
The Believing Obedience of Entering God's Rest

Hebrews 4:1-13

What is your Christianity like to you?

Is it marked by calm, trusting assurance and confidence that is believing and obeying with an eye on heaven?

Or is marked by the frantic doing that looks and feels like a hamster on its exercise wheel: round and round but getting nowhere?

The difference between the two is a matter of the heart. It is a matter of believing in an obeying way that trusts God's promises until we arrive in heaven.

A Warning to Heed

(v.1)

We once lived in the village of Dalzell, Illinois. The east side of our village was bordered by a highly trafficked road called Dalzell or Meridian Road. Just north of us, that road T's into the access road along the Interstate. When we first moved here, there was just a stop sign and a T sign telling you to stop. And people ran through it all the time, destroying the guard rail. Soon, there were more signs up, warning that you had to stop and you had to turn. Still, people kept running through and hitting the guard rail. Now, you have several large signs and the unnerving strips that thunder as you run over them to alert you to the danger ahead. (Amazingly, people still went through and destroyed the guard rail again.)

This verse ought to come to us like large signs and unnerving strips in the road to alert us to a danger ahead.

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.

Let me put this verse to you in the way that it is phrased in the Greek so that it grabs our attention. "Let us fear, therefore, lest being left with a promise to enter His [God's] very own rest, anyone of you seems to have come short [of it]."

The Word of that Warning

Strange is it not that the Bible tells us, in fact commands, us to fear? Now this is not a phobia. A phobia is an unreasonable and irrational fear of something. We can think of claustrophobia or arachnophobia or hydrophobia. These are paralyzing, crushing fears of small spaces, spiders and water.

But the fear we are warned to have here is the opposite. It is a rational, thought out fear that comes from seeing a desperate danger ahead. It is not inner sense of crawl that comes with soft squishy bodies and hairy legs. It is the sense of careful caution that comes from bright yellow and red signs and thrumming from our tires. It should cause us to take our foot off the gas and put it on the brake and to look earnestly ahead for we are at a place where many have failed to heed the warnings and have made desperate crashes of their lives.

The Reason for that Warning

Here it is: there is a promised rest that we can miss. Our author is going to unpack the three aspects of this statement which will concern us as well. Before we press on, just note them.

There is a rest for us.
That rest is related to promises.
It is possible to come short of entering the rest.

We must remember that this text was originally addressed to Jewish converts who were facing the temptation of going back to Judaism in order to avoid the pressures and persecutions they were facing. They had borne well so far, but the prospects were dimming by the moment. We are not as far removed from their reality as it might appear. If I state their case another way, it will ring true to many of you: we have been converted out of a religious system that had, while we were in it, all appearances of being Biblical. Now we know from the Scriptures that it is not. And we face the difficult pressure from family and friends to go back to it or to bring its errors into our present situation. This is exactly what the Jewish converts face and what many of you are struggling with.

A Principle to Understand

(v.2-3)

So the author gives us the simple principle by which we enter God's rest and to avoid falling short of it and returning to the wilderness.

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. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,' " although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.

Its Historical Background

(v.2)

He neatly ties together the situation of the Jews in Moses' and in his own day. This could easily have been translated, "We, both have been thoroughly *good newsed*." (Piper) In other words, if they failed to enter the rest it is not because they did not know better. We, all of us, the Jews of Moses day, the converts of the Author's day and us today, have been thoroughly good newsed. The message of the promises of God and the evidences of the power of God are on public display in the Word and in the lives of transformed men and women.

The problem with the Jews of Moses' day was that they did not hear the message with faith, with belief. They did not have the "O, I see" when hearing of the promises and when seeing the power of God. They did not come to the point to where the promises they heard were being believed in an obeying way. Here is the land of promise, believe God and enter it. But no, the obstacles are too big. So, they do not enter because of the principle which follows.

Its Biblical Expression

(v.3a)

"We who have believed enter that rest." Now to many of us, this is an accepted dictum of Christian doctrine. To enter God's rest, we must believe. Believing is an entering. But I wonder if we could interview the Israelites that stood at the edge of Canaan if they would say, "I believe that God is going to give us the Promised Land, but since it is impossibly hard now, I will not go in." This is exactly what we try to do today. "I believe God's promise of _____, yet it is impossibly difficult now so I won't do _____."

Please understand. Believing in the Bible is never the mere mental assent to truth. It is an embracing of the truth with our minds, our wills and our affections. Believing hears God's promises, sees what they promise to bring, values it as God's, understands the obstacles but trusts God to deal with consequences and obeys its conditions. That is faith. That is the believing that enters rest.

So what is that rest? The Jews associated it with the land, the kingdom and the Temple. We tend to argue (at the least the commentators do) whether it is heaven or salvation or victorious Christian living. In doing so, we have, all of us missed the point of the argument of verses 4 through 8.

An Argument to Follow

(v.4-8)

Frankly, the intricate logic of the argument of this paragraph can be like a Rubik's cube. Remember them? They were a cube of small cubes each face having one of six colors. The object was to twist and turn this thing so that all the cubes on a face were one color. You could play with thing for days on end. And in the end, even if you could solve it, there remains a huge question, "So what? What in the world have you accomplished?"

I suspect that this is true here as well. This paragraph is a marvelous example of intricately argued rhetoric. We are not used to following such detail in our processes of thinking today. Some of you are familiar with satellite navigation systems for airplanes. The plane has a starting point and a destination. It will fly a particular route. In order to follow that route, way-points are placed in the nav system. These way-points are where the pilot must either make changes in direction or make certain of his direction so that he stays on his route to the destination. In tracking a flight, it is possible to follow the plane through every point on its route. But it is also possible to track the plane as it hits each way-point. As long as the plane hits them and we see it, we can track the progress of the plane until it arrives at its destination.

⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." ⁵ And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest."

⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.

So let me give you the way-points on the journey of the Author's argument so that we may track him from his starting point to his destination.

The Rest of God at Creation

(v.3b-5)

God's rest is not related to Canaan or to the Temple. It is like God's rest at creation. God's rest came because the work was completed. Genesis 2:1-3 emphasizes *the completeness of the work* so there is a *finality to the rest*.

The Rest was not Entered under Moses

(v.6)

Although God had entered His rest, they never entered the land and never entered the rest. So under the Mosaic Covenant the rest was not entered. Therefore, there is a rest remaining.

The Rest was Available in David's Day

(v.7)

They were still being offered rest and warned about not entering rest in David's day in Psalm 95 *even though they were in the land*. So, even though the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants were being fulfilled, there was still a rest to be entered.

The Rest not by Joshua in Canaan

(v.8)

Even though Joshua brought them into the land, that was not the all that the rest involved. God marked out a time in David's day, generations later, called "today", a when that the rest is still available.

So what is the point? God's rest is marked by the completed aspect of its work. Its rest is marked by finality. All that made Judaism what it was, its Law, its Temple, its land and its King, were incomplete works and were not final. They were pointing to a person, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is the argument in a nutshell:

If God's rest is marked by completeness and finality,
neither of which were ever experienced by Israel at any point in its redemptive history,
and, if that rest is still being offered anytime it is "today",
then we can only reach a very powerful and wonderful conclusion.

A Conclusion to Accept

(v.9-10)

⁹ *So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,* ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

I must point out that the phrase here "Sabbath rest" is actually one word in the Greek. There remains a *Sabbatismos*. It is not the word used for rest anywhere else neither in this book nor in the whole of the Bible. This word is utterly unique. And to argue, as many do, that we have a Sabbath keeping in the church and for God's people today is to totally miss the point. Neither the Holy Spirit nor the writer is arguing for Sabbath keeping.

Now is when we ask a very important question, "If we have rest left over for us that is like God's rest at creation, is constantly offered to God's people in flow of life, WHAT IS THAT REST?"

God's rest is **all that He is for us in Christ made available by believing and obeying His promises until they are completely fulfilled in eternity.** Let me use two illustrations to help us here.

Its Realities in the Present

Imagine with me a large box. This box is addressed to all of God's people. It is labeled as *God's Rest*. It is filled with envelopes all addressed to different groups: some envelopes are addressed to Abraham, some to David, some to Israel, some to the church, some to Paul, some to the apostles and some to all of God's people. When we open the envelopes, inside are descriptions of what God has done for the addressee, how it relates to Christ and directions as to what we must do if this is true. Wrapped around the envelopes is a statement saying that everything inside each envelope has been (from our perspective now) signed, sealed and delivered by the death and resurrection and glorification of Jesus. Now, we start opening the envelopes and discover that what God has done in Christ that He will do for us now requires from us what often appears to be impossibly difficult or costly or risky. But we believe God, start following the directions and start receiving what was promised. But, loved ones. If all we do is read, and memorize and hold the envelope, we don't get what was promised. When we believe in an obeying way what each envelope says then we are moving into God's rest.

Its Prospects in the Future

There is something else about entering the rest that comes out from this text and from the Bible at large. When Esther and I were engaged, we had together all the promises of what

marriage is all about. Some things we could begin to enter into. We had long talks and hours together. We could buy things for our home. But there were some things that were reserved for after the marriage. So it is with our rest. We are in the engagement period now. We have all the promise of what it means to be married to Christ. But some things are going to have wait until the marriage. We will not have them today. But O the sweetness of holy anticipation when ALL that God is for us in Christ is fulfilled in glory.

An Exhortation to Obey

(v.11)

What is our responsibility in the light of this?

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Make every effort to enter the rest.

Practice – What We Must Do

Make every effort – be diligent. Are you bending every fiber of your being to believe God's promises in an obeying way? Or are we opening the envelopes, admiring their contents and then just putting them in our spiritual pockets. Beloved, if we do not do what we say we believe, then we do not believe. I may know exercise is good for me, but I don't believe it until I start exercising. As soon as I start exercising, I begin to receive the benefits that exercise brings.

Purpose – Why We Must Do It

We do not fall by the same example of disobedience. The word here is the same one as in 3:17. It conveys the picture of being strewn across the wilderness. We had better be giving attention to believing God in an obeying way lest we become wilderness wrecks.

Reflect and Respond

In the particulars of our situation, this principle holds true:
we must believingly obey to enter into the rest of God's promises.

What applications can we make of this?

Let us hold fast to our profession of faith. Let us believe God's promise of salvation in an obeying way. Let us not go back to the Egypt of our former religious beliefs and pagan practices.

Let us believe God's promises for our every moment, for every "today" and do so in an obeying way. Let us understand the descriptions of God's promises, embrace their delights, follow their directions and anticipate their future fulfillment.

Let us, in our salvation and in our sanctification, rest in what Christ has completed for us. Let us stop working to earn the benefits of God's promises. Let us be diligent to enter the benefits that Christ has already earned for us.

Let us press forward in spite of the giants and the castles and the obstacles and problems because God has said He will do it and wine and milk and honey of that land are ours just for the believing obedience.

Psalm 95:6-7

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.