

Don't Fail to Enter God's Rest. Hebrews 4:1-10

Introduction

Luke 13:23ff

Are there few that will be saved?

Jesus: Strive to enter through the narrow door. For I tell you, many will seek to enter and will not be able. (It will be too late.)

Hebrews 3 and 4 calls us to make sure we enter in while we still can.

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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." ⁵ And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest." ⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ 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." ⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

1. What is this "rest"?
2. How is it made available to us?
3. Who gets to enter into it?
4. What keeps us from entering in?

1. What is this "rest"?

What the author means by "rest" can be confusing to us as read through this passage, largely because of the historical range of his references: the creation, entering Canaan—or failing to do so, David's referring to rest as still coming in Psalm 95—600 years after the conquest of Canaan, and then the declaration that this rest still remains for the people of God in the second half of the first century when this letter was written. The implication is that the offer of rest still stands to this day, and there are hints that the full experience of it may not even be during our mortal lives here on earth.

Let's start by looking at how the author of Hebrews describes this particular rest.

1: The promise of entering His rest still stands.

3, 5: They shall not enter My rest.

9: There remains a Sabbath rest. (compare v. 4: God rested on the seventh day from all his works.)

10: Whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Whatever this rest is, the text repeatedly underscores that this *rest God himself participates in and God alone gives*. That means that the only way to experience this rest will be through our connection with God. Nothing else will do.

"Lord, You have made us for Yourself, and our souls are restless till they rest in You."
Augustine

Consider the two historical incidents Hebrews references to shed light on what this rest is.

First, entrance into **the promised land**. Israel has been delivered from slavery in Egypt by the mighty hand of God (ten plagues). They have been led by fire and cloud through the wilderness to the borders of Canaan. God has promised to give this land flowing with milk and honey to them,

whatever opposition they might face. God had promised this land to their forefather Abraham four centuries earlier. God told Abraham that his descendants would wait in a foreign land four generations (430 years to be exact), because the sins of the Amorites that inhabited Canaan were not yet full. In other words, Israel's conquest of Canaan would be both God's gift to them and God's judgment of a wicked people who had turned their back on the God they once knew (as evidenced by Melchizedek, priest of Yahweh, King of righteousness, King of Salem—eventually Jerusalem).

So rest for the Israelites was the fulfillment of God's promise to give Abraham's descendants a land to call home, free from their former slavery, rich provision, shalom.

Joshua 22:4

And now the LORD your God has given rest to your brothers, as he promised them. Therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan.

We learn even more from the other historical reference: creation itself.

Hebrews 4:3b-4

3b His works were finished from the foundation of the world. **4** For he has

somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works."

When God finished the creation of the universe, including Adam and Eve,
Genesis 1:31

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 2:1-3

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Everything was perfect. Nothing was marred. God had provided for human beings everything they needed. He blessed them and commissioned them to fill the earth and subdue it, to exercise dominion over all the earth, plants, and animals. Initially that was impossible for only two human beings, so He planted an enclosed garden, a paradise called Eden, for them to cultivate and manage and enjoy. He walked with them in the cool of the evening. If you think of rest as contentment,

security, peace, happiness, purpose, strength to fulfill it with no weariness, pain, fear or fatigue; no disease or death, no thorns, no sweat—you are recalling what Eden was like, when God had rested from His works. Why? Because it was all perfect and complete. And at first Adam and Eve were resting in Him.

But Adam and Eve sinned. They listened to the lie of the serpent that they would be better off if they disobeyed God's command, if they tasted for themselves what it was like to determine right and wrong. They chose to cast off God's restraint and to seek happiness by their own choices. And when they did, the rest they enjoyed at first was gone. They were driven out of the garden, and humanity has ever since been exiled from Eden. Every human heart longs to find the way back somehow. And when we read the description of the heavenly city, we find there a remarkable resemblance to the Garden of Eden. In fact, the tree of life is there, as it was in Eden's paradise at the beginning.

Taken together, the rest Hebrews is talking about is the rest of being delivered from bondage to slavery, of being led and empowered by God into the land of blessing, of recovery of the pristine beauty, peace, and joy of Eden, which reaches its full measure in the heavenly city itself. The citizens of heaven enjoy some measure of that rest even now.

Through faith in Christ the impenetrable sin barrier between them and God is broken through. They become God's children, God's people—the saints—set apart to Him; they enjoy freedom from guilt and condemnation; they are given by the Spirit the power to fight their sin instead of being enslaved to it; they look forward with eager expectation the day they see God face to face, sin completely cleansed, blameless, incorruptible, immortal, their names written in the Lamb's book of life. They rest in God's promise, God's goodness. They lean into His reliability and the certainty of their inheritance, purchased for them by Jesus the Messiah, their elder brother.

The rest is salvation in all its dimensions: built upon the past work of Jesus, transforming the present experience of those who belong to Him, and guaranteeing the full and perfect rest that is to come in the future when their salvation is complete. That's why the historical range. From creation to consummation, this rest remains for those who desire to enter it.

God finished His work of creation in six days, so He ceased/rested from His creative work from the seventh day on. But that does not mean He is idle. He rests from His creation work, but He continues to be active in redemption history.

John 5:17

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

The Jewish leadership persecuted Jesus because He healed on the Sabbath. They had distorted the purpose and limits of the Sabbath, making it a burden rather than a blessing. They treated their oxen better on the Sabbath than a human being in need. Sabbath rest is not idleness. It is resting in God, leaning on Him, letting Him lead you and empower you to do what He wants you to do. Worship, acts of love and mercy, prayer, gathering with the people of God.

Heidelberg Catechism, answer 103 regarding the fourth commandment:

"That every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath."

John Newton

*Safely through another week
God has brought us on our way;
Let us now a blessing seek,
Waiting in His courts today;
Day of all the week the best,
Emblem of eternal rest.*

Revelation 14:13

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

You need this rest more than anything or anyone else you might pursue. Ultimately, people get what they most desire. O enter this rest!

2. How is it made available to us?

Look where our text points us.

The Promise (1)

The promise of entering his rest still stands.

Think of all that God has promised throughout human history. To Abraham—a people; a place. Promises centered on the coming Messiah—fulfilled by Jesus. Promises yet to be fulfilled that were procured by Jesus for us—a people—the saints in light; a place—the heavenly city, the new heaven and new earth. I am with you all the days even to the consummation of the age. Our full inheritance. Our resurrection. Sinlessness. Not just without sin, but incapable of sinning anymore—incorruptible. Immortality. New heaven. New earth where righteousness has taken up residence. Forever reigning with

Him—restored to the vice-regent status we were created for in the beginning.

The Good News (2, 6)

For good news came to us just as to them. Those who formerly received the good news.

Both of these refer to God's promises to the Israelites that He would deliver them from Egypt and give them the promised land of Canaan. News that brought joy to a beleaguered nation, suffering the indignity and cruelty of bondage, facing the dangers of the wilderness, and the formidable foes who lived in the wilderness and even in Canaan. The good news from God was that He would empower them to win victories impossible for them to win on their own.

Hebrews refers to these promises from God to Israel as good news because he is drawing a parallel to the good news of deliverance and eternal life that God has promised to us through Jesus. Ironically, *Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua*, who led the people in the conquest of the promised land.

The Message (2)

The message they heard

God has spoken to man.

Two great presuppositions on which our faith is built: God is real and God has spoken to us in His Word.

You have a message from God Himself. Will you give it any attention?

His voice (7)

Quoting David in Psalm 95 (the Holy Spirit says—3:7)

“Today, if you hear his voice”

Now it becomes even more personal. We pay attention to the Word of God because of the God of the Word. We show reverence for and trust in Him when we listen to his voice with willing hearts. We do not hold Him and His Word at arm’s length as if we are the judges of Him.

Beware those who charge those who hold to God’s Word as bibliolaters. And beware those who fixate on studying the words while they ignore the Person speaking. God’s very voice.

John 5:38-40

³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. ³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

Jesus in John 10:27-28

27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. **28** I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

When you read the Word, when you hear it preached, do you hear the voice of God? Or is it all just an academic exercise, and intellectual stimulus, a philosophical musing, a practiced ritual, a merely human monologue to be endured each week?

Do you think that Christianity is just a cultural thing?—we're in the Bible belt you know. Perhaps you have even started to mock it in your heart, joining what has become seemingly a favorite pastime of many who once professed to be evangelical. They look at all this as merely human, cultural, traditional, unsophisticated, backward. They don't seem to have noticed that they were exposed to the very voice of God Almighty! They scoff at the flaws and failures of His people, and think that sufficient to shut their hearts to His voice.

If you are struggling with doubt, don't run from the Word. God's voice calls you to enter—to trust, to rest in Him. If you turn a deaf ear to Him, you will never find faith.

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."

3. Who gets to enter into it?

Hebrews 4:3 is explicit:

For we who have believed enter that rest.

Hebrews 4:9-10 describes those who believe this way:

⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Believing is more than just acknowledging historical data; it is more than intellectual assent. It is reliance. It is resting on the promises of God as completely sufficient to bring you safely home through all the twists and turns of this life.

They are not depending on themselves to make this journey. They are resting on God's finished work of creation and redemption. God has made a way for them through Jesus. They are leaning on Him, holding on to Him, relying on His truth, His power, not their own reasonings and their own abilities. The good works God's people do rise from their restful reliance on God and His work in them.

They are described here as the people of God.

People who rely/rest/believe in God's promises reveal themselves to be His people. Their new birth is evident by their active reliance.

Jesus in John 10:26-27

²⁶ But you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

Jesus calls in Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

You can't fix yourself. If you keep relying on your own ideas, your own efforts, your own accomplishments, you will never find the rest you need. It's like trying to rest on a raft that's sinking. You need one that will float, that will keep you from drowning, or you will spend your life thrashing about, struggling to keep above water.

Trust Him. Stop trying to figure everything out. Your brain is too small. We are all too broken. We have the debilitating virus us sin. We desperately need the Great Physician to heal us. We cannot heal ourselves.

4. What keeps us from entering in?

Hebrews 4 begins with this sobering warning.
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.

Unbelief (no faith in God and His promises)

Hebrews 4:2

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.

“They brought no faith to their hearing of it.”

Hebrews 3:19

So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Disobedience to God’s command (based on His promises)

Hebrews 4:6b

Those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience.

Hebrews 3:18

And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?

Faith responds with obedience. Unbelief expresses itself in disobedience.

Hebrews 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Obeying God is impossible if you don't He exists or that its worth it to obey—that it's really the best way. That He really is good.

This was the primal temptation. Satan convinces Adam and Eve they'll be happier if they disobey God because He's just trying to hold them back. He's not really good. They should be in charge, not Him.

Just hearing the good news is not sufficient. Somehow we feel safer just because we know the gospel and have heard it, perhaps many times.

Hardness of heart

Hebrews 4:7b

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

Unbelief and disobedience are connected to a heart issue—the seat of our disposition, thinking, and will. The three work together in a toxic vortex.

Hebrews 3:13

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.

Sin deceives us. Sin enslaves us. Sin poisons us, anesthetizes us, causes us to be irrational. When we choose sin, it chooses us and digs its claws deep. When we try to shake it off, having found it disappointing in what it promised, we find it will not let go. It claws at us, trying to drag us deeper and deeper.

We need brothers and sisters in Christ to come alongside and encourage us, strengthen us, to fight sin’s deceptive power. We need it now, today, every single day (Ben). Your time is limited. You don’t have time to waste. Today if you hear His voice, don’t, don’t harden your heart.

Hardening of heart happens at a level others cannot see at first. It takes time for it to break out into view.

Don’t fool yourself into thinking you can continue nurturing sin in your heart and that it will not harden your heart toward God.

Do you really think you can keep ignoring the voice of God—neglecting His Word, withdrawing from His people, shutting your heart to His call and it not destroy you?

Husbands, do you really think you can keep on neglecting your wife, being harsh with her, shutting her out, treating her like she's worth little, and it will not poison your very soul? 1 Peter 3 says that such behavior hinders even your prayers to God.

Wives, do you really think you can continue to belittle your husband and resent his leadership, and it won't harm your relationship with him and with God?

Children, do you really think you can nurture resistance and rebellion to your parents as they try to rear you in the fear and admonition of the Lord, just waiting the day you can break free, and that it will cost you nothing? That you can feed on all the worldly voices clamoring for your heart and that it will not reshape your brain and divert your life? Does any of us think we can feed our eyes and our hearts on impurity and it not defile us? That we can lie and steal and gossip and slander and that it will not infect our hearts? Beware the deceitfulness of sin. It will harden your heart, ruin your appetite for God, for holiness, for truth, make you deaf to His voice.

Proverbs 4:23

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

Hebrews 3:5

As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

"The rebellion" gathered momentum. Unbelief spread like a plague. And with it the willingness to obey died. There was all kinds of peer pressure to rebel against God's command to enter Canaan and take it by His power. The evil report of 10 out of 12 of the spies that the land was amazing but the enemies were too strong to defeat caused the congregation to lose hope and to turn in anger at Moses, Caleb, and Joshua for exhorting them to go on in and take the land at God's command.

But wait. Have you heard the voice of God? Whatever everybody else is saying, do you not realize that His voice is the only completely reliable voice there is?

Joining the ranks of exvangelicals seems to be growing like a contagious disease. It is fashionable to mock those who believe and obey God's Word simpletons.

But this is nothing new, even if it has infected the ranks of those who once worshiped with you, wrote helpful books, led Christian movements.

Psalm 2

² The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,

against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, ³ "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."

⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

Rebellion against God is a fool's game. Don't be intimidated or baited into joining it. God always wins. And He's not the least bit worried that He won't. So don't you worry either.

The OT example of Israel's failure to enter the promised land (Numbers) clarifies the obstacles to our entering God's rest. It was not that God had not promised them Canaan. It was not that it was impossible for them to take it, though ten spies convinced that people that it was. It WAS impossible for them to do on their own. It was not impossible if they leaned on God's promises and God's power. They refused God's gift of entering the land because they feared they could not pull it off. They feared failure more than they feared directly disobeying God. They were willing to disobey Him because they did not really believe Him to be reliable and good. Their hearts were hardened against Him. They loved their sin more. And their sin grew from their unbelief.

Don't let this be your tragic story. Don't fail to enter God's rest because of your love affair

with unbelief, disobedience, and hardness of heart.

Conclusion

Don't Fail to Enter God's Rest

1. This rest is salvation in all its dimensions.
2. It is available to us through God's promise, the gospel message, His voice.
3. Those who believe (God's people) get to enter it.
4. Unbelief, disobedience, and hardness of heart will keep us from entering in.

Discussion Questions

1. The rest Hebrews 4 talks about is impossible apart from God Himself. How should knowing God to be the only true Source of rest shape your habits of thinking and activity through the week?
2. In what ways does Israel's rescue from slavery in Egypt and God's gift of the promised land to them provide you an illustration of what this rest is like?
3. How does the perfection of Eden (and of the heavenly city, and the new heavens and earth) help you understand what this rest is?
4. In what ways does a Lord's Day sabbath (ceasing from labors in order to

worship and do works of love) resemble God's completed creation work and foreshadow our future inheritance?

5. Since God's Word—the promise, the gospel, God's voice—makes this rest available and what responses should this reality draw from you?
6. What ways have you found strengthen your faith and thus confirm you belong to God's people?
7. What have you found erodes your faith and your sense of identity as one of God's people?
8. Why do you think unbelief, disobedience, and hardness of heart work together to create a spiritual death spiral? What are some ways can you combat each of them and all of them?