

Hebrews 4:9-11

And now we come to the main scriptural text on the sabbath in the new covenant. The law was a shadow, prefiguring Christ – the sabbath prefiguring the believer’s rest in Christ. Indeed, the ‘redemption’ or ‘salvation’ of Israel was only a shadow of the real salvation in Christ in the new covenant. Deliverance from Egypt was not ‘salvation’ in the full sense; it was only a shadow of the believer’s redemption in Christ, his deliverance from sin, law and death. Everything about Israel’s deliverance from Egypt firmly pointed to the reality; namely, Christ.

In God’s providence, it fell to the writer to the Hebrews to deal with the sabbath (along with all the other old-covenant shadows), and tell us plainly what it is today. From his letter, we are left in no doubt as to the sabbath’s place in the new covenant. Along with the tabernacle, temple, priesthood, sacrifice and altar, the sabbath is fulfilled in Christ. The true sabbath is found in him, it is experienced in him, and only in him. Indeed, in the new covenant, the sabbath *is* Christ, and Christ is the sabbath. Far from being a day of the week to be observed by all mankind, the sabbath is a spiritual experience which is enjoyed by believers, and by believers only, and enjoyed permanently by them from the moment they trust Christ. Christ is their sabbath; more, he is their all (Col. 3:11). This is the point of Hebrews 3:7 – 4:11. This vital passage in connection with the sabbath in the new covenant, especially Hebrews 4:9-11, demands careful attention. It reads:

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works, as God did from his. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest.

There *is* a sabbath – a ceasing, a rest – for saints in the new covenant. And every believer should be unspeakably relieved it is so. If there were no sabbath, no rest for the saints today, believers would be of all men the most miserable. They would still be bound in their sins, engaged in a futile struggle on an

endless treadmill, trying to get themselves out of bondage into freedom – and always failing. But, praise be to God, the believer *is* at rest, having learned, having been ‘taught by God’ (Isa. 54:13; Jer. 31:33-34; John 6:45; Heb. 8:8-13; 10:15-18) to cease from his works.

And this is true not only for justification and positional sanctification. Scripture shows us plainly that the rest includes assurance which leads to progressive sanctification (and in that order). Both assurance and sanctification are by Christ, through his Spirit, in the gospel – and not by the law.¹

This rest for believers, therefore, most definitely is *not* a day of the week. It is Christ. The believer must keep his eye on Christ, looking to Christ, listening to the witness of the Spirit taking him to Christ. This is the teaching of Hebrews 4:9-11. This is the real, true sabbath, the only sabbath; namely, the present spiritual rest which is a foretaste of God’s purpose culminating in that eternal rest which all the elect will enjoy in and through Christ. Trying to use the passage to talk about a weekly sabbath under the gospel is tragic. Tragic, I say. Throughout Hebrews, tabernacle, priest, sacrifice and altar are all nuanced into Christ. So why do sabbatarians persist in making an exception of the sabbath? On what biblical grounds do they do it?

To whom was the sacred writer referring when he said: ‘He who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works, as God did from his’ (Heb. 4:10)? Who is this person ‘who has entered his rest’? Who is it that has ‘ceased from his works’? Some argue that this is Christ himself. But this is a mistake. The writer is speaking of the sinner who trusts Christ. The believing sinner enters rest. The sinner himself! And rest is the issue. And there is rest ‘for *anyone* who enters God’s rest’, since he ‘also rests from his own work’ (Heb. 4:10). That is, when we believe in Christ, at that moment *we* enter into rest – *we* are freed from the burden and toil of our sin, *we* are freed from trying to justify ourselves before God, *we* are freed from sin, law, fear and

¹ I will not confirm these points here, having done so at length elsewhere. See my *Christ; Assurance; Fivefold; Positional*.

death. And *we* enter into rest, God's rest; that is, the rest God has accomplished for his people in Christ. Hebrews 4:3 says so: 'For we who have believed do enter that rest'. This surely speaks of the sinner who believes – not Christ. We enter God's rest by faith (Heb. 3:18-19), by believing (Heb. 4:2-3); to enter this rest is to become one of the 'partakers of Christ' (Heb. 3:14). This must be speaking of the sinner who believes, not Christ. Furthermore, it is the disobedience of unbelief which keeps the sinner out of rest (Heb. 3:12-19; 4:1-6), and condemns him (Mark 16:16; John 3:18,36).

Could anything be more clear? Believers can look back and see that as sinners they used to toil in bondage. Whether it was the law of Moses, which held them in prison, 'kept under guard' under its prying eyes as the child custodian, rod in hand to smite (Gal. 3:23-25; 4:2), or 'the elements of the world' which held them 'in bondage' (Gal. 4:3), or false gods (Gal. 4:8), they were outside of Christ (Eph. 2:11-12), and 'under sin' (Gal. 3:22), 'committed... to disobedience' (Rom. 11:32), trapped in 'the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will' (2 Tim. 2:26), under the wrath of God (John 3:36; Eph. 2:1-3), condemned already (John 3:18). But, having believed, having come to Christ, they have been liberated from all such slavery and misery, having died to the law (Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 2:19-20). As the apostle declares: 'You were the slaves of sin yet you... [have] been set free' (Rom. 6:17-18). How many scriptures speak of this rest, this liberty, this freedom from sin, law and death, this ceasing from works! Here is but a selection:

If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free... Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed... It is finished (John 8:31-32,36; 19:30).

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord... Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace... But God be thanked, that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became

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slaves of righteousness... But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end everlasting life... For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out: 'Abba, Father'... Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us... Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:1; 6:11,14,17-18,22; 8:15,33-34; 15:13).

God has called us to peace (1 Cor. 7:15).

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (2 Cor. 3:17).

So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free. For freedom Christ has made us free... For you, brethren, have been called to liberty (Gal. 4:31; 5:1,13).

[Christ] himself is our peace... making peace... And he came and preached peace (Eph. 2:14-17).

In short, instead of labouring under the old covenant (or paganism), in bondage to sin, the flesh and the law, the believer in Christ is united to Christ in the new covenant, and he is free, at liberty, at peace, enjoying ease of conscience, knowing he is perfectly sinless in the sight of God, beyond all risk of condemnation (Rom. 5:1; 8:1; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:14). And he *rests* in it.²

I know I repeat myself, and that this annoys some, but I cannot refrain here. This glorious truth needs to be shouted from the rooftops, trumpeted abroad. The believer has ceased from his own works. He has come to rest in Christ, in Christ's person and work. Instead of keeping the weekly sabbath as a shadow of true rest, he now enjoys real rest in Christ, he now enjoys a permanent peace with God. He has the Spirit, the one

² See my *Four; Fivefold*. I am not, of course, teaching sinless perfection. But the believer is utterly beyond condemnation in Christ.

who, removing his fear and bearing witness with his spirit, assures him that he belongs to Christ (Rom. 8:14-17,23; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5; Gal. 4:6-7; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 1 John 2:20-27; 3:24; 4:13; 5:6,9-11). He has died to the law, the killing letter, the condemning ministry of the law, and he is alive in Christ, alive by the Spirit (Rom. 7:4-6; 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:6-9; Gal. 2:19; 5:18).³ And he rests in this assurance, because he rests in the Lord Jesus.

I say to all believers reading my booklet: ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery’ (Gal. 5:1).

And I would address all men, not just believers, urging them to listen to Christ, to hear what he offers them in the new covenant:

Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden [who work to exhaustion, NASB margin], and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

This is the glory of the new covenant: ‘For I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul’ (Jer. 31:25), precious words written in the context of the prophecy of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). This is true of every believer, now!

So much for the *present* sabbath. Think, for a moment, of the *ultimate* rest for the child of God; namely, the *eternal* sabbath. What must that be! Indescribable! This, too, is held out to us in Hebrews 4. Yes, although I reject the *limitation* of Hebrews 4 to the believer’s eternal rest, nevertheless such a rest is guaranteed to every child of God:

Behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying: ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’... ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord

³ See my *Assurance*.

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from now on'. 'Blessed indeed', says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!'... These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger any more nor thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat, for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes... And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying: 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away'. Then he who sat on the throne said: 'Behold, I make all things new' (Rev. 7:9-10,14-17; 14:13; 21:3-5).

And it will not only be the saints who enjoy this eternal rest or sabbath, 'for we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs until now'. And it does not groan in vain. It, too, will enjoy its sabbath, for 'the creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom. 8:18-23), when 'mortality' shall 'be swallowed up by life' (2 Cor. 5:1-6). For:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:6-9).

Consequently, as believers, 'we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet. 3:13).

It is true, of course, that 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has

prepared for those who love him. But God has revealed them to us through his Spirit' (1 Cor. 2:9-10). What are these 'things'? Such things as these:

And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him. They shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign for ever and ever (Rev. 22:3-6).

And all is in and through Christ: 'For it pleased the Father that in him all the fullness should dwell, and by him to reconcile all things to himself, by him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of his cross' (Col. 1:19-20).

This is what the sabbath was teaching Israel in the old covenant – if only they had listened. That is, the law of Moses, all the law, including the ten commandments – specifically, the fourth, concerning observance of the sabbath – continually pointed the Jews to the fulfilment of all the shadows; namely, Christ and the glories he would bring in with the new covenant. All the prophets spoke of it (1 Pet. 1:8-12).⁴ It was *rest* which the repeated sabbath of the old covenant was pointing to. It was *rest in Christ* which the law and the prophets were constantly proclaiming – in every daily sacrifice, in every weekly sabbath, in all the sabbaths, in the settlement and enjoyment of the fruitful land of Canaan. Indeed, God had given a clear indication of it in his own rest after creation (Gen. 2:2; Heb. 4:3-4), and the promise of rest for Israel in Canaan (Heb. 3:7-19). Creator-rest, Canaan-rest and ceasing-rest all typified and spoke of Christ-rest for believers.

Sadly, the majority of Jews never understood this, nor did they enter into the spiritual meaning of their repeated observances, including and especially, the sabbath. They saw the shadow and clung to that – and frequently not even that! If only they had seen Christ, and trusted him, and entered the rest

⁴ There are well over 200 references to 'rest' in the Old Testament. The book of Ruth is a glorious illustration of it.

he offered! Some did; Abraham for one (John 8:56) – and many others (Hebrews 11). Grievously, the Jews, by and large, did not. The overwhelming mass of the Jews who left Egypt would not, could not, enter God’s rest because of unbelief (Heb. 3:7-19). The failure was still prevalent in David’s time (Ps. 95:7-11; Heb. 3:7-19; 4:1-8). The same goes for the time of Christ on earth: ‘He came to his own, and his own did not receive him’ (John 1:11). Christ would have gathered them, but they would not (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34; John 5:40).

But by God’s grace, others did receive him (John 1:12). In words pregnant with meaning, ‘Simeon.. this man... just and devout’, who was ‘waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him’, on seeing and holding the Christ, ‘blessed God and said’:

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel (Luke 2:25-32).

This is true of all who receive Christ, and enter into rest by him. ‘There remains therefore a rest for the people of God’, which rest is entered by faith in Christ. ‘Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest’ (Heb. 3:12-15; 4:1-11).⁵

In light of all this, how can anybody think that the inspired writer would have encouraged believers, in such strong terms, to make sure they did not falter on the weekly sabbath? The notion is risible! The believer, having the reality in Christ, has

⁵ This is not salvation by works. The writer is making it clear that we must have all our hope fixed on Christ alone, we must abide in him, and never drift away from him. Compare John 15:1-8. We must never allow ourselves to have any old-covenant shadow imposed on us (Col. 2:16-17). As for the eternal element of this ‘rest’, the believer must persevere, as Hebrews tells us repeatedly (Heb. 4:1,11; 6:4-8; 10:19-30; 11:1-40; 12:1-29; *passim*). For more on all this, see my ‘Sabbath’; ‘Sabbath Rest For Believers’; ‘Christ The Believer’s Sabbath’.

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no need of the shadow. He has Christ. And Christ is all (Col. 3:11).⁶

As one hymn writer⁷ expressed it:

*The sabbath day, that day of rest,
Was sanctified and blest
To point us to our Saviour Christ,
In whom alone is rest.*

*That legal sabbath ended when
Christ died and rose again;
Yet there's a sabbath that remains,
A rest that's found in him.*

*'Come unto me', the Saviour said,
'And I will give you rest'.
O weary sinners, cease from works,
Trust Christ and find sweet rest.*

*Ah, sweet refreshment for my soul,
The rest of faith is rest!
Ceasing from works, I trust God's Son –
Christ is my sabbath rest!*

And as Joseph Hart put it:

*To all God's people now remains
A sabbatism,⁸ a rest from pains,
And works of slavish kind;
When tired with toil, and faint through fear,
The child of God can enter here,
And sweet refreshment find.*

⁶ Take Christ's discourse on the manna (John 6:30-58). The message is plain: Do not cling to the shadow; look for the reality, Christ; cling to him. As I say, bearing in mind Ex. 16:1-35; Neh. 9:13-15, there is a powerful parallel with the sabbath.

⁷ Don Fortner ('Christ Is My Sabbath Rest', donfortner.com); the cover of *New Focus*, Go Publications, Eggleston, August/September 1999, Vol.4 No.2.

⁸ 'Sabbatism'. Hart clearly spotted the significant change the writer to the Hebrews made in Heb. 4:9. He had been using *katapausis* and *katapauō* ('rest', noun and verb), and doing so frequently, but changed to *sabbatismos*, 'a keeping sabbath, the blessed rest from toils and troubles', the only time the word is used in Scripture.

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*To this, by faith he oft retreats;
Bondage and labour quite forgets,
And bids his cares adieu;
Slides softly into promised rest,
Reclines his head on Jesus' breast,
And proves the sabbath true.*

*This, and this only, is the way,
To rightly keep the sabbath day.
Which God has holy made.
All keepers that come short of this,
The substance of the sabbath miss,
And grasp an empty shade.⁹*

Let me quote from two Anabaptists to bring this chapter to a close. I start with Melchior Hofmann, one who rightly maintained that 'all the promises of God tend... [to] that [which]... all... victors [in] the true kingdom of God [receive] here and now as their inheritance; [namely,] that the same enter into the holy [of holies] and come to the sabbath and the true rest'.¹⁰

And Sebastian Franck:

From the moment when the sabbath, circumcision and the commandment concerning the temple and offerings have been abrogated [literally, cut off], God recognises them no longer as his ordinances, although they were hitherto expressly ordained, and says [Isa. 1:10ff]: What concern are the temple and sacrifices to me? I am full of burnt offerings... The Spirit of God is alone the teacher of the new covenant... And just as the church is today a purely spiritual thing, so also is all law, promise, reward, spirit, bread, wine, sword, kingdom, life – all [are] in the Spirit and no longer outward.¹¹

⁹ Joseph Hart: *Hart's Hymns*, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau, 1965, number 31.

¹⁰ Melchior Hofmann: *The Ordinance of God (1530)* in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, edited by George Huntston Williams, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1957, pp190-191.

¹¹ Sebastian Franck: *A Letter to John Campanus (1531)*, in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical*

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Such is the way, I repeat, for believers to read the old covenant in general. Can you not hear the echoes of ‘letter’ and ‘Spirit’, to which I have already referred? And, in regard to perhaps what is the greatest bone of contention over the law – the keeping of the sabbath – this is the vital principle of interpretation. Believers must not go back to the shadows. They have Christ! They are in Christ!

In short, there is no weekly sabbath for the believer. The Lord’s day is not ‘the Christian sabbath’. Not at all! The believer’s sabbath is not confined to a mere 24 hours. It does not consist of a day which is shrouded in ‘complications’ (a sabbatarian word), a day which he has to try to make ‘bright’ (another sabbatarian word). No! The believer enjoys a permanent, continual and unending sabbath: Christ.