

Sermon Summary #11

Rest! Hebrews 4:1-11

Back in Hebrews 2:4 our author encouraged us not to neglect this “great salvation” that we have in Jesus Christ. Do you know *why* your salvation is great? Do you think often of it? Have you exerted the mental and spiritual energy to meditate on the multi-faceted, multi-dimensional nature of what it means to be “saved” from sin and death and condemnation? How much time have you given to exploring the multitude of blessings that comes with being a child of God?

For example, the NT tells us that those who’ve put their trust in Christ have been *redeemed*, which is to say, we have been purchased or ransomed out of slavery to sin and are now owned or possessed by God. We are also told that we have been *justified*, which is to say, we have been declared perfectly righteous through faith in Christ because the righteousness of Christ himself has been imputed or reckoned to our account. Or again, we who trust in Christ are now *adopted* into God’s family; we are his spiritual sons and daughters with all the rights and privileges that come with being a child of the most High God. Or yet again, we have been *reconciled* to God, which among other things means that all the hostility between us and God caused by our sin has been removed.

Or I could speak of the blessings that come with salvation, things such as *peace* with God, the abiding *presence* of the Holy Spirit in our lives, a sure and solid *hope* for the future, the promise of *eternal life* in the new heaven and new earth, *forgiveness* of sins, and the guarantee that we will one day be transformed or changed into the moral likeness of Christ himself, what the NT refers to as *glorification*.

But today I want us to think about one of those blessings of our “great” salvation that we often tend to forget or simply overlook. And as much as we are inclined to neglect this aspect of salvation, it may be one of the more urgent needs that we experience. I’m talking about *rest*. In fact, this promised blessing was at the heart of our Lord’s appeal to men and women to come to him:

“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” (Matt. 11:28-29).

You can clearly see that this promise of “rest” is the focus of our author’s appeal here in Hebrews 4:1-11. To be perfectly honest, this paragraph is one of the more complex in terms of its structure and argument of any that you’ll find in the book of Hebrews. However, the message that it conveys is clear and easy and forthright and wonderfully encouraging. So my aim today is not so much to walk you through this passage word upon word, line upon line, but to articulate the primary message that it holds out for the believer in Jesus. So let’s begin.

“Therefore”

We read in Hebrews 3 about some tragic events that followed in the wake of Israel’s exodus or deliverance out of slavery in Egypt. Notwithstanding the remarkable and repeated miracles of protection and provision that God sent to the Jews, many of them, perhaps even most of them, went *astray* in their hearts, *hardened* their hearts, and fell into *unbelief*. The result of this was stated in no uncertain terms in Hebrews 3:11 – “*As I swore in my wrath,*” said God, “*They shall not enter my rest.*”

We need to understand what this “rest” is, this “rest” from which the unbelieving Israelites were excluded. We need to know because *immediately following this horrible declaration of judgment in Hebrews 3:11 and 3:18 we encounter the word “therefore” in Hebrews 4:1*. Evidently, our author is about to draw a very important conclusion about this issue of the availability of “rest” and the failure of the Israelites to enter in and experience it.

And that conclusion couldn't be any clearer or more explicit than what we read in 4:1 – ***“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.”*** Don't forget, as we noted in our study of Hebrews 3, that our author is talking about people who have been exposed to the gospel, people who have perhaps grown up in the church, people who have been greatly blessed by their presence among the people of God but who have never fully and finally embraced Jesus Christ in saving faith. And it is to just such people that this warning in Hebrews 4 is issued.

Be afraid of unbelief, he tells us. Fear failing to enter God's rest. Tremble at the prospect of coming so very close and yet falling short. Fear finding that your heart has been hardened against God and his promises. Or to use the words of v. 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 comparison that our author drew in chapter three between Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament is still in his mind. Look at v. 2 – “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.” Israel of old doubted God and distrusted God and refused to invest their hope in God, but murmured and griped and complained and in effect said, “We don't believe you when you promise us rest. We would rather go back to Egypt and live under the authority of Pharaoh.”

Be afraid, he tells us in vv. 1-2, that what happened to them might happen to you. ***Be careful lest you become bored and indifferent and eventually become hardened in your heart and fail to embrace God's promised rest by faith in Jesus.*** Some of you have been in church virtually all of your lives. You have simply assumed that you are ok, that you are spiritually safe and have nothing to fear because you are an American (!) and you attend a service on a Sunday every so often and you have never committed a public and scandalous sin.

To that mentality our author spoke back in Hebrews 3:12 – ***“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”*** And of course one of the primary ways that we help one another to avoid falling victim to this tragic end is by doing what Hebrews 3:13 told us to do – ***“But exhort one another every day . . . that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”***

Divine Rest in Four Stages

In order to make sense of this difficult paragraph that follows, I want to identify for us four stages in the revelation and experience of what our author refers to as “rest”. Or perhaps I should call it the four different ways in which “rest” might be experienced or enjoyed.

(1) The first mention of “rest” in the Bible is found in Genesis 2:1-2. There it obviously describes God resting after the work of creation. I think what is meant by this is that God entered into a time of triumphant peace and celebratory joy and a glorious satisfaction that came with knowing that all he had made was good. This is mentioned by our author here in Hebrews 4:3-4.

(2) The second instance of “rest” focuses on its *geographical* dimensions. Simply put, the promised land of Canaan was an expression and offer of “rest” from God to his people. Look at how our author unpacks this in several stages.

He first directs our attention to the time following Israel's exodus out of Egypt. You will recall that after their time of wandering in the wilderness the people of Israel arrived at the borders of the promised land, the land of Canaan. ***This land was their promised rest.*** This land was God's provision for them following their many years of bondage in Egypt. But as we've seen repeatedly, they hardened their hearts against God and refused to trust him, the result of which is that God swore they would never enter that “rest” which he had made available. The result was that almost everyone of the generation that came out of Egypt died in the wilderness (see Hebrews 3:16-19).

This expression of promised rest in the land of Canaan appears yet again in the life of ***Joshua***. In other words, the failure of the exodus generation didn't nullify the promise. It is still valid for the people of Israel.

It wasn't so long ago that we studied the book of Joshua. There we saw that after the first generation of Israelites were judged by God and died in the wilderness because of their unbelief and rebellion, Joshua led the next

generation into the promised land where they enjoyed the promised rest of God. You may recall that the book ended with these encouraging words:

“Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them **rest** on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (Joshua 21:43-45).

This manifestation of promised “rest” included Israel’s victory over her enemies, the cessation of all hostility, agricultural abundance, and all the other blessings associated with living in the land of promise.

But this poses something of a problem. ***If Joshua and the people of his day experienced the fulfillment of God’s promised rest, does that mean that it is no longer available to anyone else? No!***

The reason the answer is No is because several hundred years later King **David**, in Psalm 95, spoke of God’s rest as **still** available to God’s people. God continues to extend the offer of rest. So David, many years after Joshua, says in Psalm 95, “Don’t harden your hearts and you will enjoy God’s rest as well.” Observe how this is explained in Hebrews 4:6-8.

In other words, long after the people enjoyed the rest of the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, David says that God is **still** holding out to his people an offer of salvation rest: Don’t harden your hearts, and you will enjoy God’s rest.

(3) The third manifestation of “rest” for God’s people might be called the “spiritual Sabbath” for those who trust in Christ. In order to make sense of this, we need to think for a moment about the OT Sabbath day of rest that God instituted for Israel and how it applies to Christians today.

Many Christians believe that Sunday is the “Christian Sabbath” and that God requires that we “rest” on this one day and devote our energy and focus entirely to worship and fellowship and study of God’s Word. I respect those who embrace this view, but I disagree with them. Hear me well: I **do** believe we are commanded by God to join together in corporate assembly and worship and study his Word, but I don’t believe we should call that day, whether Sunday or any other day of the week, the Christian Sabbath. Here is why.

You may remember an incident recorded in Mark 2:23-28 where Jesus responded to the accusation of the Pharisees that he and his disciples had profaned the Sabbath when they plucked heads of grain to satisfy their hunger (Mark 2:23-28). Matthew’s version of the story includes this remarkable declaration by our Lord:

“Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (Matt. 12:5-6).

Jesus is saying in response to their accusations: “I am greater than David! I am greater than the Temple!” But he doesn’t stop there:

“And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man [i.e., for his benefit and spiritual and physical welfare] not man for the Sabbath [the Sabbath has no needs that a human can fulfill]. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:27-28).

Do you see what Jesus is saying? This isn’t primarily a story about finding a loophole in the Sabbath regulations. This isn’t primarily about finding precedent in the OT for reaping and eating on the Sabbath. It isn’t even primarily about whether or not you can do good by healing a man on the Sabbath. This is a story about **who Jesus is!** It is all about Jesus saying to them and to us: I am greater than David. I am the fulfillment of all that David typified. I am greater than the Temple. I am the fulfillment of all that the Temple typified and symbolized. I am greater than the Sabbath. I bring to you a rest and satisfaction that not even the OT Sabbath could provide. In the words of N. T. Wright, “If Jesus is a walking, living, breathing Temple, he is also the walking, celebrating, victorious sabbath” (*Simply Jesus*, 138).

Remember that the Sabbath was instituted by God as a sign of the old covenant with Israel (see Exod. 31:12-13, 16-17). However, as Paul makes clear in Colossians 2:16-17, Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the OT prophesied, prefigured, and foreshadowed: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ***These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.***”

The immediate purpose of the Sabbath in the OT was to provide men and women with physical rest from their physical labors. When Paul says that this Sabbath was a shadow, of which Christ is the substance, he means that ***the physical rest provided by the OT Sabbath finds its fulfillment in the spiritual rest provided by Jesus.*** We cease from our labors, not by resting physically one day in seven, but by resting spiritually every day and forever in Christ by faith alone. ***We experience God’s true Sabbath rest, not by taking off from work one day in seven, but by placing our faith in the saving work of Jesus.*** To experience God’s Sabbath rest, therefore, is to cease from those works of righteousness by which we were seeking to be justified. ***The NT fulfillment of the OT Sabbath is not one day in seven of physical rest, but an eternity of spiritual rest through faith in the work of Christ.***

Physical rest, of course, is still essential. God does not intend for us to work seven days a week. Our body and spirit need to experience renewal and refreshment by resting. But resting on Sunday is not the same thing as the OT observance of the Sabbath day. Some Christians have chosen to treat Sunday as if it were a Sabbath, as if it were special, and that’s entirely permissible. Don’t let anyone tell you it is wrong. But neither should you tell anyone that it is wrong if they treat Sunday like every other day of the week.

“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5).

If you want to observe Sunday as a day of rest to the exclusion of all other worldly pursuits or activities, that’s fine. But you have no biblical right to expect others to do the same and therefore no biblical right to pass judgment on them if they don’t.

My point is simply that for the Christian, for the person who is trusting in the work of Jesus Christ rather than in his own efforts, for those resting by faith in Jesus, every day is the Sabbath! Every day is a celebration of the fact that we don’t have to do any spiritual or physical works to gain acceptance with God. We are accepted by him through faith in the works of Jesus Christ. If you are a child of God, born again, trusting and believing in Jesus for your acceptance with God rather than in your own works and efforts, you are experiencing the true meaning of Sabbath twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. ***I observe the Sabbath every moment of every day to the degree that I rest in the work of Christ for me. Thus, for the Christian, Jesus is our Sabbath rest!***

And it is precisely this sort of “spiritual Sabbath rest” that our author has in mind in Hebrews 4:9-10 and that Jesus, in Matthew 11, offers to anyone who will come to him in faith. What precisely is this “rest” that Jesus offers? It certainly isn’t a promise that we need no longer work for a living. Jesus isn’t suggesting that we can simply coast in life, nor is it an endorsement of laziness, passivity, or inactivity.

- Rest = the soul’s sigh of joyful relief and satisfaction that comes from experiencing release from the anxiety and tension of constantly wondering whether or not I’ve done enough to gain favor with God.
- Rest = the soul’s sigh of joyful relief and satisfaction that comes from never again fearing death as some dark and unknown termination.
- Rest = the soul’s sigh of joyful relief and satisfaction in knowing that even if everyone else abandons me, God never will.
- Rest = the soul’s sigh of joyful relief and satisfaction in trusting the perfect and finished work of Christ for me rather than trusting the imperfect and never-ending effort on my part to work for Christ.
- Rest = the soul’s sigh of relief and satisfaction that comes when you forsake the endless and ultimately empty legalistic demands of religion and find everlasting peace and joy and hope in what God has done for you in Jesus.

And listen carefully: Jesus promises to “give” you rest, not “pay” you rest. You don’t merit rest by coming; you simply receive it as a gift. We are undeserving of rest. If justice were the only dynamic at play here, we would be forever left to our burdens and weariness and spiritual anxiety, for that is precisely what we deserve and have brought on ourselves. Rest is a gift of divine grace and mercy!

(4) We’ve now come to the fourth and final and I might even say the “eternal” expression or manifestation of God’s promised “rest”. It is life in the New Heavens and New Earth. This is that final and perfect and never-ending state of complete satisfaction and joy and fulfillment and pleasure and fascination that will be ours when our bodies are glorified and our hearts are entirely joined to Christ’s.

This final and forever expression of God’s rest into which we fully enter is portrayed in Revelation 21-22 as the absence of death and mourning and crying and pain. It is that time when God wipes away all tears from our eyes. It is that eternal experience of drinking “from the spring of the water of life without payment” (Rev. 21:6). It is that inexpressibly joyful experience when, as we read in Revelation 21:3, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

Again we read of that eternal rest that “no longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:3-5).