

“Rest for the Restless”
Hebrews 4:1-13
June 20, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

The author of Hebrews spends the better part of two chapters explaining and applying the truths of Psalm 95. His primary application is to warn his readers of the danger of missing the rest God has for us, just as many in Israel missed entering the Promised Land. These died in the desert during the forty years in the wilderness because of their unbelief. They missed God’s rest. St. Augustine is famous for his statement about rest. He prayed, “Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.” Today’s passage is something of a meditation on rest.

I think it’s safe to say that our culture doesn’t know very well how to rest. We take vacations to rest and find ourselves more exhausted at the end of the vacation than at the start. We have more time-saving devices than any culture in history, yet still find ourselves with precious little discretionary time. Technologies such as email and the internet promise greater efficiency in our work but end up only allowing work to spill into the parts of our lives that used to be reserved for non-work activities. When we do get time off, we pack it so full of activities that we are left exhausted at the end of a weekend. Maybe it’s time we listen to God’s wisdom about rest.

I. The Already-Not Yet of Our Rest

We need to begin by understanding the Bible’s definition of rest. We will never be able to enter the rest God offers unless we understand something of what that rest is. When we were studying the first part of chapter 3, we noted the significance of the word “house.” Just as that word had a rich biblical background, so the word “rest” does as well. Notice that this rest is referred to as “**his rest**” (4:1), meaning God’s rest. Then in verse 4 he makes it clear that this is referring to God’s seventh-day rest after his six-days of creation work.

Why did God rest after his work of creation? It’s safe to say that he didn’t do so because he was tired. God didn’t say, “Creating the heavens and the earth sure is hard work; I need a break.” Rather, he rested because he was done. God created a world in which he could live with his image-bearers. He was inviting mankind to joyful fellowship with God himself. Imagine a family moving to a new home. They only have enough money to buy a fixer-upper, and it is unfit for the family in its current condition. So the husband and father decides to move into that home early and work to make it suitable for his family. Every day as he works he is thinking about his wife and children, looking forward to the day when

he finishes rehabbing the house and can welcome his family to live there with him. Finally, he finishes and notifies them that they can come. The first night in their new home together is a joyful celebration. He rests from his work because it is completed. God's rest is similar.

What does this tell us about our rest, a rest spoken of as that of entering God's rest? It defines for us what constitutes true rest, teaching us that Augustine hit the nail on the head. Our hearts will be restless until they rest in God. In other words, life in the Garden is what we were created for. It has been pointed out by many that Eden was a type of a temple, a place where mankind could meet with God. What that means for our purposes of defining rest is that rest is best understood as a going back to the paradise of Eden. We need, then, to understand something of God's purpose for mankind in Eden. We will find rest only when we move toward this purpose. In their book, *Becoming Whole*, Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic define human flourishing like this. "People experience human flourishing when they serve as priest-kings, using their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation" (p. 144).

It would require several sermons to unpack everything in that statement, so let's restrict ourselves to the element that is foundational. We flourish as humans, experiencing deep rest, only when we come to enjoy a loving relationship with God. It was the loss of that relationship that led to all other problems, and it will be the recovery of that relationship that leads to genuine rest. Or to say this differently, worship lies at the heart of our rest. That's why the psalm that lies at the heart of Hebrews 3-4, Psalm 95, begins with a call to worship. We enter God's rest by worshipping God. We miss God's rest when we fail to worship. Sunday is to be a day of rest because it is a day of worship.

How is it that we enter this rest and worship God? Verses 2-3 answer that question, first negatively and then positively. **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. For we who have believed enter that rest.**" We enter God's rest by faith in Jesus. We don't enter the rest through work, because God has done the work for us. He did the work of creating the first Eden, and Jesus does the work of restoring us to Eden. We must trust him and his work on our behalf.

John Paton was a missionary to the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. As part of his work, he set out to translate the Bible into the language of the people of those islands. He encountered a problem in his translation effort when he could find no word in their language for faith. Then one day he observed a group of hunters returning from their expedition. As one of them fell into a chair exhausted from the hunt, he exclaimed, "My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest." He quickly wrote down that phrase and used it to describe faith in Jesus. Patton's efforts would be used to bring many of those islanders to

faith in Jesus. When he arrived in 1858, there were no Christians and many cannibals. It is reported that when he died in 1907, there were no cannibals and many Christians. Many had entered the rest brought by Jesus.

This is a rest that our author describes as being both present now, but also not yet fully present. Note the present tense of verse 3. **“We who have believed enter that rest.”** We enter it now. But then he says later, **“there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God”** (4:9). This is a rest we can begin to experience now, but one that we will not fully experience until our eternal heavenly rest.

Let’s pause for a while and celebrate this rest that we can already begin to enjoy. There are many things in life that bring weariness to our souls, things from which we need rest. Verse 10 describes one of those. **“Whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.”** We rest from an identity and merit that is based on our performance and achievement. Maybe you’ve heard of the statement made by Harold Abrams, one of the runners featured in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. The sprinter Abrams said, “I have ten seconds to justify my existence.” When we rest in Christ, we come to the place of realizing that our identity is based not on our works but on Jesus’ works on our behalf. We come to rest in him.

What else brings weariness to us? Fear wearies the soul, fears we are not intended to have. Part of our rest is to be delivered from fears of all kinds, including fears for our nation and world. The theologian Carl F. Henry once said, “The early church didn’t say, ‘Look what the world is coming to!’ They said, ‘Look what has come into the world!’” We also rest from anxiety because, by faith, we come to see that God loves us and is in control of all things in our lives. And he uses everything to bring the good of Christlikeness. We rest from guilt, knowing that our sins are fully paid for by Christ.

And in the future when Jesus takes us home, our rest will be complete. We will be made whole physically, emotionally and spiritually. Our eternal rest will not consist of napping all the time, but with vigorous activity. And that activity will be the full return of what God always had in mind for us. To quote from Fikkert and Kapic again, “People experience human flourishing when they serve as priest-kings, using their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.” It will be the rest that comes from God’s dwelling with his people. **“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”** (Rev. 21:4).

II. The Weapon of Our Rest

Given the promise of this rest, verse 11 gives the application. **“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”** It is possible to miss this rest. Apparently, entry into this rest will require something similar to what was needed for Israel to enter the Promised Land in the days of Joshua. Just as they had to fight, we are going to need to fight as well. But our fight will not be against people, but against the workings of sin in our own hearts. As we saw back in chapter three, sin deceives us (3:13), keeping us from trust in God. Thankfully, we have a powerful weapon to help us in our fight against the deceitfulness of sin and the hardening of our own hearts.

That weapon is the sword of God’s word. We are told here that the Word of God is living and active, with the result that it can speak to you about present needs within your life. Though the latest part of the Bible we have was written in the late first century, over 1900 years ago, it speaks with a fresh relevance to us today. It is unlike any other book because it is alive just as God is alive. I was concerned about my mother this week, as she continues to decline. A church member texted me a verse that came alive to my heart. **“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”** That promise gave me great comfort as I thought of my mother’s precarious health and her approaching death.

Another way I commonly experience this living and active quality of God’s word is in the effect it has when preached. It has not been unusual for me to be accused of targeting people in the congregation with a particular sermon application. I have even had people think that I came to know some secret about them through the violation of a confidence. For example, it has not been unusual for a husband to say, “Has my wife been talking to you this week?” The truth is that I’m not smart enough to do that. What is happening is the living and active word of God is at work in a person’s life.

The second quality of God’s word that is mentioned here is its penetrating ability. It is able to pierce **“to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”** The idea here is the ability of God’s word to get to the places in our lives that are hidden and inaccessible to us. It does so as a sharp, double-edged sword which cuts in two directions. The two directions in which the sword of God’s word cuts are convicting us of sin and reassuring us of God’s promises. We need both, don’t we? There are times when we need to be convicted of sin, and these sins are almost always hidden to our sight. The sword of God’s word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, works to cut us open to see what was previously hidden to us. And then we need God’s sword to cut in the other direction and reassure us of our complete forgiveness through Christ. To say this in words that are familiar to most of you, it is through the double-edged sword of God’s word that we come to see that we are far worse sinners than we ever knew and at the same time far more loved than we ever dared hope.

Let me give an example of the power of God's word in a story from a former church member. Her story is familiar to some of you who knew her. It is published in the book by Fikkert and Kapic that I mentioned earlier. Mimi's parents divorced when she was a young girl. From the age of nine, she was repeatedly sexually abused by a fourteen-year-old boy, leading to a sexually promiscuous lifestyle and a heart filled with guilt and shame. She became an alcoholic by age ten. When she turned twelve, she ran away with an eighteen-year-old boy to Atlanta. Before long, he grew tired of her and sold her to several men. They kept her high on LSD and passed her around to be sexually abused. With the help of a private investigator, her father rescued her, but not before much damage had been done to her. The next three decades of her life included drug and alcohol addiction, sexual abuse and promiscuity, an abortion, mental illness, multiple incarcerations, and homosexuality. At age forty-three, her female lover, with whom she had been living for seven years, was diagnosed with colon cancer and Mimi was devastated. In desperation, she cried out, "Lord Jesus, I need help." A clear thought emerged through the fog in her brain. It was a word from Scripture. **"Fear not, I am Jehovah-Rapha your healer."** The sword of God's Word came alive to Mimi and pierced her heart. She became a follower of Jesus, and life has not been the same since. She found her way to our church, where she experienced that healing touch from God that many have experienced here at Altadena. She later felt God's call to move to Chattanooga, where she met a man she later married. She also developed a ministry there called "Love's Arm," a ministry that reaches women trapped in the sex industry. Mimi estimates that over 95 percent of the people they are trying to help are victims themselves of sexual abuse. God is using her to rescue many of these women. And it all started with the powerful sword of God's word piercing her heart, bringing her into God's rest and allowing her to be used to bring many others into that same rest.

CONCLUSION:

At the conclusion of our service today, we are going to sing this great hymn, "Jesus, I Am Resting, Resting." It was a favorite hymn of Hudson Taylor, founder of China Inland Mission. As the name of that mission indicates, Taylor felt called to reach the interior parts of that vast land of China. Prior to his efforts, Christian missionaries were focused exclusively on the coastal regions of China. Not surprisingly, his pioneering efforts resulted in much suffering and stress in his life. His son wrote of the way he was able to rest in Jesus.

Day and night this was his secret, "just to roll the burden on the Lord." Frequently those who were wakeful in the little house at Chinkiang might hear, at two or three in the morning, the soft refrain of Mr. Taylor's favorite hymn ["Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art"]. He had learned that for him only one life was possible—just that blessed life of resting and rejoicing in the Lord under all circumstances, while He dealt with the difficulties, inward and outward, great and small.