (Gen. 1:5). That phrase was repeated for each of God's six working days. This pattern, however, does not continue into the seventh day. Unlike the other days, this Sabbath day of rest does not end, it is not brought to completion, but goes on forever.

When we say that God rested, we do not mean that he went on vacation or took a break from the job. The picture is rather that having made and ordered and subdued the creation according to his desired plan, his control was so absolute, his sovereignty so

unquestioned, that God enthrones himself without effective opposition. His reign is one of rest -- that is, one of absolute supremacy, unassailable sovereignty, absolute control, so much so that he exerts all his rule from the position of rest. It is the kind of rest possible to a God who could say these words from Isaiah 46:9-10, "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand'" (Isa. 46:9-10). So when we think of God's Sabbath rest, we should immediately think of his utter, uncontested sovereign rule.

To enter God's eternal Sabbath rest, therefore, means to enter into saving relationship with that kind of God. When God becomes our Savior and Lord we become a part of that Kingdom in which he so utterly and sovereignly rules over us and for us. His work in our lives is established, even as the writer of Hebrews says of God's work in creation, in verse 3, "His works were finished from the foundation of the world."

This means that if you have put your faith in this saving God, if you have trusted his gospel in Jesus Christ, you now can rest. You can stop worrying about whether or not you will have a place in heaven. You can stop fretting about whether you will endure as a Christian. You can stop being afraid of what the world will do to you. You can face the prospect of loss in this life, of suffering, even of death, for yours is the God of the Sabbath, he who established his purposes forever from the beginning. Through faith in him you enter into his rest. He is the God who says to his people, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11). So you can rest in his saving purpose for you.

Anyone who has been a soldier knows what it means to be in field operations and then to be sent behind the lines for a period of rest. On the front lines you are constantly dirty, your food is inconsistent and what you get is bland to eat. Most of all is the constant vigilance, the need to be always alert to danger, which is seldom far away.

I vividly recall what it was like to be pulled out for rest, taking my first shower in days, eating hot and freshly-cooked meals. Best of all

was the sense of peace, the opportunity to sleep deeply and long, the rest of security and provision.

That is what we enter spiritually by faith, and what we forfeit by unbelief. Jesus calls out, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30). He offers rest from the burden of your sins, which he takes onto his back and puts away at the cross. Rest from the troubles of this world. Yes, you will have them in this life, Jesus said. But he went on to promise, “Take heart, for I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

Salvation rest is living in God’s presence, feeling the warmth of his love, trusting the strength of his hands to hold us forever. It is saying with the apostle Paul:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Romans 8:38-39*

THE WAY INTO GOD’S REST

Realizing this, we can understand the urgency with which the writer of Hebrews speaks about faith in Jesus Christ. The question is: How can I enter into this wonderful rest? And the answer is By trusting the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation. Verse 3 tells us, “We who have believed enter that rest.” Who are the people who are saved, the people of God who enter into his rest and enjoy a saving relationship with him? It is those who believe the message of the gospel they have heard.

Since he is writing into a church situation, our author makes a point in verse 2 that he is especially concerned about. He writes: “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.”

Do you understand the point? It is this: It is not enough just to come to church, any more than it was enough to have been a member of

Israel during the Exodus. It is not enough to hear the gospel or even to understand it, to explain it to others or even to appreciate the wonder and beauty of the gospel. Unless you receive the gospel in faith you will not enter into God's rest; you will not be saved. Indeed, if you hear the gospel and do not combine the hearing with believing, if you do not respond to it by confessing yourself a sinner and casting yourself upon Christ for salvation, that gospel, which verse 12 describes as "sharper than any two-edged sword" will become the source of your damnation instead of your salvation. To all who hear but do not believe, regardless of anything else, come God's words as repeated in verse 3: "I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"

If you have been coming to church, listening to the gospel as it is preached, perhaps enjoying the music and the fine architecture, but have not personally put your trust in Christ, you are in great peril. Do not delude yourself by thinking you are in a neutral or even a promising situation, for you are not. Until you receive Christ as your Savior you are a rebel against the gospel you have heard, you are excluded from God's rest and instead are under his wrath. You must believe the gospel and rest upon Christ's saving work for you.

A story explains this idea of faith as resting. John G. Paton was a pioneer missionary to the New Hebrides islands. He set about the work of translating the Bible into the peoples' language which until then had no written form. Before long he encountered the problem that their language had no word for faith, which given the Bible's message was some problem indeed. Paton had learned to speak the natives' tongue and one day he went on a hunting expedition. As the hunters came back from their exertions he watched as they threw themselves into chairs and cried out, "My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest." Paton jumped to his feet and wrote the words down; they provided his translation for the word "faith" in this native Bible.³

Similarly, we might substitute that expression into these verses from the Bible: "Stretch yourself out on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "For God so loved the world that he gave his

³ c.f. James Montgomery Boice: *The Gospel of John*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, p. 195.

one and only Son, that whoever stretches out on him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

What this means is that you must rely for your salvation not on what you have done or might do – all of which lead only to condemnation because of sin and failure because of weakness – but on what Jesus has done. Verse 10 of Hebrews 4 puts it this way: “Whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.” You no longer trust your own works but rest upon God and his finished work of salvation.

What a difference it makes to rest upon the Lord Jesus and enter into God’s rest, which is like no other. It is the rest that is peace with God and which produces joy within. That is all the more reason to trust in the Lord during this present day of opportunity, when the promise of entering God’s rest still stands. For it will not profit any of us to hear without believing, without resting and stretching out on him who came to save, and calls us into God’s eternal Sabbath rest.