

Do I Deserve Rest?

Hebrews 4:9-16 (NIV)

⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. ¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Life is busy. You move from one thing to the next, to the next and to the next. As you finish one project, or even while you are still working on one, another project crops up. More has to be done. As many things as get checked off the to-do list, there are always more being added to it. These other things that need to be done weigh on your mind. You try to push it aside and focus on finishing your current task, but the list never ends. There is no stopping. There is no rest from what needs to be done.

When you work this hard, when you are pulling the 9 to 5 in addition to taking work home with you and working through the week...and Saturday...and Sunday, you find yourself wearing thin. The more stoic of us say during these non-stop working patches, "I'll sleep when I'm dead." Others of us say, "Take a day for yourself. You deserve it. You need it. You need a day of rest." The more pragmatic of us think as we hear people telling us to take a "me day" wonder when the work will ever get done if I am not the one doing it? And so we feel obligated to continue working, to try to get it all done even though some rest sounds sweeter than ever.

This is no different from God's people in the past. Back in the day of Moses, of the time of the Exodus, the Israelites looked forward to a day of rest, a day when they would be settled in a new land, the Promised Land, a day when they would be done with slavery, done with hardships, and finally living in peace and prosperity. They were looking forward to a day of rest.

However, many of God's people disobeyed on the way to the Promised Land, on the way to a place of rest. They rejected God. They rejected God's leaders: Moses and Aaron. They paid for their sins by dying in the desert, never entering that promised Sabbath-rest. Even after they entered the Promised Land under Joshua that was not the rest God has planned for them. They still had battles to fight. They still had to labor on their fields for their food. They were not done. They were not resting. The writer to the Hebrews says, "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God." (verses 8-9)

Then there is rest for me yet. Oh the prospect of rest, thinking of all the responsibilities that will be done without me having to do them, of being able to kick back and relax. That Sabbath-rest is music to my ears. Christianity will be easy. God gives me rest.

Wait a minute. Not yet. Yes, God did establish the Sabbath-rest already on the seventh day after he had spent six days creating all things. He established the Sabbath as a day of rest for his people, a time that they would not do any work, but would rest and recharge. But this rest was given knowing that next week, there was more work to be done. God's intent was not that we would simply cease all efforts on this side of heaven.

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews thus exhorts us, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience." (verse 11) Make every effort. Oh man. You talk about this rest, God, but at the same time you are telling me to make every effort to enter it. Isn't rest supposed to be, I don't know, restful? Shouldn't this be easy? Why do I have to make every effort to enter it? That's hard.

Some wouldn't bat an eyelash at the idea that you need to work nonstop to get eternal rest. That's what all religions outside of Christianity boil down to. Do. Do. Do. Do. Make every effort. But our salvation is accomplished completely outside of our efforts. However, by our neglect, by our laziness, we can compromise our salvation, our Sabbath-rest. That's what happened to so many Hebrews in the past. They did not make every effort to enter God's Sabbath-rest. They stopped trusting in God. They stopped worshiping him. They stopped listening to him. They fell into patterns of disobedience. They perished. They thought that this life was the one to kick back on and stop working for God.

Are we making every effort to enter the Sabbath-rest that God made for us? Are we tempted to stop trusting in God, to stop worshiping him, to stop listening to him? Is my Christian life just a Sunday morning deal? Is my life one where I take every opportunity to obey God and follow his commands for my life?

Do I deserve a rest from obeying God, from staying close to him? Should I take a “me day” from God’s expectations of me? Isn’t it a bit unrealistic of God for him to expect me to make every effort to enter his Sabbath-rest? There are only so many hours in the day, anyway. I need a break. I need rest in order to carry on, in order to be more productive. Besides, do I really need to give any more of my time or thoughts or efforts in service to him? What do I really need to do for God? I’m good. I’m just going to rest from my efforts.

Just because you are tired, does that exempt you from obedience to God? Because he has paid for your salvation, are you supposed to rest from serving him? Are you making every effort to enter God’s rest? Are you giving him your very best, all you can muster? Or are you giving just enough so that you can get back to resting?

God knows the attitude of your heart, my heart. “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (verse 13) How would you answer him if he asked you if you were making every effort to enter that Sabbath-rest for the people of God? Would he let you get away with a, “I’m good. I don’t need to do more” kind of answer?

I have tried, Lord. I am trying to do as much as possible, make every effort, but I am tired. I am weak. I am worn. I don’t feel like I can carry on. I have no strength left. I know that I am supposed to make every effort to serve you God, and those around me and be obedient to you, but I can’t do it. And frankly, I don’t want to. I want to rest.

As we are worn out, tired, and in need of rest, we are reminded by the author of this letter to the Hebrews that “we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God.” (verse 14) We have one who stands in our place, who acts on our behalf. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” (verse 15)

Jesus was tempted like we are to simply rest from his efforts, his obedience to God. Even as his public ministry began, Satan made Jesus an offer of no suffering to have all the people of the world...if he would only bow down to Satan. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before he goes to the cross, Jesus prays that his Father would take this cup of suffering away from him. “If it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” (Matthew 26:42) Jesus was tempted to give up on making every effort to enter that Sabbath-rest. But he resisted. He made every effort even when we did not. He did not sin even though we have treated our Christian life as if it’s a Sunday morning only deal. He substituted himself in our place, resisting temptation for us, so that we stand forgiven, heirs of this Sabbath-rest. It’s all done for us by Jesus. Your salvation is accomplished by our great high priest. God has given us rest in earning salvation because he earned it for us and forgave us when we have not made every effort to enter it.

Because Jesus did not sin and won the Sabbath-rest of heaven for each of us, we now make every effort to thank him for what he has done. Because Jesus did not sin, we have access to God’s throne of grace. We can go to him with confidence, knowing that our Sabbath-rest is already won, asking him to help us when we are tempted to rest from obedience to him. We can expect to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (verse 16)

When you are feeling tired, worn out, needing a day off, in need of rest, approach God’s throne of grace. He will give you grace to help you. It may not exactly be the help you thought it would be, but it is what you need to make it through that day. When you are feeling like you can’t stand for another moment, God bolsters your legs to keep going. When you feel like you can’t endure any more of this, that you can’t put up with one more thing, you find yourself making it – one day at a time, by the grace of God. The very fact that you are still here and hearing this sermon means that God has answered your prayers and that he is giving you grace to help you in your time of need, to keep you going.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, sweet, undeserved rest is coming. We will enter the eternal Sabbath-rest in heaven because Jesus is our great high priest who has resisted every temptation for us. Our work of salvation is accomplished. Now, we make every effort to continue to do God’s will, to continue in obedience to him. As we see that we are not enough for these things, we approach God’s throne of grace with confidence. We hold firmly to the faith we profess because God has won for us that Sabbath-rest. Amen.