

# The Book of Hebrews

## Jesus: A Better Rest

Hebrews 4:1-13

Today we will be working through Hebrews chapter 4. John Piper, who is a world renowned Bible teacher who pastors a church in Minneapolis, says that verses 1-11 of chapter 4 are some of the most complicated verses in the Bible. So if you find this passage a bit complicated, you're not alone. Had I known that when we were picking which passages of scripture we were going to teach on, I probably wouldn't have picked this one. Thankfully God has used this piece of scripture to teach me more of what it means to rest in Him over the last few weeks as I've been studying it and I hope I am able to teach it faithfully as the Holy Spirit intends it to be taught.

Up to this point, the author of Hebrews has been pointing us to what happened right after the Exodus, where God had brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, right up to the walls of the promised land. [Deuteronomy 1] God tells them to take the land, but in their unbelief they decide to send spies first. They send twelve spies to stake out the land and when they all come back, ten of them say, "Those guys are too tall for us. We can't do it." They're complaining about their height. It was only a few days ago that they were walking through the parted Red Sea and yet now they decide that God can't handle a few tall guys. Their hearts were hardened and they didn't want to hear about how faithful God had been to them. They just didn't want to believe. So God in His mercy and His justice takes them back into the wilderness for the next forty years until the entire generation dies out. They didn't get to enter God's rest because of their unbelief.

Unbelief is failing to trust in the wisdom and goodness of God. It is when we refuse to believe that God is a good and loving Father who wants us to receive true and everlasting joy. The Israelites did not trust the character or love of God.

Hebrews 4:1 "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."

### Help Each Other Fight Unbelief

The author of Hebrews is informing us that the promise of entering his rest still stands. Even though during the writing of this letter, the Israelites had already inherited the promised land, that was not the final rest. God intends for us a rest in Him. To receive a peace only He can provide and to be satisfied knowing that Jesus has accomplished all the work to earn our salvation. We are resting in the good news of the salvation Jesus Christ has provided and freely given to us.

Last week at the end of chapter 3, Rob showed us how, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we are to remind each other of the gospel daily lest any of us should fall into unbelief. We see at the end of chapter 3 that the reason the Israelites did not enter into the rest God had planned for them was because of unbelief. We were given a warning to not harden our hearts, but rather to proceed, with rest in Jesus, in obedience out of loving Jesus and appreciation for the gospel. Unbelief is a dangerous temptation that needs to be fought off by a community of believers who can encourage one another, love one another, and be open enough with one another to actually help fight unbelief. This is why it is so important to be the church - to live lives of community together - and not just attend a church service on Sundays.

## **Fear Unbelief**

Then he tells us to fear. Because this chapter starts with the word “Therefore”, we need to go back to the previous verse to figure out how this fits with what is being said here. 3:19 says that “they were unable to enter because of unbelief.” The conclusion the author draws is that we should fear. 4:1 “while the promise of entering his rest still stands, *let us fear.*” We should fear if we haven’t reached that rest. The rest in Jesus that starts the moment we are saved and continues on for eternity. The rest in knowing we are saved. We should fear because if we continue in unbelief we will miss out on the rest. Just as it shows us in 3:19, “they were unable to enter because of unbelief.” Therefore, fear unbelief, fear not trusting Jesus.

Some translations, such as the NIV, use the words “be careful to,” which doesn’t provide the same sense of weight as intended by the author. The greek words for fear and be careful are quite different, and the word used here is definitely the word fear. This is not careful like, “watch out, that’s hot soup” careful, but real severe fear as in, “watch out, that car is about to hit you and kill you” fear. The intent here isn’t that we are in constant fear, walking around all day worrying that we’re not saved or that we don’t believe. The intent is to strictly warn us about the dangers of unbelief so when we see them we can run back into our Father’s arms.

When Wyatt was a bit younger, just learning to run, he was playing in the yard having a great time, then out of the blue, he took off like a bolt of lightning from our front yard towards the street - one, without holding my hand, and two, not having a clue of whether there were any cars coming or not. As any good Dad would do, I called out to him, chased after him, and brought him back off the street to talk with him. At this point there is a sense of urgency and weightiness in the situation and because I love him, I need to instill in him a fear of the street. This is where you use the “Dad” voice. It’s a little lower than usual, a little more stern, and straight to the point. “You DO NOT run out into the street. There are cars driving by and they won’t see a little boy who darts out into traffic. If you want to go into the street, you need to hold someone’s hand. If a car hit you it would hurt you very bad and probably even kill you.”

If I tell him that, he’ll hopefully have a healthy fear of the street. Now he’s not going to be laying in his bed at night thinking, “oh no, the street’s going to get me.” He’ll still be

able to play and have fun in the yard or in the house without a constant fear of the street. Only when he goes near the street, or is tempted (perhaps by his older brother) to go across the street when he's not supposed to will he feel that fear. The rest of the time the fear allows him to have fun and play and be a kid in the places he doesn't need to fear at all.

I should add this, which is a free parenting tip, and not really related to the message, but I'll add it anyway. When you tell your kids that they have to hold someone's hand to cross the street, you need to be explicit that it's an adult or a parent's hand. Last year while we were at Kim's parent's house, the boys were playing in the back yard and decided they wanted to go to the park without telling anyone. Markus was three at the time, and Wyatt was two. After noticing the kids weren't trapped in the back yard like we thought they were, Kim found them playing in the spray park across the street about a half a block away. When reprimanded and asked why they crossed the street by themselves without holding someone's hand, Wyatt answered, "But we *were* holding hands." A neighbor across the street said he saw them walk across to the park holding hands with each other. Needless to say, we had to have the fear of the street discussion again - with more explicit instructions on when and how they were allowed to cross the street.

And in terms of fearing unbelief, just as we don't want our kids living in constant fear of the street, we don't need to live in a constant fear of unbelief, being paralyzed by it. We should feel fear when tempted to distrust God, but it should drive us back to the Father, to the safe area of his goodness and promises. We need to be aware of the fearful danger of unbelief, but not be terrorized by it. We were reminded in chapter 2, verse 15 a few weeks ago that "[Christ died to] deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." Jesus died to free us from the fear of death. He died to free us from slavish fear. He wants us to be a people filled with faith in Him. The only thing we should fear is not trusting Him. This allows us to be bold, to be courageous, to live life in a way that testifies that God is really our Father. We can now not worry about what people may think of us if we tell them we're Christians. We can not be afraid for our lives if we feel called to a dangerous neighborhood, city, or country to share the gospel. It's faith in the promises of God through what Jesus has already done for us that makes us fearless before the threats of men. (Hebrews 10:32-36)

Verse 2 begins with the word "for", which is giving us the reason to fear. "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." We should fear unbelief because they still didn't believe even though they heard the good news, or the gospel. They didn't hear it the same way we do, in its fulfillment, but it was loud enough and clear enough for the author of Hebrews to say they heard it. One example in the Old Testament is in Exodus 34:6-7,

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"

This was the good news they had received giving them a shadow of what was to come in Jesus and it was also the good news of the promise that God would bring them into the land he had for them if they would trust him. They were able to see God's promise that He is merciful and forgives sins and promises rest and joy for all who trust him. For them it was the promised land, which was supposed to be a picture of the eternal promised land led by King Jesus, where sin and death are no more. But just as the Israelites gave up the promised land because they didn't trust God, because they decided that they would rather go back to their old way of life in Egypt as slaves, we must look at our lives and see if we would rather give up infinite joy given by God as we trust in him or be slaves to our selfishness. As C.S. Lewis says, in his book *The Weight of Glory*, describing those who live in unbelief, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." The good news did not benefit them because they did not believe. They were not united by faith. They were too easily pleased with slavery. Because they would rather be slaves in Egypt than follow and trust God, God did not allow them to enter His rest, which is a picture of missing heaven.

### **The Rest for God's People through History**

Verses 1 and 2 have shown us to fear unbelief because through unbelief we fail to enter God's rest. Verses 3 through 10 show us five different points in history that God has been continuing to offer his believing people rest. Since the beginning of time, God has had a plan for the perfect rest of His people. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28) and these verses are showing us where the promise was already given in the Old Testament.

Verse 4 shows us creation. "For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.'" God didn't rest because he was wiped from all the hard work of creation. It's not like God the Father said to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, "Hey guys, that was a long week, this creation thing was harder than I thought it would be. We'd better take a day off to get our energy back." No, God didn't rest from tiredness, he rested out of joy and appreciation in what he had created. He rested because he had finished creating everything he had set out to create. It was a time of joy where Adam and Eve could enjoy fellowship with God. It was supposed to last forever and we would still be living in that seventh day of rest had sin not entered the world.

Verse 5, quoting Psalm 95 focuses on the period when Israel was wandering in the wilderness in rebellion against God. "And again in this passage he said, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" Because the promised land was a picture of God's eternal rest in Jesus and their unbelief excluded them from it, the author is guessing that some of us are wondering if there still is a rest for God's people.

Verse 8 points us to the time of Joshua, “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.” Joshua had brought God’s people into the promised land, but it wasn’t the final rest for God’s people. It was a shadow of things to come, but not the actual rest God had promised.

Verse 7, which again quotes Psalm 95 focuses on the time of David, “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.’” David had been King of Israel, right in the promised land, in the shadowy rest that God had given His people. Yet David knew this wasn’t the ultimate rest, and that God was still offering that eternal rest for those of His people with faith to believe.

And finally the fifth period of history comes in verse 9, which was repeated from verse 1, “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.” So the offer for rest was extended to them in that day and now still remains extended for us today. God is offering you his rest.

There may be some of you who may cringe at the word Sabbath because it brings thoughts to mind of a day of the week that you aren’t allowed to have any fun. Where you’re not allowed to laugh or enjoy life at all. You have to sit still in church all day with your brow furrowed and act very solemn, making sure everyone knows you’re taking a “holy” day. But whenever the New Testament uses the word Sabbath in a positive light it’s talking about the rest we have in Jesus, having completed the work for us on the cross. It’s not just a day of the week we take to reflect on the cross, but it’s now an everyday thing where we get to enjoy God and be refreshed through his rest. So every day becomes a Sabbath. We can work, play and enjoy life to God’s glory all while resting in the finished work of Jesus.

The way we enter his rest is through faith and belief in Jesus, who is the only reason we can rest. We don’t rest because we’ve lived a perfect life and now we can sit back and enjoy the fruits of our labor, we rest because Jesus lived a perfect life. Because we have sinned and rebelled against God in our unbelief we don’t deserve rest, instead we deserve death. But Jesus died in our place. He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. But not only did He die, he rose again, conquering our sin, defeating our death, and giving us new life along with the life he took up again. We are able to stand in front of a holy, good, and righteous God and rest because of what Jesus has done for us. While hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out, “It is Finished!” declaring the end of religion where people try to earn their own way to rest, which always fails. So what this now means is that we no longer need to work for our salvation. We can rest in the finished work of Jesus. We can have a relationship with God, our creator and rest in His goodness.

## **Strive to Enter that Rest**

Verse 11, "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. 12 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. 13 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."

I want us all to desire that rest in Jesus. We want to be a people who fear unbelief. Who want to stay away from unbelief, who strive to enter God's rest. It was because of Israel's disobedience through unbelief that they fell away. They had hard hearts and had no desire to strive for God's rest. How can we fight unbelief? How can we desire God's rest? We look to Jesus, we get to know him. Jesus is the Word of God. And the Bible is God's written word to us. Jesus said that the Scriptures, or the Bible, testify about Him. The Bible is all about Jesus, it's not a list of rules we need to follow to get into heaven. God's word shows us who He is, then who we are in relation to him. We are in desperate need of a Savior, and the Bible reminds us of that. Like a surgeon, God uses His scriptures to cut into our heart, show us our idols, and remind us of his mercy and goodness.

## **Communion**

As we now transition into our time of communion I would like us to contemplate our position with God. Have we been trying to earn our own salvation? Have we been working to please God? Are we trying to rest on our own merits? Or can we now rest in the fact that Jesus paid it all?

The night before Jesus went to the cross, he gathered his disciples for a meal, known as "The Last Supper." He told his disciples to continue doing that in remembrance of Him. Here at Grace Fellowship we continue that by taking a piece of bread signifying Jesus body broken for our sin, and a cup of juice signifying his blood shed to make way for the New Covenant, which put an end to us trying to earn our way to salvation. This is something we, as Christians, do to celebrate Jesus, who is our King. If you are not a believer in Christ we ask that you do not participate, but rather contemplate your standing with God. If you have a desire to enter God's rest and trust in the finished work of Jesus, you can talk to Murray, Rob, Sammy, or myself if you have any questions. If you are a believer, please come to the front and take a piece of the bread and a cup of juice as we sing a song in praise of our savior and we will eat and drink together when the song is finished.