

“Entering God’s Rest”

Introduction: You’ve probably seen the statistics that reveal how sleep deprived we have become as a nation. Well over half of Americans get less than the minimum recommended seven hours of sleep each night. Too little sleep leads to numerous health problems such that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have declared our sleep problem to be a public health epidemic.

Not only is physical rest a significant issue for the human race, but we also need spiritual rest. We need not only to enter the rest our beds beckon us to enjoy; we need to enter the rest God invites us to experience and enjoy.

God, in his word, talks a lot about rest. Last week we heard the author of Hebrews warn his readers about the danger of not entering God’s rest. To make his point, he held up the bad example of his readers’ ancestors, known as the wilderness generation. This group of Israelites had been graciously delivered by God from their slavery in Egypt and were heading toward the rest God was holding out for them in the Promised Land of Canaan. But along the way their hearts became hard and they became filled with unbelief.

It all culminated, as the account in Numbers 13-14 describes it, after they had sent spies out to check out the land and the spies came back with a report that there were scary and powerful inhabitants who lived there. Most of the Israelites wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt, or at least die in the wilderness. As a result of their lack of trust in God to bring them through whatever difficulties lay ahead, God essentially granted them their wish. They wandered aimlessly for forty years and then died, never experiencing God’s rest.

Writing to a people who seemed to be growing weary and losing heart, drifting in their faith and even at risk for falling away, our author does not want his readers, which include us, to miss the rest God holds out. What is God’s rest? How do we enter it and (maybe the greatest challenge) continue in it? Let’s hear our texts and then return to those questions. [READ]

I. What is God’s rest?

A. With the sobering lesson of the wilderness generation still echoing in their minds and hearts, our author begins chapter 4 with a remarkable statement: “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands . . .” What’s remarkable is that these readers already lived in the land of Canaan and so they were not being invited to a rest that involved a physical plot of land, nor the formation of a nation. Neither are we, when considering God’s rest, being invited to move to Israel.

B. The fact that a plot of land is not what is ultimately being promised is confirmed in v. 8 when we are told by our author that Joshua, the leader of God’s people who succeeded Moses and led the next generation of Israelites, finally, into the Promised Land, *did not* lead them into rest. As our author describes in v. 8, “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.” What we see here is that the rest linked to the Promised Land was physical and temporary. It entailed secure, external borders and the internal absence of threats to life and well-being (cf. Dt. 12:8-10; 1 Ki. 5:4), but it did not provide an ultimate rest for those who lived there.

C. What we see in the external structures in the OT – the temple, a plot of land, a physical nation – are all items that point forward to the fuller reality that is found in, and fulfilled by, Jesus. It's why our author goes on to say: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (v. 9). Our author begins to describe this Sabbath-rest as he draws in a connection to the "rest" of God that is found in the Genesis creation account at the end of the seventh day:

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

Rabbinic commentators notice the difference in days 1-6, each of which ends "And there was evening, and there was morning." By way of contrast, day seven ends in an open fashion, that is, there is no mention of evening, meaning that this rest of God is an ongoing reality.

D. This means that while God still actively sustains all that he has made, God's creative work is complete, and his rest has no "evening," no ending. It is a state of everlasting joy, as he contemplates the "very goodness" of all that he has made (Ge. 1:31). And it is a joy he invites us to join him in now, a joy that will never end. And when he adds v. 10 to the discussion: "...for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his," the logic of his argument goes like this: As God rested from his work, recognizing that his work of creation on our behalf was complete, so are we to cease from our efforts to earn God's salvation, resting in the good news that Christ's work of redemption on our behalf is complete.

E. And I think that adding the word Sabbath highlights the fact that this day of rest and worship is kind of a training day really, a day on which we are to rest from our everyday labor and trust in God's ongoing care for us and for his creation. On this day we remember and celebrate the good news (v. 2) which includes the blessing of forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Jesus that grounds our life of faith, and the ongoing formation work of the Holy Spirit through which our faith grows. It all anticipates the rest to come when heaven and earth are fully joined in God's new creation in which there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Rev. 21:1-4; cf. Heb 12:22). Putting this all together we can see the already not yet aspect to the rest of God. It is already in that God invites us to join him in it now, experiencing the blessing of his mercy and love, and the peace that transcends all understanding (cf. Phil. 4:4-7), even though we live in the midst of trials and tribulations. And it is not yet in that those trials and tribulations persist and will continue to do so until the "Promised Land" of God's new creation is fully realized.

## II. Entering God's rest

A. So how do we get in on this rest of God? How can we begin to experience the blessing of forgiveness, the peace that transcends all understanding, and the hope of life that never ends? It all hangs on Jesus who, as he looks out at a weary, exhausted human race says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Ma. 11:28). Not, "Come to a set of teachings" (though Jesus does a lot of that which we're called to pay attention to). Not, "Come to church" (though he does call us to participate in a community of faith). Not, "Come to your psychologist," (though God does use gifted counselors). Not, "Come to a vacation" (though a work life balance is important to maintain). No. Rather, he says, "Come to me."

B. True rest is only found in a relationship with God that comes to us as we come to his Son, Jesus.

Illustration: In his book, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, author Lee Strobel tells of a thirty-one-year-old mother of two, who after attending two worship services where the good news was proclaimed said, “I’ve just realized I’ve been playing religion all my life. I’m active at church, I’m on committees, I’ve heard about the Crucifixion so much since I was a child that I’ve been numb to it. And I realized today that I don’t have a relationship with Jesus.”

Through Jesus a right relationship with God is found and a right way of living is revealed. It begins, our author mentions time and again, with faith. A couple of observations about faith.

1. First, the faith being talked about by our author is one that links the good news we hear with trusting obedience, with putting what we hear into practice. It doesn’t take faith, for instance, to hear that you can fly in an airplane from Boston to Nairobi. What takes faith is actually buying a ticket and getting on that plane! It’s what the wilderness generation seemed to lack (not an airplane!). They heard the good news about the Promised Land but never went in because they really didn’t trust God to bring them there.

2. At the same time, it’s also a faith that doesn’t need to prove our goodness through what we do because Jesus has already declared us good through what he’s done. This is perhaps even harder for us, particularly given the emphasis we place on performance, from an early age.

Illustration: I remember walking my then third grade daughter home from school during one of those January stretches when the weather hit 50. She told me that her class had been given an extra recess that day. I said, “Wow, sweetheart, that’s wonderful. The school really does have a heart!” “Not really,” she replied. “We had to earn it by getting five extra check marks for good behavior!”

No extra check marks needed where Jesus is involved. Through his death and resurrection, he’s provided the only check mark we need to begin enjoying the rest he’s holding out to us.

When we return to Hebrews in a couple of weeks, we’ll think about how to continue in this gift of rest once we’ve entered. For now, as we sing our closing hymn, I would encourage you to think of some of the ways God might be inviting you to put the good news you hear into practice so that you might experience more of the joy of rest that he brings.