

The Preeminence of His Rest

Hebrews 4:1-11

Thou moves us to delight in praising thee, for thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee."
Augustine; "Confessions"

sermonnotes

Introduction

We saw last week that unbelief stemming from our dessert experiences can cause us to miss the rest of God. During our moments of temptation and trial we either turn to God, or very far away from Him. Today's passage picks up from their and reminds us that God's rest is available, accessible, and begins in trusting Him. Let's look at the hope we find in Him, and the pitfalls on the way due to our lack of trust.

From The Head...

From Doubt/Fear to Promise (Hebrews 4:1-2)

We begin this part by looking back on the unbelief of Israel. "Therefore" forces us to look at last week's reminder that the Israelites did not enter into God's rest (Canaan) because of their unbelief. We examined the reality of unbelief in the middle of a desert experience. These verses remind us that there are no "super Christians" that incapable of falling into "spiritual depression."

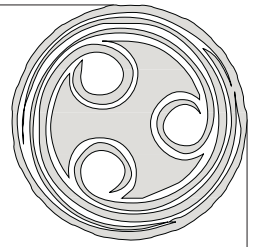
Sometimes depression can lead us to destruction or it brings us to a closer, humbler, more nuanced walk with God (see 1 Corinthians 10:12). Often it is God who leads us into the wilderness for either our own refining (Hebrews 12:4-11), or His burning off of the chaff (Matthew 13:40). In our passage the author reminds us that we ought to fear God. Proverbs tells us that "fear is the beginning of wisdom," and Jesus was clear in His admonition to "fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28), yet we also see Jesus telling His disciples to, "not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32), not to mention that the apostle John says that, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). So what is it? It's simple in theory. As we move closer to God's love being perfected in us, we are comforted by the assurance of His love; but while our lives take us into the wilderness, we best not take God for granted. His love is real and consistent, but wilderness/desert experiences clearly define where we are with God.

These warnings are not a matter of losing salvation, but rather of clarifying who we really are. It is true as Dr. Martin Luther King says that, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy." The problem is that we mostly fail to fear God while maintaining fear of our circumstances and the people around us. This will always result in a spiritual earthquake, and can end in a bout of anxiety, depression, and to borrow a phrase from the monk St. John of the Cross, "The dark night of the soul." That dark night either ends in peace and joy and a newfound love for a mysterious God where we are comforted by the joy and peace we have in Christ; or it ends in despair and the possibility of unbelief. Notice that in verses 1-2 the author identifies with the people by using terms like "us" and "we." We all need to take heed unless we too fall, and we too need to place our faith (trust) in Christ. It is the word of God united with trusting it that can bring us into the promise of rest that we are offered in Christ (see Matthew 11:28).

From Promise to Reality (Hebrews 4:3-5)

Where the Old Testament concept of rest is a promise, the New Testament is the fulfillment in Christ. The thought here is clear. God's rest is ready and open and available to those who trust Him. Not only is it available, but it is also a reality now (literally, "for we do enter that rest" is a present indicative, indicating the sure reality of this statement.). God didn't fail in His promise; the failure of one generation to enter the rest does not negate God's promise to any subsequent generation who enters that rest in belief.

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There is nothing wrong with His rest, nor is there anything else God needs to do to make it happen. The problem with those that didn't enter the rest was not God, but their own unbelief. They rejected it, and settled for the idol's the world has to offer, be it religion or the body's appetites left unchecked. The author is most likely collating Psalm 95 and Genesis 2:1-3, which was a typical synagogue practice on the Sabbath in Jewish liturgy. Note that what God calls His people into is "My" rest. It is the very rest that He has enjoyed since the creative force of the creation ceased. This tells us that God's rest/salvation has been open since the foundation of the world, but is always negated by disobedience (unbelief). We are called to live in God's rest, which according to John 5:17 is a working Sabbath's rest. God's work ceased in the sense that there was nothing left for Him to create. The plan was set in motion; all that was left for Him to do was execute his creative plan for His own glory. We are to rest in that sovereignty, and work in conjunction with the plan.

From Reality to Hope (Hebrews 4:6-10)

Here we are shown that God sovereignly sees to it that some enter His rest, while others will continue to reject it. He is also clear that the rest Joshua gave the people of Israel by entering into Canaan is only symbolic of the rest that we can have in Christ, which is open to the people of God both Jew and Gentile. Thus any rest or joy we may have in Christ, while real, is still only a glimpse of what heaven will bring, since we are imperfect in accepting this rest perfectly due to our imperfection. This is our great hope! We have our hope that in the next life we will find the rest that often eludes us in this world (see Hebrews 11:10-16). It is imperative that we understand this mystery in scripture. The rest and salvation that we are offered in Christ has an already/not yet reality. Because of the frailty of our human existence, we cannot experience God in all His attributes, but in Christ we can gain access to the depth of His riches and His joy, and feed off them for a lifetime while we await the final redemption of our bodies at the second coming of Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15).

"Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death"

Psalm 13:3

There are a couple of things that we need to understand here. First, even though we will never gain perfect access to God's rest because of our weaknesses, it is still accessible to us, and it is there in all its richness because we are situated at His right hand in Christ as His children. Secondly, trust or faith is not the source of the riches, but God is, thus it is not about how much faith you have, but whom you are placing your faith (trust) in. It's not that we don't have enough faith; it is just that we don't always put it in the right place. We are too often people wallowing in our unbelief searching for rest in every human endeavor rather than finding it in God Himself.

This is often why God leads us out to the wilderness to be tempted, to trust in Him and be faced with the reality of who we are, and who we are in Christ. So many of us are failing to find our rest in God, and we, like the Psalmist, must ask God to do the same for us. Lord, you need to open my eyes, make me see what you see, make me feel what you feel, and give me the strength to believe and truly trust you with my aching soul, and continually learn to fall in love with you; that I be refreshed with your word, washed by your Spirit, and restored in the joy of salvation; that I may glorify you by reflecting the joy, rest and peace that you give to us in the midst of our pain.

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... To The Heart