

“A Sabbath Rest for the People of God”

The Sixth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 4:1-13; Deuteronomy 31:1-13

For a tired and weary people, struggling in the face of all kinds of persecution, and yet striving to persevere to the end in faith, nothing sounds better than God’s promise that at the end of the journey, his people will enter his Sabbath rest. But God’s promised Sabbath rest is not merely physical rest from earthly burdens (although this is part of what is in view). Rest from our earthly burdens is merely an illustration of our heavenly rest which extends throughout all eternity. And we enter this rest when we place our trust in Jesus Christ.

As we continue our series on the Book of Hebrews, I hope you are finding this series to be helpful. I encourage you to continue to read through his book on a regular basis in preparation for these sermons. We now move into chapter 4 of this remarkable book, and we will take up the subject of the Christian Sabbath (the Lord’s Day). In this chapter, the author is continuing his discussion begun in the previous chapter when the author quoted the words of Psalm 95 and applied them to the congregation receiving this letter. This section (chapter 3:7-4:13) is part of the author’s case to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses, and the New Covenant to the old.

Psalm 95 was very familiar to those Hellenistic Jews who became followers of Jesus Christ, and who composed the bulk of the congregation receiving this letter. This particular Psalm, which was read often in the synagogues as a celebration of the arrival of the Sabbath, is divided into two parts. The first part of the Psalm (vv. 1-7a) speaks of the proper worship of YHWH. The second half of the Psalm (vv. 7b-11), recounts Israel’s rebellion against YHWH at Meribah in the wilderness (an event recorded in Exodus 17). Hellenistic Jews understood the account of Israel’s rebellion as the sad story of one of the worst moments in Israel’s history, and something not to be repeated.

The author of Hebrews uses this well-known incident in Israel’s history as a powerful warning that Israel’s rebellion against YHWH was not merely a lesson about the nation’s history—the rebellion at Meribah also serves as a warning to all those in this church who had made profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and were baptized, but who were now considering renouncing Christ and returning to the synagogue as some of their number had already done. To renounce Jesus Christ is to do the same thing the Israelites did in the rebellion at Meribah, only the consequences are far greater because of the greater promises of the New Covenant to those of the Old. To look at this from another angle, rejecting the New Covenant means that much more is forfeited (eternal promises) than even possible under the Old Covenant with its temporal promises and curses.

Everyone who knew the account of Israel’s rebellion knew that as a consequence, that generation of Israelites spent their entire lives wandering in the Sinai wilderness, never entering the land of Canaan in which the people of God could finally rest from their labors and enjoy that good land overflowing with milk and honey. In light of this infamous event, the author of Hebrews warns the church in 3:12-14 in no uncertain terms, *“take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”* As Israel did not enter into Canaan because of their unbelief and therefore missed out on God’s promised rest, so too, Christians who renounce Jesus will fall away from the true and living God, and not enter into that wonderful eternal rest from our labors.

Continuing with his purpose of showing the superiority of Jesus to Moses, and of the New Covenant (of which Jesus is mediator) to that covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, the author acknowledges that Moses was faithful over God's house (the people of God). But Moses' mediatorial work was limited—Moses was both himself a sinner, and subject to sinful human weaknesses. Moses was not able to ensure that God's people would enter Canaan and enjoy the promises of God. Jesus, on the other hand, is without sin and is alone able to ensure that God's people do receive everything which he has promised them. He is a greater priest who dispenses much great promises.

As we move into chapter 4, the author is continuing to quote the words of Psalm 95, although now he begins to focus upon the theme of rest, explaining how the idea of resting from one's works on the Lord's Day, foreshadows that heavenly rest we will all someday enjoy.

There are a couple of things we need to keep in mind about the Sabbath before we proceed. First, the Sabbath is creation ordinance. The creation account tells us that God worked for six days before resting on the seventh. God's rest refers to his Sabbath enthronement (rule) over everything that he had made, and which he pronounced "good." It is not as though God rested because he was tired—his rest is symbolic of his rule once he finished the work of creation. This pattern of working for six days and then resting upon the seventh is built into creation. We are designed to work for six days and then to rest for one. God has built this sabbatical pattern into creation.

Second, the Sabbath is unique in that it is not only a creation ordinance, but the Sabbath is also codified in the fourth commandment: *"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."*

Sabbath observance (along with circumcision) was one of the most public characteristics of first-century Judaism. Jews were usually meticulous in their Sabbath observance—refusing to work, shop, travel, or even prepare food (meals for the Sabbath were prepared on Friday before Sundown). With the coming of Jesus Christ (the Lord of the Sabbath), the Sabbath day and its proper observance is completely redefined. Because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week (Sunday), from the very beginning of the church (the *ekklesia*, or God's house), Christians began assembling together on the Lord's Day for worship. And this change in day of observance from Saturday to Sunday only further exacerbated the division between Jews and Christians.

To fully understand the force of the author's point, we need to realize that Sabbath observance was a huge issue at the time the author wrote this epistle. When a Jew left the synagogue for the church, this created a major and very public change in lifestyle. Jewish converts to Christ not only faced dietary issues when they began to have fellowship with Gentiles, but no doubt they also faced a constant stream of harassment and belittling from friends and family when they ceased attending the synagogue on Saturday and began going to church on Sunday. Not only would they be cut-off from friends and family, by not going to the synagogue on Saturday, Jews contended that converts to Christianity were engaging in what would have been considered "Gentile" practices on the Sabbath (which was God's day), however scrupulous they might have been in resting from their labors on the Lord's Day (Sunday).

And so, in this chapter, the author of Hebrews offers what is perhaps, the most important treatment of the Christian Sabbath anywhere in the New Testament. He has to address this issue, since, no doubt, it would be a very real source of contention between Christians and Jews, and a return to Jewish Sabbath

observance would have been one of the major reasons why Jewish Christians would go back to Judaism.

In verse 1 of chapter 4, the author writes, *“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 use of “therefore” (*oun*) indicates that everything which follows in verses 1-13 of chapter 4, is the conclusion to the argument which the author began to make back in chapter three, verse 7. At this point, the author of Hebrews introduces the theme of “promise.” God’s covenant promises are a very important theme in the Book of Hebrews, especially because God is the one who makes them, and so it is God’s fidelity which is object of our faith—“do we trust God to keep his promises?” The focus on God’s covenant promise means that the issue with which the author must deal is this: “how do those in this church respond to God’s promises? “Will they embrace them by faith?” Or do they doubt that God will make good on his promises? Or worse, do these people even care any more about God’s promises because they put their own needs and comfort first?

In this instance, God’s covenant promise is very specific. God has promised his New Covenant people a time of rest just as he promised Israel. For God’s house (the church) there remains the promise of entering into God’s rest, so Christians are urged to consider the consequences of not persevering to the end. The author even speaks of the “fear” (*phobeomai*) of not obtaining this rest. This warning is set forth against the backdrop of Israel’s unbelief at Meribah. Those in the church who had given up and returned to Judaism are doing the same thing that Israel did at Meribah—rebellious against God. Anyone hearing this letter who was considering doing the same, is now challenged to give very serious consideration to the fear that they too might miss out on the promised rest. In other words, the author is asking them to think long and hard about the consequences of not persevering until the end. There will be no Sabbath rest (either in this life or in the next) for those who turn away from Jesus Christ.

But as he has done throughout the earlier chapter, the author’s warning is followed by a reason to persevere. *“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 had the good news preached to them through their deliverance from the cruelty of Pharaoh (which was itself a picture of God’s rescue of his people from the tyranny of sin), and through the promises made to them under the covenant of grace that God made with Abraham and all of his spiritual descendants.

Most Israelites in that generation which perished in the wilderness did not believe God’s promises. They did not believe that God would do as he said, or they did not believe that God could give them the things he had promised to give—the promise of a land, the promise to make them a great people and a great nation. So, when the Israelites entered the wilderness and heard the reports of the ferocity of the Canaanites, they did not accept YHWH’s promise and power to defeat Israel’s enemies and give Israel the land which God had promised to give them. Unbelievers are not willing to wait for God to do things in his time and way. They demand that God give them what they want right now, and under their own terms. Such people heard the promises, nodded their heads in apparent agreement, but never really did believe them. And so when God promised them something they could not see, they gave up.

The author’s point is now obvious. Like Israel in the wilderness, those in this church have also heard the good news, that Jesus died for our sins, was raised from the dead, and ascended on high, where he now rules at God’s right hand. Now, the question for this church is, “do they trust in the promise (the good news) that Jesus can save them from their sin and give them the things he has promised?” Or are they indifferent to the warning that if they turn away from Christ that they will never enter God’s rest and will not receive that which Jesus Christ himself has promised?

In verses 3-5, the author cites two Old Testament passages in continuing to make his case. *“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." The last line "they shall not enter my rest: is from Psalm 95:11. The author then compares the Psalmist's words of warning with those of Genesis 2:2 ff., where we read of God resting after completing his work of creation.

The point is that it is not as though the Sabbath rest promised Israel was something which was off in the distant future. The author's point is that the promised rest already began when God entered his own rest on the seventh day. God's people have been able to rest from their labors one day each week from the very beginning of creation. And yet, our rest from physical labor, as beneficial to us as it is to us, is not an end in itself. Our weekly day of rest is an illustration to us of the greater Sabbath rest we will enjoy when we enter heaven. That Israel did not enter this rest meant that it was available to them in an even greater form after the Sinai covenant when the Sabbath rest was defined more clearly on tablets of stone.

But without trusting in the promise, there is no true rest, no matter how much the Israelites avoided labor on Saturday. The legalists and unbelievers among them were too busy keeping track of what they didn't do on the Sabbath, and too busy keeping track what others were doing to violate the Sabbath, to simply stop and enjoy God's gift of rest. The day of rest (Saturday) was a gift from God designed to not only give his people physical rest, but to implant in them the theological category of an eternal rest in the presence of God. The Sabbath rest is so much more than merely ceasing from labor one day a week.

This is why the author of Hebrews is so careful to point out that all who trust in Jesus Christ have already entered the promised rest (at least in one important sense). There is a clear already/not yet component here in the author's argument. Lord's Day observance (attending to spiritual things and physical rest on the Lord's Day) is a foreshadowing of our heavenly rest yet to come. The *ekklesia* (God's house) already enjoys this rest when we assemble on the Lord's Day to hear God's promises proclaimed to us (the good news of which the author has been speaking), when we receive his sacraments (the signs and seals of those promises), and then when we use the Lord's day to rest and recharge our weary bodies.

As we have seen, our author does not warn his hearers without giving them ample reasons to persevere. He does this again in verses 6-7, "*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.'*" Returning once again to the "today" of Psalm 95, the author makes several important points. First, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Every Lord's Day we participate in the heavenly Sabbath in a typological way, as we anticipate the blessings yet to come. When God's house assembles together on Sunday, God visits us with salvation. He speaks to us through his word. God reaffirms his covenant promises through the sacraments. God then allows us, his people, to respond to him through our songs of praise and through our prayers of intercession and thanksgiving. In our participation in all of these things, God is preparing us for heaven.

Second, there are people in the church receiving the letter who have heard the good news (the gospel promises have been preached to them), but who have not embraced the promises by faith. These are people who have disobeyed God's command to repent and believe. The author is warning them, as well as us, that there are people in our churches who hear the words of the gospel, make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and are even baptized, but who are just like the rebellious Israelites at Meribah. They do not believe the promises. Anyone who is guilty of this, be warned, you will not receive the promises Jesus Christ makes to you. In fact, you are mocking Christ by professing faith but not believing the

promises which he so graciously makes to you, if only you trust him to keep his word and save from the guilt and power of your sins.

The good news, however, is that not too late to do something about your predicament. The “today” (the day of decision which confronted Israel) now confronts you. “Today,” if you have heard God’s voice through his word, and wish to embrace all of God’s promises by faith in Jesus Christ, then do as the author of Hebrews urges you to do. “If you’ve heard God’s voice, do not harden your hearts.” God always keeps his promises. He will never disappoint you. And the specific promise the author focuses upon here is that of entering into God’s rest—a very good reason to move from the Jewish Sabbath, to the Christian Lord’s Day, which is but a faint glimpse of that true rest which lay ahead for the people of God.

As the author points out in verses 8, Israel’s entrance into Canaan and the promise of rest which that entailed actually pointed ahead to something much greater (type/shadow vs. reality/fulfillment). As the author states, “*for if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.*” As we saw in our Old Testament lesson (Deuteronomy 31:1-13), Moses instructed Joshua to lead the people into Canaan, and not to be afraid or doubt that God could give them everything he promised them. This means that the rest mentioned in Psalm 95—entrance into Canaan—was not the whole story. Under Joshua’s leadership the Israelites (the second generation which left Egypt) finally entered Canaan and experienced that which is described in Joshua 23:1 as follows: “*when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years.*”

So, for a time, the people of God did experience rest in the land God had promised. But it only took a generation or so before the Israelites were doing what was right in their own eyes and behaving like the pagans around them. Joshua led them into the land. The people enjoyed rest for a time. But if, as the author of Hebrews makes plain, Joshua could not give them rest, then Israel’s time in Canaan must have pointed beyond temporal promises (a rich and fertile land flowing with milk and honey) to heavenly ones (rest from all our earthly labors in the eternal presence of God).

This is why in verses 9-10, the author focuses upon the day of rest which still remains for the people of God. “*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.*” This is an important point to make with people considering going back to Judaism, in part because of Sabbath observance. The true Sabbath remains for the people of God. Those who are Christ’s (“*whoever has entered God’s rest*”) get a foretaste of this rest on the Lord’s day, although we know that this is yet to be fully realized when we enter the presence of the Lord, or Jesus returns, whichever comes first. And just as God now rests from his work (in his Sabbath enthronement) so too, we the people of God are to rest from our works.

The rest spoken of here has a two-fold application. First, when we trust Christ and receive his saving merits, we are no longer uncertain of our final destiny. We are able to rest from the fear and worry about whether or not we will make it to heaven when we die. It is finished. Jesus Christ has settled this matter for us—and as the perfect high priest of a greater covenant he is now at God’s right-hand ensuring that we receive everything God has promised, including rest from our labors in Jesus Christ. Second, God has given us the Lord’s Day as a great blessing for us to enjoy. The Lord’s Day is not only that appointed time when we as God’s *ekklesia* assemble together in devotion to our Savior and his word (Sunday worship), it is also that day when we are to rest from physical labor.

Aside from the commandment to assemble together as God’s people, Lord’s Day observance is not a matter of doing or not doing certain things on a check list. Those checking off their list of things they did not do, (or checking off a list of what their neighbors are doing) are not resting. Rather, Lord’s Day

observance is a matter of using the gift of rest which God has given us to its full advantage. It is something for which to be grateful. As our catechism so wonderfully puts it in question 103, *“What does God require in the fourth Commandment?”* Answer . . . *“In the first place, that the ministry of the Gospel and schools be maintained, and that I, especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church to learn the Word of God, to use the Holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms. In the second place, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, allow the Lord to work in me by His Spirit, and thus begin in this life the everlasting Sabbath.”*

Having made his case, the author of Hebrews now issues another pointed exhortation in verse 11. *“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”* Christians are not to rebel against God as Israel did at Meribah. Christians must strive (persevere) to enter God’s rest—not only in assembling together and resting from physical labor, but in relying upon the merits of Jesus to secure this promised rest for us. In fact, we can even explain the relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace in the following terms: Christ has performed sufficient good works (fulfilling the demands of the law), so that we might rest from all our labors (under the covenant of grace) when we enter God’s rest through faith in Jesus Christ. Christ works. We rest in Christ.

But God will not be deceived regarding those who believe the promise and those who don’t. *“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.”* God’s word exposes both human action and human motivation. God sees all, he knows all. The preaching of his word reveals who believes the promise and those who do not. And since they “Today” of salvation has come, those who are Christ’s and trust his promises, will strive to enter the promised rest. For although this is the time when we all must work and then rest on the Lord’s Day, never forget the Savior’s promise to us as we strive: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). Beloved, *“there is a Sabbath rest for the people of God.”*

What, then, do we take with us by way of application?

The author has made his case for the superiority of the Christian Sabbath (the Lord’s Day) to the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). This superiority is a matter of Christ’s saving work, versus the temporal benefits of the Mosaic economy. If we are Jesus Christ’s through faith, then we already participate in the eternal rest when we assemble together on the Lord’s Day as God’s house, and when we take advantage of this day to rest from our earthly labors. The Christian Sabbath points beyond temporal things to that wonderful reality grounded in the fact that Jesus died for ours sin, was raised from the dead, and has taken his place at God’s right hand. His promises—including a heavenly rest—are “Yes” and “Amen!” because these things have already been accomplished for us!

It is sad that so many Christian and Reformed discussions of the Lord’s Day focus upon our duty and obligation, and not the wonderful blessing of participating in a weekly worship service which amounts to a rehearsal for heaven, as well as enjoying a day which God himself set aside for our rest and due consideration of the things of Christ. Because we experience the blessings of the Lord’s day even this day, we know that remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, a rest which we have already entered, and which we will enjoy in full when we enter into the presence of the Lord. This rest is so wonderful, it is well worth striving for. And we strive for it by participating in all the blessings of the Christian Sabbath (the Lord’s Day), which we enjoy as members of God’s house (*ekklseia*).