

## Title: “Striving for Rest”

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Hebrews 4:1-16

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**Service Readings:** Eccl. 5:10–20; Heb. 4:1–16; Mark 10:23–31

*This portion of Paul’s letter is a difficult one to understand, even more so when removed from the rest of his message. We will explore what he was describing and how it applies to us, today. In a word, rest. We should strive for rest in Christ Jesus.*

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

An entire generation of people missed out on God’s invitation of rest because they abandoned their faith. An entire generation worshiped with their lips but rebelled with their hearts and God, peering into the dark corners of their souls judged and withheld what he had once offered. An entire generation missed out, not because they didn’t hear the Word. No, it was preached to them, repeatedly. That Word, and the faith that God delivered through it, fell on closed ears and hardened heart. There would be no entry into the Promised Land, not because God didn’t deliver, but because they rejected that delivery.

For over three hundred years, the Israelites had been subjected to the crushing oppression of the Egyptians. Generation after generation they had been enslaved, abused, humiliated, and afflicted. Their lives, described as anything *but* restful, and yet, they clung in faith to God’s promise that he made to Abraham: they would possess a land flowing with milk and honey. God would give them rest. But when that day came, when that promise was to be realized, they withdrew their faith in God and so he withdrew his promise and offered it to their offspring.

Now, fast forward to just after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus and we find a small community of new Christians in Rome. Their worldview is in conflict with the culture of that day. They confess that Jesus is their Lord and savior, that he died and rose again, that he suffered the punishment of God’s judgement for all, and that they are to love only him and to live only for him. They believe all this but at the same time, they live in a society that believes the opposite. A society that believes in a worldly trinity of money, power, and fame. And this society has no use for those who believe otherwise; it has no patience for those who would challenge this worldview and so it pushes against these Christians, trying to weaken their faith and align them back into the societal norms and beliefs.

And so, in this sermon to this early church, the book of Hebrews offers encouragement for his hearers. He reminds them that these persecutions and sufferings are expected, that their lives will always be in conflict with the world, and that following Jesus will bring anything but peace and rest. But he also reminds them of the promised rest – a rest that awaits us when we enter into heaven. And he anchors this promise all the way to the seventh day of creation and connects *that* rest to God’s chosen people – first the nation of Israel, and then to all who believe in Jesus as Lord. The rest that was initiated by God during the days of creation is the day of rest that is promised to us when we are reunited with him.

Here these words again.

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. <sup>2</sup>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.

You see how the preacher uses the Exile as an illustration of the true rest that is available to all God's people? He teaches that even though this rest is unable to be fully realized until the end of times, it is worth striving for. He encourages them to remain steadfast in their faith lest they miss out on this opportunity, this promise of God.

Let us now jump 2000 years forward to today. How similar are we to this early group of Christians? Are we not also a minority in the world? Our values and confessions, our faith in the work of Jesus puts us in conflict with every other society. Our beliefs, our way of loving God and selfless serving of others does not align to their values and beliefs. The world would want nothing less than for us to conform, align, and bow to the gods of their world. And when we refuse, do they leave us alone? Of course not! Like the early church they discriminate against us, exclude us, ridicule us and pressure us to conform. They shame us and even persecute us!

We are being pressured, even today, to abandon our faith and conform to the faith of the world. It is a false faith that places its hope in self, that elevates worldly things and abandons Godly things. It is a false faith that promises rest, but leads to restlessness and even destruction, instead.

And so we are to reject these false promises and cling to the one who offers real rest. Jesus, who made the way for us. Jesus. Through him we can experience it today, in this turbulent world. And with our faith in him we can survive in this world with confidence that on the final day we will enter into the fullness of God's rest.

Now, I could end my message here; and I almost did. I almost tossed on the floor my next thought. It would have been much easier for me to end now, but I can't. The world I described is a world that is adverse to Christianity. It is a world that does not desire us to enjoy rest. And through that frame it is easy to dismiss the world as everyone *except* us. But let's be honest with ourselves. We are as much a part of that world as they are. The election is but a few short weeks away. Take a moment and recount all the times you have treated other Christians in the same way the world has treated you. Have you *obstructed the Christian rest of others* through your verbal and written comments? Have you shamed others because of their political alignments? Have you discriminated against them? Ridiculed them? Have you pressured *them* to conform to *your* way of thinking?

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

This may be a hard message to hear this morning, but it has to be said. We are Christians! We are the church body of Jesus! He suffered and died for each one of us so that we could cling to this promise of rest. But while we wait, *why are we causing others such unrest?* They see your actions and wonder if this Christianity thing is really any different from what the world offers.

We learned from James last month that the tongue is a fire! But we also learned that no human being can tame it. We learned that this must come from the Holy Spirit working within us. The lesson of today is no different. We have the promise of everlasting life – of a time of celebratory rest for all eternity! But we cannot acquire it on our own. We need the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. We need the transformation change of our hearts so that what flows from us is Godly in every way. But we also need each other. We must hold each other accountable “so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” We have the promise of everlasting life. We have the promise of rest. And that promise is big enough for

everyone. Let us not be like the Israelites. Let us gather unto ourselves every soul that we can find, every heart that can be opened, and let us enter together into this heavenly rest.

Please pray with me.

God created in six days and then rested on the seventh. Teach us the true meaning of this rest that we find in you. In a world that pushes against our faith, grant us the strength to stand firm and resist the false gods of the world.

Grant us the courage to hold one another accountable in love, that none may fall into disobedience. Unite us in our pursuit of your heavenly rest, not just for ourselves, but for all who would hear and believe.

Amen.