

Sermon Draft (October 21, 2018)

Text: Hebrews 4:1–13 (14–16)

Sermon: Striving in Christ

A couple weeks ago we heard how we are to learn from the example of the Israelites: where they hardened their unbelieving hearts to the promises of Moses and God and fell in the wilderness, we ought to exhort and encourage one another to remain steadfast, *“for we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end”* (3:14). Today’s text in chapter 4 continues this exhortation, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us: Strive! For we who believe will enter God’s rest! *“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest,”* our text says in v 11.

On the heels of hearing of Israel’s demise in the wilderness, the promise of entering God’s rest may seem far removed; we may even wonder whether there is such a thing as “God’s rest,” for it seems as distant to us as the Promised Land seemed to the Israelites.

The epistle writer recognizes his hearer's skepticism, and he begins our text by reassuring you that ***“the promise of entering [God's] rest still stands”*** (v 1). This is an important reassurance! How often do we begin to wonder whether God has decided no longer to be gracious? Life seems to be full of toil and labor. Prayers seemingly go unheard. Jobs are lost. Loved ones die. Life crumbles around us. We begin to wonder if perhaps God is punishing us, if our sins are still remembered; after all, did not Israel fall in the wilderness because God had gotten fed up with them, had lost patience with them? That's what we convince ourselves. As we see our own sins and admit our own guilt and feel our own shame, we begin to wonder if perhaps there is no such thing anymore as a promise of entering God's rest.

But the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, God has always offered a rest—it's even woven into the fabric of his creation! ***“For,” the epistle says, “[God] has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works’”*** (v 4).

Yes, from the very foundation of the world, God had in mind a rest. In fact, so important was this rest to him that he gave his people of old the commandment, ***“Remember the Sabbath day [the day of rest] to keep it holy.”*** No, we should not doubt God’s promise to provide rest to his people. In fact, as Jesus even says of that Sabbath, ***“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”*** (Mark 2:27). And once we realize that God’s weekly day of the Sabbath was meant to proclaim to us his promised eternal Sabbath, we understand that God’s plans and promises of rest were specifically made for us.

Why is it that we sinners always burden the word rest with an “active” connotation? “What are you doing?” “I’m resting.” Or “Come, rest!” Rest isn’t a good work that we do; it’s the absence of work.

On the seventh day, God abstained from working. And that means, when he calls us to rest, he’s not calling us to do something, but he’s calling us to receive something. And by definition, something that is to be received can’t be earned, can’t be worked for, can’t be gained by my own effort. In fact, the word in the Greek is a noun “the rest.”

It's something God has for us: ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*** (Matthew 11:28)

The lesson we are to learn from the Israelites is not to work harder or “be more faithful,” but to trust in God’s Promise. What does our text say? ***“For good news [that’s Gospel!] 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”*** (v 2).

In other words, they didn’t trust the promise. God had given them promise after promise after promise, and yet, each time they eventually grew cold, skeptical, bitter, fell away—went their own way rather than trusting his word.

So, the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that the Israelites had the same Good News (Gospel) of God’s promised rest, but they lost out on it because they refused to believe. Their will seemed far better than his; their wisdom seemed far more relevant than his.

So, *“those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience”* (v 6). Disobedience to the promise . . .

Israel’s unbelief prevented them from entering God’s rest. We are told: *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts”* (vs 6–7). The promise still stands: “if you hear his voice.” There’s still One to deliver that promise! And who is that One? The writer hints at the answer: *“If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on”* (v 8).

We remember Joshua. We learned that God replaced Moses, the lawgiver, with Joshua, the one whose name promised “God saves,” the one who would lead them to the Promised Land. But that land was not the place of eternal rest, for Joshua was only a type, foreshadow, and figure of the greater Joshua to come.

The words grace and rest are synonymous. If God is gracious to me, then I can rest in his bosom. If I rest in his bosom, it can only be that he is gracious to me.

But as we've said, that rest is based on the greater Joshua, Jesus, the One who brings God's people to eternal rest through his merit and righteousness being poured out upon the cross.

When Paul reminds the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain but that now is the day of salvation, what message precedes that? On what truth is that promised rest predicated? ***“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”*** (2 Corinthians 5:19).

There's God's promised rest; it's found in Christ Jesus, crucified that God may thereby reconcile the world to himself, that he and all believers may rest in that reconciliation. Trust his promises (that's faith), for he promises us rest through our redemption in Christ crucified.

God's rest is found not in Moses, nor Joshua, but is here for us today in Jesus Christ. And if it's in Christ crucified, then it cannot be by works, by our own striving. In other words, there is no rest for the one who seeks to enter God's rest by his own merit, his own striving.

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Romans 4:5). In other words, by faith he rests in the Son of God! Didn’t the prophet say, ***“The righteous shall live by his faith”*** (Habakkuk 2:4)?

Israel refused to trust God’s promise of grace. It seemed too distant, too far removed from their current struggles. They believed that perhaps they knew better than God what they needed—that perhaps their desires, their efforts, their plans, their strivings ought to be the god to follow unto their own false promises of rest.

We can learn from Israel’s disobedience. Paul calls it, ***“the obedience of faith”*** (Romans 16:26), the obedience that seeks not to win God’s favor but simply to dwell in the rest he has provided for you through the merits of Jesus Christ. Our text says, ***“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience”*** (v 11).

But, if we are to strive to enter that rest, how are we to do so without depending on our own merits, our own efforts, our own selves?

Our text answers that, as it ends with words we know well. But we tend to learn them out of context: *“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”* (v 12).

That’s what we learn, or perhaps a shortened version of it, in Sunday School. But, in context, the writer uses this not just to highlight the nature of God’s Word, but to remind the faithful that this Word of God is their only hope to enter into God’s rest.

Consider this: the Israelites thought so little of God’s Word that as Moses went up to the mountain to receive it, the masses danced in sinful revelry. And again, they thought so little of his Word that they forgot or grumbled against his promises almost as quickly as they had received them.

How easy it is for us sinners to think that, if we just put away the Word of God, his will and ways hidden from our sight, that therefore we are hidden from his sight!

But our reading reminds us: ***“No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account”*** (v 13).

Sometimes, that’s how we feel when we come to confess our sins, isn’t it? Naked and exposed. His Word of Law has had its way with us—it has pierced ***“to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and [has discerned] the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*** And that’s exactly the Lord’s plan! For he may then turn right around and declare to us his Word of Gospel that our rest is in Christ Jesus, who has secured it for us.

Indeed, our God calls us to remember the Sabbath rest that here, as we dwell in his Word, he might do surgery on us with his Law, remove the cancers that afflict and tempt us, and bind us up with his Gospel. No wonder Paul exhorts Timothy that every pastor must present himself to God as an approved worker who rightly handles the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15)!

But what is required of workers is a gift to those who rest from their labors. The efforts of the surgeon are a blessing to the patient. The work of the servant is for the rest of the served. And the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve: *“Come to me . . . and I will give you rest . . . and you will find rest for your souls”* (Matthew 11:28–29).

Today, the Lord’s promise stands: his divine rest is ours, and it’s ours as we dwell richly in the Word of Christ Jesus, he who has removed from us the dues of labor, has upon the cross finished the work that was ours to bear, and now gladly calls us to rest by Word and Sacrament as they sustain us unto the eternal Sabbath rest. Strive, therefore, for we who believe will enter God’s rest!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.