

Seek the Rest They Lost

Hebrews 4:1-11 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴ For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "On the seventh day God rested from all his works." ⁵ And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest." ⁶ Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage 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 later about another day. 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.

What is rest to you? Is it sipping mai tais on a beach in a tropical paradise? Is it a camping get-away in your RV or a backpacking trip somewhere out there in the middle of nowhere with very few if any people around? Is rest coming home, kicking off your shoes, putting on some comfy pants, turning on the TV, and vegetating for a couple of hours? Is rest the cessation of work, doing nothing?

At different times we need different things to find rest. Sometimes you need a cessation of all work, to do nothing, in order to find rest. Other times, you need to be doing something, something very different than what you usually do to find it. Sometimes rest means that no one is around; other times it means you are surrounded by your family and loved ones. There's a specific kind of rest, though, that our Bible readings refer to today.

According to the author of this letter to the Hebrew Christians, we should associate rest with what God did after the six days of creation. "And yet [God's] works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'On the seventh day God rested from all his works.'" (verses 3b-4) What does that mean that God rested from all his works? Does it mean that God was worn out after being so creative for six days straight? No, because the Bible says, "The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary." (Isaiah 40:28) God didn't need a rest because he was tired. When he says he rested, then, does that mean God took a vacation from his creation, that he stepped back, admired it, dusted his hands off, plopped on the couch, kicked his feet up, said, "I'm done" and took a nap? No, that's not the rest God is talking about either because Jesus himself said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." (John 5:17)

So, what is this rest that the author of this letter to the Hebrew Christians is talking about? It's not a rest of doing nothing, staying inactive. It's a rest that we experience when we can look back and admire a completed project or task. It's like the satisfaction of God admiring his creation on the seventh day, when he could see a completed creation, that everything was in its place, nothing was lacking, no tweaking had to be done, it was finished. It's kind of like the satisfaction we get when a sink full of dirty dishes that just by the very sight of them has been nagging at you to clean them are finally washed, dried, and put away all nice and neat in the cupboards. It's kind of like the satisfaction when you admire the freshly mown lawn that now is all even and uniform. It's the satisfaction that will come once our remodeling is all done, when the dust is wiped away, the lawn is back to normal, tools are put away, the dirt piles removed, and the work is finished. We will be content, happy, with the completed project.

What is this completed project or task that is the rest that God wants us to enter? It is the rest that comes from his completed work for our salvation. Many people live under the burden that they need to work, work, work, work in order to make things right in the world, to make themselves right with God. Some believe that for God to love them, they have to prove themselves worthy by doing all the good works that they are capable of doing. You yourself may have lived with that mindset or have pondered if that is the right way to live your faith. When you live with this mentality, your mind will constantly deprive you from having rest. Your conscience will butt-in and remind you that there is something more that you should be doing. Even after you have done good work after good work after good work all in a day, a week, a month, a lifetime, whatever your conscience will question whether you have done enough. These thoughts leave you with uncertainty. You find no rest with God based on what you do because you know that he demands perfection and you just are not.

Instead, God has accomplished the very thing that you could never do. After we sinned and missed the mark of perfection, he stepped in and was perfect for us. When we were powerless to make ourselves right with God, Jesus as both God and man came down and made us right with him, substituting his life for ours. There is nothing more I can do, nothing that I can add, nothing that I can make up for with God. It is all his completed work to make me perfect. His work which sets me right with God. He has washed me in the waters of Baptism. I am pure and holy right now before him. I am at rest with God, no longer trying to make myself be or even look perfect before him because he has done it for me. We who believe this message have entered God's rest. "Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his." (verse 10)

This rest, this completed salvation, this having been made right with God, can be disrupted, though. It can even be lost. The Old Testament Israelites exemplified this fact. They had been delivered by God. They had the sacrifices which foreshadowed the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They had the Promised Land to look forward to, one more fulfillment of rest along the way before that offspring of the woman would come and crush the devil and his power and relationship over them. They had been made right with God. They were at rest with him.

However, when it came time for the Israelites to take the Promised Land, fear overtook them. They refused to go up and attack the inhabitants as God told them to. They did not believe God's promises. They did not believe God's Word. They gave up their rest with God. They had God's promises, just like we do, but they did not believe. "For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed." (verse 2) God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" (verse 3) Many of them lost the rest won for them by God.

If these Israelites did not enter God's rest, what about us? Will we enter it or will we be denied as well? Amazingly, the Israelites' sinfulness, our sinfulness, does not stop God from offering this rest. Instead, God tells us to seize it. "Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." 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 6-9) As long as this earth exists, today is a day to enter God's rest. As long as we still take breath in, it is still today, a day to hear God's Word and enter his rest. This rest is still open to us and for all generations to come.

The author of this letter to the Hebrews tells us about the Israelites of the past as a warning to us. Yes, we believe and so have entered into this rest from God, that no more efforts need to be done to get to heaven, to know that I am right with God right now, that he has perfected me and that I stand worthy before him. But this is a sip of the perfect peace and complete fellowship we have with God. This rest will be fully realized when God takes us to be with him in the heavenly home that he has prepared for 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) We will be tested throughout our lives here on earth, like the Israelites were. We might take this rest with God for granted. We can lose it. How will we make every effort to enter this full rest from God?

Because the work is already done, we don't have to do anything to earn this rest. Instead, the effort we are to put in is to be constantly reminded of what God has given us, to live in God's rest. To live in God's rest means being in God's Word, hearing his actions done for you and his promises spoken for you again and again, having your confidence in God built up by them. As you are in God's Word more and more, the Holy Spirit builds up your faith and confidence in him. Make every effort to enter that eternal rest by remembering your baptism day by day, recalling that those waters have made you pure and holy before God, cleansed you from all your sin, knowing that no one can take this gift of God from you. Living in that forgiveness of sins, you will be motivated to work to keep God's commands, to live the holy life that he has set you apart for. And when it gets too much, you recall Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-30)

The work of making ourselves acceptable and perfect before God is completely done and accomplished by Jesus Christ. Because of him, we rest in that fact. Now we live our lives for him, not to earn favor with him, but to avoid sin and temptation that would lead us to lose our rest with God. "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it." (verse 1) With God working in us, we will not lose the rest he has given us, but instead will revel in the fact that it is accomplished and that heaven is our home. Amen.