



God and Rest (God and the Secular 8)

Hebrews 3-4

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Loanne, Jack and I just spent a week in Clermont-Ferrand—it was wonderful. It was the first time in a while that we had been able to take a real vacation. We climbed volcanoes and visited the city and *read for fun!*—we rested and recharged. And then, Tuesday evening, we arrived at our AirBnB to the news that a priest in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray had been killed in his church by two assassins claiming links with ISIS. And suddenly, we felt weighed down again. These days, it's not just our work that exhausts us, but the realization that our world is as it is. So just like that, we felt tired again. It's the same for all of us here—we need rest. Most of us will seek rest in breaks, in entertainment, in sports, in vacation. But that rest will be temporary at best. In our day, we need better rest—rest for our *souls*, rest which *lasts*.

If you're joining us for the first time, we are in the last week of a series we've been doing entitled "God and the Secular," in which we explore those areas of our lives which we often imagine have nothing to do with our faith, but which in fact are intimately related. We've looked at work, leisure, money, sex, family, and friendships. (If you've missed the previous weeks you can find all the messages on our website.) If you remember, every week we've been asking ourselves two questions about each of these areas of our lives: 1) How does this area of my life serve the mission of the church (to make disciples)? and 2) How does this area of my life serve my joy in Christ? So to finish off our series, we're going to do the same thing today on the topic of rest—a subject that, given this last week, is particularly timely. If you have your Bibles, I invite you to turn to Hebrews chapter 3—we're going to spend our time today going back and forth between chapters 3 and 4 of the letter to the Hebrews.

In the Law of Moses, God institutes a number of rituals and practices for the people of Israel concerning rest. He institutes the Sabbath, a 24-hour period once a week in which the people of Israel could do no work. He institutes festivals, where the people take time to celebrate and to eat and, most especially, to remember what God had done for them in the past. He also brought them into the promised land of Canaan, which was intended to be a land of peace and of rest from war and oppression. Now, everything in the Law—all of the commandments and promises—are there to show us aspects of God's character and holiness: they're there to point us to something *bigger* than the commandments themselves. (This is why Jesus condemned the Pharisees for meticulously obeying the Law while *completely* missing the point.) The same goes for the institutions and promises of rest: all of these things—the Sabbath, the festivals, the promised land of Canaan, and more—all of these were meant to point people toward the promise of a better rest.

But the people of Israel missed it—they *didn't* enter the rest God had planned for them, but rather rebelled against God. This is what we see at the end of Hebrews chapter 3 (v. 16-18): *16 For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?* The people had been oppressed for many years, slaves of Egypt, and through Moses God miraculously led them out of Egypt to give them rest from oppression and strife. But despite this, they still rebelled against God, and thus did not enter his rest: they didn't profit from the rest provided for them by the Sabbath and the festivals; although they entered the promised land, they didn't enjoy rest there but were met with nearly perpetual war. That's the setting of chapter 4: the example of Israel who

failed to enter the rest God had prepared for them. And the author will exhort us to do something which seems oxymoronic: to *strive* to enter the rest that God had held out to the Israelites.

1) There Is Rest for God's People (4.1-10).

Verses 1-10 of Hebrews 4 is all meant to show us that *there is rest for the people of God*. Now, those of us who know the Bible and are of a more eschatological bent will see this promise of rest as the promise of *heaven*: that place where there will be no more mourning, no more pain, no more sickness and death. And while that's definitely true, that's not the rest the author is talking about *here*.

How do we know? Look at how many times in chapters 3 and 4 he quotes Psalm 95. In 3.7-8: *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness...*

3.15: *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."*

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

There are also many other indicators in this text that the rest he's talking about is a *present* rest. 4.1: *...the promise of entering his rest still stands...*

v. 3: *For we who have believed enter [present] that rest...*

v. 6-7: *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..."*

v. 9-10: *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.*

Heaven is one of the great hopes of Christianity. Thinking of heaven is like thinking about your vacation destination before you get there—it gives you energy in your work, it makes you impatient to get there (but the good kind of impatience) and it motivates you to prepare for it. But the promise of heaven is not our only source of hope or joy or rest.

You all know I come from America; I love living in France and honestly have no desire to ever move back to America—unless God calls us back there for some reason, I'm here for the long haul. But one of the things I've noticed living in France is that Americans (not always, but often) tend to be less stressed and more relaxed than the French. Which is weird, because a great many of them (my parents included) get only two or three weeks of vacation a year. Although they have far less vacation than the French, they tend to be less stressed. Why is that? I have a theory, based on my own family—it's a generalization, but I know many families who operate like mine. My own family only had two weeks of vacation most years, and most of the time that vacation was spent visiting family in other states: not even a real vacation. But my parents made a regular habit of doing fun things throughout the week, things we all enjoyed. We'd eat at a restaurant, or go to the movies, or play mini-golf, or go bowling... These little breaks during the week were just part of the natural rhythm of life. We only got two weeks *full* vacation a year, but we had a thousand *mini*-vacations during the year, so the stress never got a chance to fully build up: we had lots of "ventilation" during the year.

I'm not saying this is how we in France should structure our lives. I said all that to illustrate this: the Christian whose *only* source of hope and joy is the promise of heaven is like someone who works constantly, all year long, barely even taking the time to sleep, waiting for his vacation. Yes, he *will get his vacation* (and thank God for it!)—but in the meantime, he's very often frazzled and exhausted and vacation seems *so far away*. The author of Hebrews is trying to help us see that we don't *need* to wait for that vacation at the end of the year: we don't need to *wait* for heaven in order to feel rest. So the question is, what is the rest he's referring to, and how do we enter it?

2) Rest in the Work of Christ (4.9-10)

The author tells us in v. 9-10: 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.* The first source of rest for the people of God is the rest *from our works*. What kind of rest is he talking about? He gives the example of the Sabbath, this 24-hour period where Israel couldn't work. God's people had the Law, and they'd tried hard to keep it, but try as they might, they were unable to do so—every time they attempted to keep the Law, they failed. So the author says that God still holds out rest for his people: another, *better* Sabbath—the rest of *having* to obey the Law. He's saying, *After all these years of working and failing, you can rest.* And the *rest* God has provided is rest in is the finished work of Christ for us.

At the beginning of chapter 3, the author says this: *3.1 Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,* ² *who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house...* ⁶ *...Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*

God calls us all to perfect obedience, and none of us are able to obey perfectly. And so, according to God's law, we should all be condemned to die—as Paul says in Romans 6.23, *The wages of sin is death.* The good news of the gospel is that God sent Jesus to live a perfect life for us, on our behalf, and to take on himself the punishment we all deserve. And that's exactly what Christ did: he lived a sinless life (1 Peter 2.22), and absorbed the wrath of God toward us on the cross, so that we might not have to be perfectly obedient to please God. This is how God built his house, the church, and Christ is faithful over God's house as a Son.

But does that mean that now, no obedience is required? Since Christ fulfilled our obedience for us, we can just do what we want? Here too, of course not—he's just told us that the Israelites failed to enter their rest because of their disobedience. So how does this work? How do we rest from works of righteousness while at the same time obeying God's commandments to do works of righteousness? Work—both physical and spiritual—is not a curse: work is not an inherently bad thing. God himself worked, and Christ worked in perfect obedience during his life. Work is a good thing. Our rest comes in knowing that it is not by *working* that we can be accepted by God. This reality has *massive* implications for the Christian, for it will help us to not just obey, but obey *in the right way*.

I don't know if you've ever noticed, but legalism and grace-fueled obedience often look very similar on the outside. The Christian who obeys out of fear and the one who obeys out of thankfulness for God's grace will *do the same stuff*—they'll obey the same commandments. But the *way* they go about it is very different. I had this discussion with my brother a few weeks ago. We grew up hearing that our salvation was up to us: basically, that by going to the cross, Jesus *opened the door* to salvation, but it was entirely up to us to make sure we walked through that door, and that we stayed in that house. And I remember thinking as a young Christian,

Well if it's all up to me, then I'm in trouble. As C. H. Spurgeon quoted in his famous *Defense of Calvinism*, “If ever it should come to pass, That sheep of Christ might fall away, My fickle, feeble soul, alas! Would fall a thousand times a day.”¹ If it all depends on my own effort and my own willpower to make sure I stay saved, then I'm in big trouble. So if that's true, I might just *barely hang on*, but I'll be miserable the whole time; *or* I'll become prideful and self-righteous and look down on others who aren't doing as well as I am; *or* I'll just eventually give up and throw in the towel.

The Christian who obeys because of grace obeys freely, knowing that his salvation doesn't *depend* on his obedience. He will still obey, but his obedience will be very different from the obedience of one who obeys out of fear or guilt. It's one thing to work hard because you know you'll be sanctioned if you don't. It's quite another thing to work hard because *you love your job*. The person who loves his job looks forward to going to work every day; he has no trouble going the extra mile to finish something that needs finishing. For the person who loves their job and is motivated by passion for their profession, work *is* rest. In the same way, for the Christian who understands the grace of Christ, the work of obedience is *refreshing*. This Christian knows from experience that obedience brings joy, because it allows us to know God more deeply and delight in him more fully. I promise you, brothers and sisters, there is nothing more restful than going to bed at night with a clean conscience.

This is what Jesus meant when he said (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.*” So we find rest in the finished work of Christ; we find rest in the obedience which helps us know him more fully; and we find rest in being *welcomed* by our Savior.

3) Rest in the Compassion of Christ (4.14-16)

¹⁴ *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

This is a very famous passage; if you've been a Christian for even a little while you've probably heard it. But I don't know if you've ever thought about it... Why does the author feel the need to tell us this? Why does he need to tell us that Jesus is a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses? Well let me ask you this. How many of you have ever said, *Sure, Jesus lived a life without sin. But he WAS GOD, after all. He did have a slight advantage.* This is a thought that has crossed all of our minds. There are a lot of theological arguments around how much of Christ's divinity he gave up when he came to earth, but there is a much simpler way to see that the sympathy Christ feels for our weaknesses is not feigned but genuine. Look at the end of v. 15: *Jesus in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* Take a moment to ask yourselves: why do we give into temptation? Because *it's painful to not.* It hurts, it's a fight, it's exhausting... And because it hurts, and because we imagine we'll feel better if we give in, we give in. So imagine how painful it must have been for him to resist *every* temptation until the very end. He endured pain in resisting temptation that we cannot *imagine*. I promise you, brothers and sisters, *he knows how hard it is. He can sympathize with our weaknesses.*

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “A Defense of Calvinism,” *The Autobiography of C. H. Spurgeon Volume 1: The Early Years* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1962), p. 169. Read online at <http://www.spurgeon.org/calvinis.php>.

Which is why we are invited to draw near his throne with confidence, without fearing. Some of you live under this impression that God is somehow obligated to accept you because he said he would, but that he's not happy about it. Can you imagine how freeing it would be to relate to God like the author tells us to here? What it would be like to believe that not only does Christ not begrudgingly accept our repentance, but actually *delights in us*, has compassion on us as someone who's been there? Whom do we want to talk to when we're going through a painful situation? We want to talk to someone who's been there, who *understands* our struggle. Those who understand grace run *to* Christ when they sin, rather than running away from him, and they do it because they know that *he knows what it's like*. He can sympathize; he's been in the fight. This is an *emotional rest*—rest from fear, rest from worry, rest from the heaviness of condemnation. We don't just rest from having to do anything to save ourselves; we rest from having to *feel* like imposters, like we don't belong in this family, like we don't belong in this house. This is the rest of coming home.

4) Rest in Faith in Christ (3.19, 4.11)

Now, there's one last question we need to answer here. The author has told us to *strive* to enter our rest (v. 11), *so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience*. How do we do that? If we take this verse out of context, it could sound very much like what we were discussing before: it could sound like if ever we disobey, if ever we don't strive well enough, we might fall, and fail to enter our rest. If we take this verse out of context, we're right back where we started, imagining that the Sabbath rest God has promised us depends on our own efforts and our own strength.

But it's clear that this isn't what he's saying, because he's already told us what sort of disobedience he's talking about: the disobedience of the people of Israel, who failed to enter their rest. And what was the defining trait of their disobedience? It wasn't just failure to keep the Law. The author tells us what made their disobedience condemning in the last verse of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4 (3.19-4.2): *¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. 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. 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.*

God gave them promises, and *they didn't believe he would make good on his promises*. They were not united by *faith* to those who listened, people like Moses and Joshua and Caleb, people like Abraham and Jacob and Rahab. Their lack of faith caused them to break the Law, and even when they managed to keep the Law, their lack of faith made their obedience *worthless*—they may as well have not even tried.

And the author fleshes this out all over these two chapters. 3.5-6: *⁵ Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, ⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*

3.12-14: *¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 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. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*

4.3: *³ For we who have believed enter that rest...*

4.7: *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*

4.16: ¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

We strive to enter God's rest by *believing that he has done everything to freely give it to us*. Our fight is *not* mainly a fight to obey, but a fight to *believe*, to hold fast our confidence, to cling tightly to our hope, to exhort one another to not have hard, unbelieving hearts. It won't be perfect: no one can produce belief, we can't produce our own faith. But we strive to enter God's rest when we fearfully pray for the Spirit's help to believe, like the desperate father who said to Jesus, *"I believe; help my unbelief!"* (Mark 9.24). I know it doesn't sound like rest to say we have to strive to do something we can't do for ourselves. But this *is* rest—it is the *only* rest. We have to see that striving to do something we *can* do is *work*—it's not rest, because it's up to *us*. God tells us that the one thing we must do in order to please him—strive to believe—is something *he does for us*. Faith is a free gift, not something we have to do on our own. You see, God's rest is *total*. He gives us rest from our work by accomplishing our salvation for us in Christ. He gives us rest by making obedience a *joy* for us. He gives us rest by giving us a compassionate High Priest who understands our weaknesses. And he gives us rest from trying to drum up our own faith by producing faith *in* us.

5) Conclusion

Now, if we have received this rest through faith in God, what are the implications? What does that mean for the mission of the church and for our joy in Christ? It means, first of all, that in any situation, in any circumstance, rest is available. Our first instinct, when we hear of things like the attacks last November, or this awful week in Germany and in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, is to run—just get away and think of other things. But God promises us rest *here, now*—rest which isn't found in fleeing our stressful world, but in the God who is sovereign over this world, our King who will one day unite all things to himself.

Secondly, our rest in Christ means that *we will be willing to work hard to serve others, because we have found rest in him*. Christian service is not a burden, brothers and sisters. *It is rest*, because as we serve Christ, we ourselves are served *by* Christ. If we serve out of obligation, we will leave Christian service feeling irritable and beaten down and self-righteous for having sacrificed *so much*. But if we serve out of *joy*, because we know Christ serves us, we will go to bed that night exhausted, yes, but the best kind of exhausted—the fatigue of a day well spent.

Our rest in Christ means that we will be okay with less vacation; we will be okay with fewer breaks; we will be okay with hard work for the sake of the gospel. Because our *real* rest is in Christ, not in vacation! Now obviously, we need to be careful—we are only human, and our bodies can only be pushed so far. But most of us are capable of much more than we think. We don't need as much rest in this world as we imagine, because our rest is in Christ, and his is a much better rest! It's not just rest for our bodies, but rest for our *souls*. You see, if we find our rest in Christ, we find joy *in* the mission of the church—the two things complement each other as two great gifts from the same great God. So let us work hard. Let us give ourselves up for one another. Let us exhort one another daily. Let us run to Christ in faith, believing he is who his Word says he is: our compassionate High Priest. And in so doing, let us find rest for our souls.