

# Hebrews 4

## Laboring to Enter into Rest

*Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief – v. 11*

An ancient Latin poet by the name of Ovid once wrote: *Take rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop.* This ancient poet was probably not familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures but was making an observation based on the common laws of nature. There is a certain rejuvenation that takes place in the soil when it's given time to rest and apart from that rest the soil can be overworked and as a result become less productive. But when the soil is allowed a certain period of rest it gives a bountiful crop.

We saw in our Bible reading from Lev. 25 that the Israelites were commanded to let their fields rest every 7<sup>th</sup> year. By following God's precept they were told that in the 6<sup>th</sup> year their fields would bring forth such a bountiful harvest that it would carry them through until the harvest of the 8<sup>th</sup> year.

The Israelites themselves, I'm sure you know, were commanded to rest every 7<sup>th</sup> day and so this law of nature is also discovered to be a physical and a spiritual law of God. If you have a marginal reading to v. 9 in your Bibles you'll discover that the verse that reads *There remaineth, therefore, a rest to the people of God* in the margin reads *There remaineth, therefore, a keeping of a sabbath.*

The Lord that created us certainly knows how we are able best to function. And I think the argument could be made that a fruitful Christian must be a restful Christian. And I'm not speaking now with particular reference to a fruitful Christian being a Sabbath keeper. I do believe that there is a keeping of a sabbath to the people of God and that the practical benefits to observing the Lord's Day are great. I do believe that the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment presents to us a moral issue and not just a practical issue and to give no regard to the Lord's day is to trample under foot a provision that was given to us by God for our benefit. We trample underfoot, not merely a Divine precept, but the very love and loyalty that God manifests to us in giving us such a day.

The rest that is spoken of in Heb. 4, however, is a rest that is more far reaching than only the observance of the Lord's Day. I believe the subject of these verses in Heb. 4 is the subject of **gospel rest**. Notice again the words of vv. 1-3:

1 *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.* 2 *For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.* 3 *For we which have believed do enter into rest,* You see the connection here between this rest and the gospel? The rest under consideration is the rest that comes through believing the gospel.

There follows a few verses later in v. 11 the exhortation *Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.* You see, then, how the

exhortations in vv. 1 and 11 pertain to this gospel rest? *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.* And in v. 11 *Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest.*

Gospel rest is the subject being treated in this chapter of Hebrews. Indeed I think you could say that this chapter is the primary chapter in all the New Testament on the subject of rest. This chapter deals more extensively with the matter than any other portion in the New Testament.

This is not to say that the subject isn't touched upon in other places. You're familiar, I'm sure, with Christ's promise in Mt. 11:28, 29 *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.* Would you note from this verse that the rest Christ promises comes as a result of learning of Him?

And in the book of Acts we find a vivid description of what the early church was like when it was at rest. Ac 9:31 *Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.* What a vivid picture this text presents to us of the church at rest. It was a church that grew spiritually and numerically. It was a church that was characterized by reverence – *walking in the fear of the Lord.* And it was a church at peace – *knowing the comfort of the Holy Ghost.*

Now the thing I want you to see from Hebrews 4, especially in v. 11 is that this rest can be elusive and challenging. *Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest* we're exhorted. It seems like a contradiction on the surface of it. If I'm laboring then I'm not resting. How can I rest if the very rest in question requires that we labor?

The very fact that we must labor for this rest is an indication that this rest does not come naturally. Spiritual warfare must be waged in order to gain this rest. It takes a certain amount of effort in order to enter into the blessing of this rest. And as we'll see in the course of our study much is at stake in terms of the Christian's peace and joy and usefulness in his service to Christ when it comes to the matter of this rest.

It might be worth noting at the outset of this study that the Hebrew Christians were not enjoying a time of rest at the time of the writing of Hebrews. They were under great pressure to deny Christ and to come back to the fold of apostate Judaism. Life was not easy. They were facing severe trials. And we can certainly draw the present day application from such a setting that when we face pressures and we're undergoing severe trials and the challenges of life seem insurmountable – it's in those times especially that we need to learn to enter anew into our rest. Our sanctity and sanity depend on it. Our testimonies depend on it. Our fruitfulness, like the fields of Lev. 25 depends upon our rest. And so I want to focus on this exhortation this morning:

## Let Us Labor, Therefore, to Enter into That Rest

In order to conduct this labor to a positive result would you consider with me first of all:

### I. The Forces We Labor Against

The very fact that we have to labor for this rest indicates to us that we meet resistance. The word *labor* is defined in a Greek lexicon as *exerting one's self*. And the implication is very plain that if we're exerting ourselves we're meeting resistance of some kind. We're not left to guess about the resistance we meet. The chapter we've read reveals it.

Notice in our text the second part of the verse *let us labor to enter into that rest lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief* (v. 11). There's the first force of resistance – unbelief. Now the example referred to in this text points us back to the previous chapter where the author makes reference to the Israelites not having the faith to enter the promised land. Heb 3:17 *But with whom was he grieved forty years? [was it] not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? Verse 19 – So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.*

You may recall, if you know your Old Testament history, that it was at Kadesh-barnea that the Israelites caved in to their unbelief. 12 spies were sent into the land of Canaan to scout the territory. And when they returned they spoke glowingly of the land acknowledging that it was a land that flowed with milk and honey but they also reported that there was no way they could conquer the land. The opposition appeared too strong. There were walled cities. There were giants in the land that led 10 of the 12 spies to compare themselves to grasshoppers in comparison to the size of the sons of Anak.

Only Joshua and Caleb had the faith to say they could and should at once go into the land. *Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it* (Num. 14:30). But the other 10 in the very next verse say: *We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we* (Num. 13:31). Every time I read Numbers 14 I'm struck by what the whole issue boiled down to. It's revealed in v. 8 where Joshua and Caleb say *If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey.*

Here is where unbelief asserts itself most strongly and builds its case against us – *if the LORD delight in us*. Here is where the line is drawn in the sand, as it were and here is where we will either enter into rest or be dominated by anxiety – *if the LORD delight in us*. Why would the Israelites believe that the Lord delighted in them? They had been grumblers from the moment they left Egypt. They had been stiff-necked even before they left.

And here is the force we must labor against, the force that says the Lord couldn't possibly delight in me. Why would He? I'm aware that I come short of His glory. I'm aware of my sins and shortcomings. There's nothing in me that would suggest to me that the Lord delights in me. And when we give in to this mindset then unbelief wins the day.

And the way we give in to such a mindset is to get our eyes off Christ and focus on ourselves. It makes perfect sense to build the case against ourselves when we look to ourselves.

And if we would enter into gospel rest then we must be able to affirm that God does delight in us by virtue of the merits of His Son. He delights in you because He delights in Christ and He sees you as joined to Christ.

Another way unbelief prevails is to look at the circumstances we face. The 10 spies weren't exaggerating when they reported that the opposition was powerful. There really were walled cities and there really were giants in the land. And when the circumstances we face become the things that dominate our minds and hearts then unbelief will prevail in our lives also and we'll fail to know the rest that we ought to know.

So the first force that we labor against and must overcome is unbelief. Another force we must labor against is a hard heart. This point is emphasized in the previous chapter of Hebrews especially but also here in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter.

- Heb 3:8 *Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness:*
- Heb 3:13 *But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*
- Heb 3:15 *While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.*
- Heb 4:7 *Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, To day, after so long a time; as it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*

Hard heartedness is what results from the neglect of spiritual things as well as a love for the world. And you can be sure that when our hearts become spiritually desensitized because we've lost our focus then your soul will not be at rest. The only rest you will know will be the rest that the world affords and if you look at the world today I think you would agree with me that the world is restless – the world is agitated and the world never finds a settled contentment.

These are a couple of the resistance forces, then, that we labor against. We must overcome unbelief and we must overcome the hardness of heart that can come about where unbelief reigns too long. Would you consider with me next that if we would labor to enter into rest we think upon:

## II. The Means We Must Utilize

And the most prominent means that stands in stark contrast to what we considered in the previous head would be faith. Faith is what stands in contrast to unbelief. Now faith is a very broad term and even a very popular term in our day. There is so much emphasis in our culture on the need for faith with no instruction of any kind as to how faith should be exercised or what we should have faith in. Those things seems to be unimportant. The

important thing, according to the culture of our day is that you have faith in something, it doesn't really matter what.

The Christian knows better. And unless your faith is focused on the right thing and exercised the right way you'll never enter into rest. What, then, do we place our faith in and how do we exercise our faith?

You'll notice with me in v. 1 that faith must be placed in a promise. *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.* I made reference in my introduction to one of the most wonderful promises and invitations that Christ extends to us in Mt. 11:28, 29 *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*

And let me repeat here what I said in my introduction that our rest is gained by learning of Christ. The author of Hebrews knew this also and so we read in Heb. 3:1 *Wherefore, Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.*

Consider the fact that He finished His work of obtaining redemption so that there's nothing to add to it and you can find rest for your soul for there's no work for you to do. There's no work you could do but there's also no work you need do. Christ finished the work.

I believe it's important to recognize here also that there is a particular way in which faith in Christ must be exercised in order to enter our rest. I love the way the translators of our Authorized Version use the term *yield* in Romans 6.

*Yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God – Rom. 6:13*

*Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? – Rom. 6:16.*

I know that modern translations use the term *present*. And you've probably heard it said along the way that the term *yield* in Romans 6 is the same Greek word as the word *present* in Rom. 12:1 *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*

There is an action in the term *present*. And I know that the action of presenting ourselves to God is a necessary act of devotion and consecration. But I think the term *yield* also captures the idea of a passive act in which we simply, like Mary in Lk. 10, sit at the feet of Christ with our hearts open to His love and His grace and His mercy. We throw open the doors of our hearts to Him and He comes and sups with us and in that yielding to His promises and to His person we find rest for our souls.

And from this posture of being yielded to Him or of having our hearts opened to His promise and His presence we are enabled to cast all our care upon Him with the assurance that He cares for us. Or to use the words of the hymn we sang earlier – we’re able to take all our anxiety and all our care and bring them to the mercy seat and leave them there.

I shouldn’t leave this point without noting in Heb. 4 that it’s in connection with the subject of rest that we find the exhortation in v. 16 *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.* We utilize our faith, with the right focus and in the right manner. And we utilize the means of grace which in this case includes the promises of God’s word and the place of prayer in which we obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

There really is no excuse, then, is there, for failing to enter into our rest? There is resistance, to be sure, that must be met and overcome by our labor. But all the means for overcoming that resistance are readily at hand. The promise of rest issued by Christ Himself – rest in the glorious truth that you’re accepted in the beloved. The promise of sins forgiven – the promise of righteousness bestowed and the promise of Christ’s very presence – *Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.* And the means of utilizing the throne of grace through prayer so that whatever agitates your heart and brings anxiety to your soul can be brought to this throne of grace and left there.

It remains for us to consider in closing:

### III. What’s at Stake in This Issue of Rest

Verse 1 presents to us a very serious issue with regard to what’s at stake. *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.* Falling short of the promise – that’s a very serious issue. And the example that’s cited in the previous chapter of those Israelites who perished in the wilderness demonstrates to us that there were many who came short of the promise of rest and in the end were lost.

I believe that hell will be a place of restlessness. When we read of weeping and gnashing of teeth there is nothing in that picture that would suggest rest. Rebellion against God stirs restlessness and anxiety in a soul and that restless anxiety will come to full fruition when a lost sinner is being scourged by a conscience that will forever remind him that he’s guilty of breaking God’s laws and that he’s a Christ-rejecter.

Certainly an element of that restless anxiety will be the sinner’s knowledge that he was exposed to the gospel but chose sin instead. So the most serious issue at stake in this issue of rest is the very eternal destiny of your soul.

But would you note with me that the author of Hebrews is not merely addressing those that come short of the promise of rest. He’s addressing those that *seem to come short of it* (v. 1). They may not actually come short of it but they seem to. This category would have to include many Christians who, for whatever reason, are hampering their testimonies because they don’t appear to be at rest.

I think you could picture this kind of Christian as being one who professes faith in Christ and his hope is actually in Christ but when it comes to his day to day living he appears to be as restless as those in the world. The things he sees in the world perhaps have so discouraged him that he finds his heart being dominated by a downcast and pessimistic outlook on life. He meets the description of the sower in the parable of the sower who receives the seed among the thorns and so the care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and he becomes unfruitful (Mt. 13:22).

We definitely don't want to fall short of the promise of rest – but neither should we even want to give the appearance of seeming to fall short of that promise. You begin to see, then, what's at stake? Your testimony as a Christian is at stake. Your usefulness in your service to Christ is at stake. Your sanity and your sanctity are at stake. Your joy and peace and sense of God's love and grace and favor are all at stake.

Oh how we need to give heed to this exhortation then. We need to examine our hearts with an aim of discovering what really rules our hearts and then we need to utilize with diligence and consistency the means of grace in order that we may not fall short or even seem to fall short of the promise of entering into his rest. We know that we'll always meet resistance when it comes to the matter of our rest. Our true rest in the fullest sense of the term will come when we enter into glory. Only in heaven will we be finally and totally free of the forces that resist our rest. Only in glory will we be perfected to the full enjoying of God forever.

In the mean time, however, we can enjoy the blessings of our rest in this world by laboring to overcome that resistance so that we can know the blessing of rest even now. It is our portion now, you see, to have a conscience that is at peace with God because our conscience has been purged from dead works to serve the living God (Heb. 9:14). It is our portion now to reckon on the truth that when Christ died, we died with Him and when He rose we rose with Him. It is our portion now to reckon on the truth that our lives are hidden in Him even as He rules from His throne in heaven. It is our portion now to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God through Christ. It is our portion now to count our sins imputed to Christ and His righteousness imputed to us.

If your faith is strong in these gospel truths then the world around you may toss and turn and the storms of life may blow upon you with gale wind force. You may find yourselves in the deepest valleys where darkness prevails and nothing seems to make sense and yet you'll still be able to rest – to rest in God's promises and to rest in Christ Himself. I believe the prophet Habakkuk demonstrates this rest when he says at the end of his book: *Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon my high places.* May we so labor to enter into the promise of God's rest, then, that circumstances in this world will be able to rob us of what we have in Christ.