

# † The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

## Coming to Rest (Part 1)

Hebrews 4:1-11

Hebrews 4:1-2

*1 Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. 2 For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.*

What is rest? What images or thoughts come to mind when you hear the word rest? Is rest sitting in a comfy chair with a cold glass of water after working hard outside in the summer sun? Is rest that time when all the noise and business of the day is silenced, as the children are out to play and no longer underfoot? Is rest being able to sleep in on your day off (not Sunday of course)? Is rest that release of tension and that big sigh that comes as your body hits the familiar feeling of the bed at night? Is rest the absence of all work or thought? What is rest?

Whether you realize it or not, man inherently desires “rest.” A very simple definition of rest is, “the freedom from all activity or labor.” But now having read of this word “rest” in our text here in Hebrews 4, we must ask ourselves, “Is the rest spoken of by the Word of God, “a freedom from all activity or labor”?”

As we come to explore the teaching of Hebrews 4, we are confronted with the fact that the passage concerns itself with the idea of “rest.” Eight times in the first eleven verses of Hebrews 4 we find the word “rest” used. Therefore, if we are to rightly understand the meaning of this text we must first begin by rightly understanding the meaning of the word “rest” as understood in the context of Hebrews 4. This then serves as the first point of the message, THE REALITY OF REST.

### I. The Reality of Rest (Hebrews 4:1)

According to our text, “a promise remains of entering His rest...” From this we learn that there is a “rest” into which God desires man to enter. But this “rest” is unlike the types of physical rest man so often seeks to enjoy. We must not seek to define God’s rest in such earthly terms. Unlike our general thoughts of rest, God’s rest is not a *time* where all thought is eternally set aside and replaced with amusement. Nor is God’s rest a *place* where “good” people eternally enjoy their favorite hobbies and activities. And unlike the rest we tend to enjoy during the dark hours of the night, God’s rest is not the abandonment of all conscious thought. Yet, these are often the ideas of rest found today.

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Even the church has had a difficult time rightly depicting God's rest. How often has the church painted the picture showing God's rest to be nothing more than floating on a cloud while lightly playing a harp, blissfully sighing for all eternity. This, some believe, is the reward for having faith in Jesus Christ, this laid back nothingness. This is the teaching that heaven and comfort are the goal for the believer. How many have heard someone say, "Just trust in Jesus and all your problems will disappear and one day you will go to heaven"? Is the meaning of God's rest comfort and heaven?

While it is certainly taught in the scriptures that faith alone in the works and merits of Jesus Christ on the cross is the only sure means of entrance into heaven and into the glory that awaits the believer; and while it is true that all who have such faith in Jesus, the Savior, whom God raise for the dead, will come to a place where "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4); I submit to you, beloved of God, that the absence of sorrow and the bliss of glory is not the primary goal of God's rest. Notice something important in Hebrews 4 –

Hebrews 4:1 – "...a promise remains of entering **His** rest..."

Hebrews 4:3 - "They shall not enter **My** rest."

Hebrews 4:5 – "They shall not enter **My** rest."

## **God's Rest**

What we must notice is that this rest belongs to God, it is His rest. It is something that belongs to Him and proceeds forth from Him. So, while the ending of all sorrow and an eternity of bliss in heaven are certainly joyous aspects of heaven and of this heavenly rest, the primary joy and blessing of heaven is found not in the time or place of heaven, but in the *Person* who occupies heaven, specifically in the person of Jesus Christ. Remember that the book of Hebrews is one that seeks to reveal the superiority of Christ over all things. Well then my beloved, even heaven itself is not superior to the person who has been preparing that place for us. True "rest" is found in a person, the person of Jesus Christ. And while we wait for that perfect rest or fellowship with Jesus in the future, the promise is that such a rest and fellowship is available for us "today" as well. I submit to you then that God's rest, is not so much a desisting or freedom from all activity, but is rather a consideration, a contemplation and a celebration of the great works of God. When we speak of entering God's rest, is it the cessation of looking to my own works and efforts to establish and maintain a relationship with God and rather looking only to and praising Him for establishing and maintaining that relationship.

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That “rest” refers to a consideration, contemplation and celebration of the great works of God can be seen as we look at how “God’s rest” is revealed to us in the Scriptures.

In Genesis 2:1-2 we read these words:

***1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. 2 By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.***

This text comes on the heels of chapter one which revealed the work God performed on the first six days of creation. Genesis 2:2 then presents to us a contrast between the first six days and the seventh day. The first six days were that of “work” and the seventh day is that of “rest.”

What was God doing those first six days? God was establishing an environment in which to keep and sustain man. Then on the sixth day God created, instructed and began to fellowship with man. This is the essence of God’s “work.” Now, listen carefully. Upon the arrival of the seventh day, God no longer “worked” to establish this relationship with man. This had been accomplished. Rather than establishing the relationship, God, on the seventh day now enjoys that relationship. It is from the seventh day on that God now walked with man in garden. I submit to you that this is God’s rest, fellowshiping with God.

As believers in Jesus Christ, do we not long for the time when we will fellowship with Jesus without the hindrances of sin? In Genesis 1 and 2 we see Adam placed in a situation where he could always fellowship with God His Creator. And please consider this, Adam did nothing to establish this relationship with God. This relationship was not brought about by Adam’s own merit – he did no work to create it. Adam was in God’s rest. Did this mean Adam did no work at all? No, there was work to be done – (children – what did Adam do?) He cared for the garden. But there are two things to note about Adam’s work in the garden. First, His work was not given in order to establish or earn a relationship with God – God had already done that. And second, this work of tending the garden was not given to him to take his mind and focus off of God, rather Adam’s work was given to help him actually focus on God.

Well, anyone familiar with Genesis knows what happens after God places Adam in the “rest” of His garden. (Children – What did Adam do?) Adam disobeys and sins against God by eating of the forbidden fruit. This transgression brought upon Adam and all his children a sinful nature, one that

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would seek to please and live for itself rather than to seek to please and live for its Creator. Now, before Adam sinned, what did Adam do if he was hungry? He simply reached out and ate of what God had provided. If Adam was tired, what did he do? He simply lay on the ground and slept. Adam had no worries or concerns about food and shelter. He was in God's rest. But Adam's sin affected this fellowship with God, this rest. Read with me what God said in Genesis 3:17-19 –

***17 Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; 19 By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.***

What was the net effect of Adam's sin? Rather than being solely focused upon God, Adam now had to occupy his thoughts with his own survival. Adam knew that he had to eat to live and yet the very ground that produced his sustenance was cursed. While in the garden all Adam had to do was partake of the fruit provided by God, but now Adam would have to work the soil. What happened? Adam had forfeited God's rest and would no longer have the same freedom to fellowship with God. We learn that the sure results of sin are only sorrow, sweat and survival.

That God's rest is illustrated with the ground is revealed throughout the Scriptures. When God's people faithfully followed God, the promise of God was to bring an increase to the land. Look at what Leviticus 26:3-4 says,

***3 If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, 4 then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit.***

In other words, obedience allows believers to experience, in the here and now, some aspect of the "rest" man lost because of sin. But when Israel was disobedient, what was part of their punishment? Look with me at Deuteronomy 28:18 –

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***Cursed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.***

It is interesting to see that as Israel desired fellowship with God and was obedient, then the curse on the ground, that is the curse of Genesis 3:17 was eased in order to allow Israel the time for such fellowship – in other words, rest was given. In Genesis 3:8, before the curse of the ground and the loss of being in God's rest, it is recorded that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. In Leviticus 26:12 note what God promised Israel when they practiced obedience:

***I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.***

But again, if disobedience reigned, what was the result for Israel? From a reading of Deuteronomy 28 we learn that God would withhold the rain, the land's produce would fail, the diseases and sickness of Egypt would fall upon them and they simply would not find "rest."

Now there is a lesson to be learned from all this that we must consider – that focus upon personal worries and concerns regarding living can greatly hinder a person from rightly enjoying a relationship with God, and a relationship of rest in God (see Matthew 13:22 compared to Colossians 3:1-2, 12-13). And when a person doesn't desire such a relationship, the Scriptures tell us that God will give them exactly what they want. In Romans 1 we learn of those who "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18); who do "not honor God" (1:21); and who exchange "the glory of the incorruptible God for" that which is corruptible (1:23). As a result of such a desire, what does God do? According to Romans 1:24, 26 and 28, God gave them over to their own sinful desires, their own God-forsaking hearts and lets them perish in their sin.

Now, while it is true that Adam forfeited the fullness of God's rest for himself and his children, God was yet gracious and for Israel, through the Law, made opportunity for fellowship again. In Exodus 31:12-17 we read

***12 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 13 But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. 14 Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from***

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**among his people. 15 For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death. 16 So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.' 17 It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed.**

What I want you to notice is that the curse on the ground of Genesis 3:8 was not unique to Israel. It was a curse upon all mankind. All peoples of all tribes and nations would have to work the ground in order to survive. But we often miss something as we study the instruction of the Sabbath given by God to Israel. Of all the people on the face of the earth, God determined that there would be one group of people for whom God would grant “rest” from that curse, if even for just one day a week.

We must remember that the Sabbath day was not given so that the people of God would have time to spend on their own interests. This day of rest was not given for the pursuit of self-pleasure or for a time to catch up on personal rest. Nor, as we have been considering, was this day of rest given so that absolutely nothing would be done. Why did God give the Sabbath to Israel? I submit to you that it was given so that the people of God might have a time when rather than worrying about their survival, they would rather be freed up to worship and fellowship with their God and Redeemer.

Is this not what we find in the wilderness account? As Israel wandered through the desert God gave them food. Each day the people were to go out and gather a day’s worth of manna. Each day then they had to concern themselves with and work to get this food. But what happened on the sixth day. According to Exodus 16:5 a double portion of manna was given, enough for the sixth and seventh days. Why is this? This extra manna was given so that the people would not have to concern themselves with having enough food on the Sabbath, thus given no hindrance for the worship of and fellowship with God. On this one day a week, Israel was freed to fellowship with God much as Adam had once so fellowshiped.

Again, many of us are familiar with the story. While Israel enjoyed the Sabbath rest for a time, over time Israel lost God’s intended purpose for it. They began to forsake this God-given “rest” and it would result in their own demise. And let me remind you that this day of “rest” was not the absence of all “work” only included a very specific kind of work - that work was to be focused in on the

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greatness of God. That work is the worshipping and serving of God. At issue was the fact that God had met all the physical needs of the people prior to the Sabbath in order to free them from the curse of work which for six days demanded their full attention. The seventh day was to be for “rest” – this consideration, contemplation and celebration of all that God has done. But, this was only a picture of “rest” and was not the fullness thereof.

Remember that Israel was promised that they would enter “*a land flowing with milk and honey*” (Exodus 3:8;17). As that name implies, that land would bring forth its “fruit” most abundantly (Numbers 13:26-27). The promise was that as God’s people took the land, they would then not have a concern for their survival. It was God’s promise that through the fertility of that land, He would provide for their needs. This then would grant them the greatest freedom to worship and fellowship with God. This is what Psalm 95:11 would mean by the “rest” of God. And yet, as we have learned in our study of Hebrews 3 and now moving into Hebrews 4, the people forfeited that rest due to their disbelief and disobedience.

Now, that is the Old Testament concept of “rest” - but what do we learn about rest in the New Testament? Moving back to our text in Hebrews 4, we are presented with two exhortations in verse 1 and in verse 11 that we will look at more closely next week. But the essence of these exhortations is the call to enter into God’s rest.

The “rest” of Hebrews 4 is both similar and different than the “rest” offered to Israel. Let me show first how this “rest” is similar. First, man is called, as we noted, to enter this rest, in Hebrews 4:11 we read: “*Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest...*” This rest is also a consideration, contemplation and celebration of the work of God. Remember that God’s rest is really a provision, providing a person the freedom from the concerns of life or survival so that they might truly focus upon the worship and fellowship of God. Therefore, this rest, or provision of God, is not meant to provide a person with the opportunities to please and serve self.

## **Romans 6:1-2**

***1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? 2 May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?***

## **1 Peter 2:16**

***Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.***

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Also, we must know that God does not indiscriminately give this rest. Israel had been chosen and redeemed. Just as Adam had done nothing to establish the relationship with God and entered into God's rest in the Garden, neither did Israel do anything to establish or merit her relationship with God and enter into a picture of God's rest. And so it is today, we have a promise, says Hebrews 4:1, of entering His rest. But this promised rest is given only to those who are chosen of God. And who are the chosen of God? They are those who are redeemed, who know they have been purchased by the blood of Christ, freed from the slavery of sin and renewed to serve and worship God. 1 Peter 1:18-19 says,

***18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.***

What does the Old Testament picture of "rest" illustrate? It illustrates to the believer in Christ not that he has ceased from physical work, but rather that he has ceased from the futile works, the self-efforts and personal merit seeking labors that men seek to establish a relationship with God. You see, the picture of man seeking physical survival by working the ground for its fruit is actually a picture of man seeking spiritual survival by trying to work for his salvation. The problem is that as a man seeks to work for meriting salvation, he actually loses focus upon who God is and what God has done. In his working, man begins to think that spiritual life is about something he has done. This is why the Psalmist would say in Psalm 46:10

***Cease striving [Be still] and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.***

It is when we cease striving for salvation by our own merits, when our concern for our eternal survival has ended because we are now looking to, that is considering, contemplating and celebrating the great work of our Savior Jesus Christ on the cross, that we enter into God's rest. So, we must learn that there really are two types of rest. There is the kind of rest achieved as a result of your own work. And then there is the kind of rest realized as releasing you from your work. The rest of God is not a result of one's own work, but is rather a releasing you from your work. Salvation and God's rest is not merited, it is a gift (Ephesians 2:8). It is a realization that Jesus did the work, He established the



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relationship between you and God and now you must cease from your work and rest in Christ. And so, rather than resting so that you can work at it again, the believer simply rests in, that is, he considers, contemplates and celebrates in the work of Jesus on his behalf. Such a rest is one of utter contentment since there is no more work to do. This is God's rest.

I close then by reminding you that God's rest is not simply a reference to heaven, a place we look forward to. Yes, heaven will be a place where God's rest is fully realized. But God's rest is available "today" that is right now. At the moment of salvation, when person gives his life over to Christ, then you enter that rest, that place where he no longer concerns himself with how to earn God's favor, for he knows that Christ has done that for him. Therefore he can live the rest of his life without the distraction of whether he has a relationship with God and focus upon enjoying real fellowship with God.

Do you believe that Christ alone has established this relationship with you? Will you by faith, by trusting and living for Him demonstrate the reality that you are not working for your salvation but are rather enjoying the God of your salvation through a life of worship and service to Him? Will you seek to know Jesus and the rest He offers (Matthew 11:28-30)? Will you learn of His ways (1 Corinthians 4:17)? Will you grow in obedience to Him (1 Peter 1:13-16)? Will you seek His wisdom (Colossians 1:9-11)? And will you serve Him selflessly (Romans 12:1)? This is the person who has entered God's rest. May it be your heart's desire to enter into that rest.

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## *Soli Deo Gloria*

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