

Rest for Our Souls

Hebrews 4:1-13

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February 9, 2025

Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If you are a visitor or a guest, welcome. We're glad that you're with us this morning, and if we haven't had the opportunity to meet, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is good for us to join together. And if you are new with us, you're joining us in the midst of a sermon series in the book of Hebrews. And so we're going to be looking at Hebrews chapter 4 this morning. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Hebrews 4. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you, or you can follow along on the screen in just a moment. But you remember Hebrews is written by an anonymous author. We don't know who he or she is. What we do know is that the people that this letter is written to are seemingly struggling with how they maintain their faith. So they've been, they've heard the gospel, they've seemingly believed in Jesus, and they are progressing in their faith. They're growing, they're understanding, and yet they're coming up against different struggles, different difficulties, persecutions. And in the midst of these things, they're contemplating, maybe we should return to our old way of living.

Maybe we should go back to the prophets. Maybe we should look to Moses. Maybe we should continue to venerate angels. They're going back to this old way of living. And so the author of Hebrews is writing to them, encouraging them not to go back, not to contemplate this any longer, but instead to hold firm to their faith, to continue to move forward in the gospel, to cling to Jesus, because Jesus is better, right? Jesus is better than the prophets of old. Jesus is superior to the angels. Jesus is greater than even Moses, the great Old Testament prophet. And so alongside this call to hold fast to Jesus, there's these warnings, right? These warnings, don't elevate others over him. Don't turn from him. Don't return to your old manner of life. God's giving these warnings through the author of Hebrews because God offers life, and life is found only in Christ. He is our life. He is our life. And so what we're going to see again this morning is the author of Hebrews bringing a new theme, not prophets, not angels, not Moses, but a new theme to encourage us to cling to Jesus, to walk with him. And the theme that he brings out this morning is the theme of rest.

So let's follow along. Hebrews 4, beginning in verse 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. 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. 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. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way:

“And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.”

And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, 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.”
For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, and we ask that you would now open our eyes to it, that you would cut to our hearts and our souls, and you would expose us so that we would turn to Jesus. We pray that you would help us this morning. Be with me as I preach, and all of us as we are attentive to your word. We ask that you would lead and guide us, and we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

So, whenever I ask someone how they're doing, how's it been, how's your day going, I generally expect one of two answers. It just kind of picked up that, generally speaking, not always, but often I'm going to hear one of two things. How are you doing? The first thing I might expect to hear is, I'm fine. That's it. Fine. Right? How's it going? How's the day? How's work? You know, how are the kids? Fine. They're fine. Right? It's just not great, not bad, just fine. That's basically what Kat heard for probably the first 10 years of our marriage. How was your day, Penny? It was fine. No, you have to give me more than that, and I have. So, anyway, fine is one thing that I expect to hear, but the other thing that I often will hear when I ask someone how they're doing is, I am busy. Right? Y'all have heard this. You've said it. I've said it. I'm busy. I'm busy with the kids. I'm running from place to place. I'm busy with work. I've got projects and presentations and paperwork. They're building up. They're above my head. I'm surrounded by it. I'm busy with school. I've got papers and tests. I'm busy with family, extended family. I've got phone calls and doctor's appointments and care and all these sorts of things. I'm busy. And you can relate to that, because whether you said that to me this morning or last week or the last time that I asked you how you're doing or not, the truth is, is that many of us feel this. We are busy. We're busy.

And when we talk about our busyness, we feel this weird tension, because we don't want to be busy. Right? What we want is margin. We want rest. We want the ability to, you know, have space in our lives to do fun things and not just the busy things. And at the same time, we kind of take pride in being busy, don't we? Right? In fact, how busy we are can sometimes be an indication of how important we think we are. Right? I have a calendar full of appointments and projects. And not only that, but I can manage them. And I can get it all done. And I can fill my days and still be able to go home at night. And so, our busyness becomes like this badge of honor that we wear. Now, we would never say that, but we think it and we feel it. And you know how I know that we think it and feel it? Because I want you to think about a time in your life, right? It maybe isn't very often, but a time in your life when you're not busy.

And someone says, how are you doing? And what you want to say is, well, I'm doing great. I'm so rested. I'm relaxed. I don't have a care in the world. That's what you want to say. But you don't say that. Right? Instead, in that moment, you're trying to think of all the things that you could say to prove your existence. Right? You're trying to think of things that maybe

you've done. Because if you said, I'm rested. I'm relaxed. I don't have a care in the world. Well, that could easily be interpreted as you're lazy. Right? And I don't know about y'all's household, but in my household, lazy is a four-letter word. And I mean one of those four-letter words. Right? And so, we don't want to be perceived as being lazy. And so, we have to come up with something else. And we have to prove how busy we are. How full our schedules are. And so, we end up doing that. We run from thing to thing. Filling our time. Running ourselves ragged. Trying to find our worth in what we do. And in our busyness. And we do this with our lives. And we do it with our work. And we do it with our families. And we do it with the Lord.

A Promised Rest

But what if there was something better? What if God was giving his people a rest from finding our value and our worth in what we do? That's the promise of Hebrews 4. That's the promise that is offered to us. A promised rest. The passage begins, "the promise of entering his, that being God's, rest still stands." So, there was a promise that was made to God's people. Right? We actually started to allude to it last week when we were talking about the wilderness generation. That is, God's people were coming out of Egypt. And Moses was leading them by his hand. They walked through the Red Sea. They're moving towards the promised land. They get to the wilderness. But the end goal was the land. Right? Because in the promised land, they would dwell with God. And when they dwell with God, they would finally have rest. That was the promise that was being made to them. That was the promise being made to them. That they would experience this rest. But we know from last week that that generation failed to achieve it. Right? And they failed to achieve it because we have this very sad phrase at the end of chapter 3. They were unable to enter because of their unbelief. They didn't believe. They didn't have faith. They didn't trust the Lord. And so, they don't enter into the land. And they don't enter into his rest.

And yet, the promise still remained. You see, the promise wasn't built upon the people's ability to fulfill that promise. No, it's based on God. God is the one who will fulfill this promise. And the promise remains even when the people are faithless. And so, a new generation is raised up. Right? A new generation that's going to follow Joshua into the land. Into the promised land. But the author of Hebrews tells us something more. He says that God has something even greater than the rest that was promised in that land. You see, the land is but a foretaste of a better rest to come. That's what verses 8 and 9 indicate. He says, for if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. You see, the promise of rest, it continues. It didn't find its completion with Joshua or the land because the promise is ultimately about eternal rest. It's not about a small strip of land in the Middle East. It's about eternal rest. And I say eternal rest because this rest is modeled after God's. That's what we see in verses 9 and 10. And we're going to talk a little bit more about this in greater detail later in the sermon.

But for now, we have to remember what God's rest was like. Remember, he created the heavens and the earth in six days and all that they contained. And then on the seventh day, the Sabbath day, he rested from his works. Now, what's interesting about the Sabbath day, the seventh day in creation, in the creation narrative, is how it differs in structure from the other six. So you remember days one through six, there was morning and there was evening. There was morning and evening. And in between the morning and evening, what was God doing? He was creating. Right? He was creating. But then we get to the seventh day and there's no evening. There's no end. The Sabbath day, God's day of rest continues for all time. That's

why I said it's a rest that's eternal. It's an eternal rest that has no end. It continues. And that is the rest that God is calling us to enter into.

Entering That Rest

So how do we enter into that rest? Well, that's where the warnings kick in. Right? Remember last week I said in the book of Hebrews, we have these promises, we have these truths, and they're often tied to warnings. Well, here's the warnings. Three times in chapter 4, the author returns to Psalm 95. Remember, this is the Psalm from last week. And two of those times he quotes the same phrase, they shall not enter my rest. So that's the warning. That's the worry. That's the concern, that we wouldn't enter God's rest. We see it in verse 1. "While the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it." Now this is very interesting, this verse one, because he says, let us fear. Now, if you're familiar with the Bible, if you've been around the church, especially if you've spent any time in the Psalms, then you've probably noticed or you've heard that the primary command in the Psalms is what? Do not fear. Right? By far and away, it is the most prominent command in the Old Testament. Do not fear. And so we have that in our background. And then we come to Hebrews one and he says, fear. It's like, wait a minute. That doesn't seem right. Don't fear, but now we're supposed to fear. So what are we to fear? We're to fear not entering God's rest.

And did you see who's supposed to fear this? The author of Hebrews says, let us fear. So he's not saying those people out there. Those people didn't come to church this morning. Those people don't read their Bibles. Those people down the street, our neighbors, our coworkers, they're the ones who need to fear. No, no, no. He says, let us fear. Him included. You and me. Let us fear that we not enter God's rest. Now at the end of our passage in verse 11, there's another let us. Did you see how our passage is kind of bracketed this way? Verse one, it begins, let us fear. And then verse 11, as we're coming to the end of our passage, there's another let us. "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest." So fear that you wouldn't enter, now strive to enter.

So we return to that question again. So how do we enter? How do we enter? If we're to fear not entering and we're to strive to enter, we enter by faith. That's what verse two tells us. Because verse 2, speaking of that generation that failed to enter God's rest, the author says this, "for good news came to us just as to them. But the message they heard did not benefit them." Here's why: "Because they were not united by faith with those who listened." Do you hear that? The good news, the gospel of God's grace, of his mercy, of his forgiveness, it was proclaimed to them. They heard it with their own ears. They actually saw it with their own eyes, right? They were the ones who were delivered, who were brought out of Egypt. They saw how God provided, and yet it didn't benefit them because they had no faith. They lacked faith.

The New Testament theologian F.F. Bruce, he put it this way. He said "the reason why this message did not do them as much good as it was designed to do was that they did not obey God's voice or keep his covenant." The practical implication is clear. It is not the hearing of the gospel by itself that brings final salvation, but it's appropriation by faith. And if that faith is a genuine faith, it will be a persistent faith. So they heard, but they didn't believe. They heard, but they had no faith. And so they never entered God's rest. So what about us? What about us? Where's your faith? What have you put your faith in? You see, we're in as great of danger as they were.

This warning is for us as much as it was for them, because we're in danger of putting our faith in the things that we busy ourselves with rather than Jesus. So how do we know? How do we know if we're putting our faith in Christ? How do we discern that? Well, we could try to discern ourselves, right? We could interrogate our hearts. We could try to figure out where our faith is. Or we could look at God's word. We could look at God's word and it will expose our hearts, because that's what verses 12 and 13 say. Now, what's interesting about this is that I bet many of you have read those verses before, verses 12 and 13. Maybe you've recited them. Maybe you've even set them to memory, right? And every time we think about these verses, what we think about is the doctrine of the word, right? And rightfully so. I want to guarantee, but I haven't read every single systematic theology book ever written, but I would pretty much guarantee that if we went into my office or the church library upstairs and we took off any systematic theology, when we got to the section on the doctrine of the word, we would find these verses somewhere in it, right? I'm like 99.9% sure without, you know, having read them all. Because this is where we turn. And rightfully so. Because this does talk about the word.

But do you notice the context in which this comes? It's coming about those who didn't enter God's rest because they had no faith and the encouragement for us to enter God's rest by faith. And so these verses are functioning as a way of diagnosing our faith. That's what they're doing in context. They say, "for the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and tensions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." We're exposed. Our hearts are revealed. The word functions kind of like the mirror of Erised. If you're a Harry Potter fan, you know exactly what the mirror of Erised is. You see, in the world of Harry Potter, the magical world of Harry Potter, there's this magical mirror. And the mirror functions this way. You can stand in front of it, you look at it, and it reflects back you, your reflection. It shows you your reflection, but it also shows you something more. It shows what's in your heart. It shows your longings and your desires and your hopes and your dreams. It shows what's in your heart. And so when Harry looks at the mirror, what does he see? He sees not just himself, but he sees his parents, right? His parents who died when he was a baby, right? That's what he sees because that's the longing of his heart. Ron, Harry's best friend, right? When he looks in the mirror, what he sees is him wearing the badge that says he's head boy of the school and he's captain of the Quidditch team and he's holding up the house cup as the champion because what's in his heart is the longing for acclaim and recognition and success.

It reveals what's in their heart. And Hebrews is telling us that's what the Word does to us. You see, when we read the Word, what it does is it exposes us. It shows us our heart. That's what God's Word does. It exposes who we are and where we've put our trust, where we have placed our faith. It reveals what's in here. Like a skilled surgeon with the sharpest of scalpels cutting through skin to reveal what's inside, what's hidden from the naked eye. So the Word in the hand of the Spirit cuts to our souls and exposes where we have placed our faith. You know, we can hide that from one another, but we cannot hide that from God. And so when we come to the Word and we're being exposed by it, it's going to reveal things that we don't like to see, right? I mean, you cannot read God's Word and not find conviction somewhere. It's going to reveal things.

It's going to reveal things like greed and lust, pride and arrogance, gluttony and indulgence. And when it exposes those things, it might lead us to despair, but it's not meant to lead us to

despair. What it's meant to lead us to is repentance and faith. It's like that mirror showing us who we are and revealing to us that we need to run in faith to Jesus. That's what it does. And that is the response when we are laid bare before God. That we don't busy ourselves with works and we don't press harder and we don't hide away our sin hoping no one will notice. No, when we're exposed, we repent of sin and turn in faith and enter God's rest. A rest from our works.

Rest From Our Works

That's the last thing I want to point out. That this rest is a rest from our works. That's what verses 8 through 10 tell us. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then there remains a rest for the people of God. For whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. So you see what the author is doing. He is taking God's rest and he's saying that is the model for our rest. And so what is God's rest like? This is the second time that he invokes Genesis in the seventh day. Right in verse 4 he did. And in these verses what he's doing is he's reminding us what God's rest is like. And the first thing we need to remember is that God's rest isn't inactivity. Okay? It's not like God created the heavens and the earth and all that they contain and on the sixth day he finished. There was evening. On the seventh day there was morning. And he stepped back and said, all right, y'all got it. Go ahead. You know, I'll just be over here. Just kind of take it all in. You know, let me just watch. I got my popcorn. Right? That's not what God was doing.

In fact, we know from Hebrews chapter 1 in Colossians 1 that God is actually holding the universe together even right now. Right? Like right in this moment God is holding the universe together. Jesus is holding it together so much so that if he were to let go, I don't know what would happen. I mean, I guess it would be like, you know, Avengers, right? Where they all just like turn to dust and float. Maybe. I don't know. He's holding it together. And so his rest doesn't mean he's inactive. He's not like a clockmaker who has wound the clock and he steps back and lets it run. No. He's still active in the world, but his rest was a rest from his initial week of creation. So that's the first thing we need to remember. The second thing we need to note about God's rest is to remember when it comes. Right? So he creates days 1 through 6. Right? He creates the spheres that the different inhabitants will function within. Right? So he creates the sky. He creates the water. He creates the ground. And then he inhabits those things. Right? He puts the sun, the moon in the sky and he puts in the heavens and he puts birds in the sky and he puts creeping things on the ground and fish in the sea. And now on the sixth day, at the end of the sixth day, he creates man and woman. After his own image, he created them. In the likeness of God, he created them male and female. And then he looked upon his created world and he said, it is very good.

Now, I think we can simply reduce that statement to like a statement of quality. Like, you know, it's not bad. It's not mediocre. It's very good. We could kind of think about it that way. And that would be right. But I think we can also think about this phrase, very good, as a depiction of God taking pleasure in what he has made. That he is enjoying his creation. That that's part of his rest. Like, God doesn't make bad things. It was very good. Okay. So this is God's rest. Right? I said earlier, it's eternal. It's still active, but it's a break from his creation week. And then it's him taking pleasure in what he has done. And so this rest informs our rest. Right? It's a rest from our works. Just as God took pleasure in his work and then he rested from his works, that becomes the model for us. We take pleasure in rest. In fact, it was in the very beginning of our bulletin, right, in the reflections, I don't know if you noticed it or

not, if you were looking, but Amy Peeler has this beautiful quote: “This Sabbath rest is not the state of doing nothing, but instead joining with God in restful enjoyment of the good creation as God intended it to be.” That is what our rest is like. We take pleasure in what we have done and we rest from our works, but it's not works of obedience, it's not works of our vocation, but it is rest from using our works to try to enter that rest. Right? That's what he said. That we rest from our works just as God did from his.

So as God rested from his works, we rest from trying to enter his rest by our works, because to enter this rest is a gift of God. N.T. Wright puts it this way, he says “the rest will always remain God's gift, not something we can ever construct for ourselves by hard work.” It is a gift, an offer from God that comes through Jesus. Because do you remember what Jesus said? He said, 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. Rest for our souls. Isn't that what we desire? Isn't that what we long for? A rest from trying to prove ourselves, a rest from trying to show how valuable we are, a rest from trying to gain acclaim by our actions? Y'all, those things don't produce rest, right? What do they produce? They worry and stress and exhaustion, but God's rest is a rest for our souls. St. Augustine, when he was praying to God, he wrote, “our souls are restless until they find their rest in you.” And y'all, that's what the book of Hebrews is driving us towards, a rest that is promised by God, that is entered through Jesus by faith, that is not momentary, but is eternal. Let us fear that we not enter that rest, and let us strive instead to enter it, the rest that God offers to us. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us your Son, who has come to live and to die and to rise again, and in doing this, he opens the pathway to your rest. And so, we pray that we would enter it, that we would not look to our own works, to our own doings, to our own labors, but we would look to you, and we would find rest. And so, we pray, Father, that you would plant the seed of faith in our hearts, that you would water it and tend it, that you would grow it so that we would believe and enter your rest.