

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews

SERMON: **Rest for the Weary**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 4:1-13

SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black

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How many of you here this morning are tired?

Is the stress of your job wearing you out? Would you like some rest? Are there relationships in your life that are wearing you out? Is ministry sucking you dry? Do you sometimes wonder if you're even making a difference? Would you like a break? Is your financial situation stretching you to the breaking point? Are you children exhausting? Is your health a burden? Does your daily struggle with temptation seem like more than you can bear? Would you like rest today?

We all desire rest from hard work and hardships – it is a desire that is built into the fabric of our daily lives. Whether it's weariness from the routine things of life like work, school, exercise, and family or stress that comes from unique circumstances, we desire rest in our lives.

Two weeks ago in Hebrews 3 we saw that faith by definition perseveres; the only true faith is faith that makes it to the end of life. And as a result we saw: 1) the need to take sin and unbelief seriously, 2) that we need each other to really live out the Christian life, and 3) that above all else we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus who was the perfect model of perseverance. Today we will see that we also have to believe there will be an end to the weariness of life if we are to persevere. It is hard to endure the weariness of this life if we don't believe that we will actually enter into the rest of God some day.

As many of you know I spent fifteen months traveling back and forth between Wichita and Chicago last year. That was the hardest thing Maggie and I have ever gone through. I never knew loneliness until then. During that time my wife was basically functioning as a single parent of four, then as a single parent of five after she gave birth to our son Abe in February. We had a lot of help, but we were very weary, to put it mildly. One of the reasons we were able to get through those months was that we knew there would be an end. On the weekends I was home, my kids would always ask how many more trips I would have to make to Chicago before it was all over. When times got really hard we would remind each other that it would be over soon. I also reminded my kids that Jesus knew what it was like to be separated from his Father and to suffer loneliness. That renewed perspective was sometimes the only motivation we had to continue.

The author of Hebrews was reminding his original readers that there would be an end to their hardship and the persecution they were enduring. They needed to keep their thoughts on Jesus. Jesus persevered to the end and is seated at the right hand of God. They too would enter God's eternal rest if they persevered to the end.

The wilderness generation didn't believe they could defeat the Canaanites and enter the Promised Land and so they turned their back on God's promises and turned back towards Egypt. In Hebrews 3:7-19 we saw the tragedy of their unbelief. The wilderness generation failed to

enter God’s rest; they were excluded from the Promised Land because of their unbelief. The example of the wilderness generation served as a warning to the Hebrew Christians to not fall away from their faith and suffer the same consequences. Our text today continues this warning.

4:1-13 *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ²For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. ³Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, “So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ ” And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.” ⁵And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”*

⁶*It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. ⁷Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. ¹¹Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*

¹²*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

Hebrews 3:7-19 emphasized the failure of the wilderness generation to enter God’s rest, but our text this morning emphasizes that God’s rest is still available for those who believe. And because this rest is still available the text gives us two commands in verses 1 and 11:

4:1 *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*

4:11 *...make every effort to enter that rest...*

Before we get into those commands I’d like to give an extended introduction and attempt to show what this text means when it says there is rest still available to us.¹ I think a clearer understanding of the meaning of rest will make it easier to understand the urgency of these two commands.

In the Old Testament there are two major types of rest mentioned, Promised Rest and Sabbath Rest. Most of the time when the Old Testament speaks of rest it refers to the promise that God’s people would have deliverance from their enemies, specifically in the Promised Land; this is Promised Rest (Cf. Deut. 12:9-10; Joshua 21:44; 23:1; 2 Samuel 7:1, 11; 1 Kings 5:3-5; 8:56).

¹ See J.C. Laansma’s article on “Rest” in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

When Hebrews 3-4 talks about the wilderness generation failing to enter God's rest because of unbelief it is referring to their failure to enter the Promised Land. But we know from the book of Joshua that the next generation did enter the Promised Land. God used Joshua to drive out their enemies from the Land and eventually give them rest in the Land. So was the rest Joshua led them to the fulfillment of the Promised Rest? Well, the author of Hebrews says no; he says the promise of entering that rest still stands.

4:6-8 *It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. ⁷Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.*

If Joshua really gave the Israelites rest when he brought them into the Promised Land in c. 1400 B.C. then why would David say, in Psalm 95, 400 years later, "*Today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts;*" implying that the promise of rest was still available? In one sense Joshua did lead the people into the Promised Rest, for they entered the Land and defeated their enemies; but as you read the Old Testament after the book of Joshua there seems to still be an anticipation of a different kind of rest that has not yet occurred.

The second kind of rest mentioned in the Old Testament is Sabbath Rest. The writer of Hebrews is trying to show us that the anticipated Promised Rest that Psalm 95 is speaking of and the rest that is still available combines both the idea of a Promised Rest and a Sabbath Rest.

4:3c-5 *...And yet his work (God's work) has been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." ⁵And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."*

4:9-10 *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.*

There are two aspects of Sabbath Rest being drawn out in this passage. 1) Sabbath Rest is rest from work. Verse 4 is a direct reference to Genesis 2:2. After God created the world he rested on the seventh day. And he commanded his people to rest on the seventh day as well. But God's Sabbath Rest is not just rest from work. 2) God's Sabbath Rest is an eternal rest. ² God stands outside of time and so God's rest has an eternal quality to it.

² When I say the character of God's rest is eternal let me be clear about something - eternity is not something that is only in the future; eternity is a present reality as well. When Jesus rose from the dead eternity entered time and space (G.E. Ladd, *Theology of the NT*, pp. 362-363). And so the rest that is still available to believers is not just a future rest in heaven (though that is most definitely part of it); it is a rest that is available both now and for the rest of eternity. Eternal life begins at the point of true belief in the gospel.

The good news for us this morning is that as verse 1 says, the promise of entering God's eternal rest still stands. Some of that rest we can experience now and some we can experience later.

Now: The rest we experience now in Christ is similar to the rest Joshua provided. But it is also different. The Promised Rest for the Israelites was a deliverance from enemies. In Christ there is deliverance from enemies, but the enemies are not Canaanites; the enemies are sin and death. Through Jesus' work on the cross we can be forgiven for our sin and freed from the fear of death, knowing that we have eternal life.

That "rest" is available to all who believe today! But in order to enter this rest that is still available today you have to cease from your work and put your faith in the work of Christ. In **Matthew 11:28** Jesus says, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" Jesus says, "Come to me." When we are weary the solution isn't going on vacation or to a counselor or even to church. None of those things are bad, but unless they point us to Jesus we won't find true rest.³ We can't enter into God's rest on our own; we have to come to Jesus by putting our full trust in him. Augustine states this well in Book 1 of *Confessions* when he writes, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."

Later: We will also have rest from the hard work and hardships in this life, but that rest will not be fully known until Christ returns. The Israelites entered the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership. In Christ there is a Promised resting place, but that place is not found in time and space as we know it; the rest offered is an eternal rest in the heavenly kingdom (Heb. 13:14). We have to continue in the faith and believe we will enter God's rest fully when Christ returns; this is how we endure the hard work and hardships of this life now.

The time to enter into the rest of God is today. Don't harden your hearts to the good news of what Jesus has done for you, believe in him and put your trust in him.

Now that we've looked at what God's rest is I'd like to look at the response this text calls for in light of this amazing rest that is available to each of us today.

4:1 *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*

The NIV says, "*let us be careful.*" But that translation is a little weak. The ESV or NASB are more accurate: "*let us fear, lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it*" (ESV).

Fear is a more accurate word, but what should we fear? Looking back at 3:19 is helpful in this case since verse 1 of chapter 4 begins with the word "*therefore.*" We have to notice what that is referencing.

3:19 *So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.*

We should fear unbelief. Verse 2 of our text confirms this.

³ G. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, pg 166.

4:2 *For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*

Sermon in a Sentence: ***We should fear unbelief and disobedience to God's Word.***

There are two reasons why we should fear unbelief and disobedience to God's Word.

Reason 1: Belief and obedience are necessary to enter God's eternal rest. (1-10)

When the spies came back from their expedition in the Promised Land, Joshua and Caleb gave the Israelites "good news" (or as the NIV says, "gospel"); they told them they would be able to take the Land because the Lord was with them. But the Israelites didn't combine this good news with faith and so they forfeited their Promised Rest.

We too have had the gospel preached to us. Have we combined it with faith? We were created for a relationship with God and made to glorify God. But we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We deserve death; we deserve to spend eternity separated from God because of our sin. But Jesus entered his creation and took on flesh and blood 2000 years ago. He died on a Roman cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus then rose from the dead and destroyed the power of death. He then ascended into heaven where he is now seated at the right hand of God. And Jesus will one day return to complete his work of salvation. If we believe this good news then we will enter God's eternal rest. As verse 3 says...

4:3a *Now we who have believed enter that rest...*

God's eternal rest is available for those who believe God's Word.

But this good news is not of any benefit to anybody unless it is accompanied by faith as verse 2 makes plain.

Some of you may be thinking, "Most of us here are Christians, we don't need to fear unbelief; this doesn't apply to me." You may have put your trust in Jesus at one point in your life, but do you believe today? The author says, "*Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts*" (v. 7). We can't say unbelief doesn't apply to us just because we said a prayer to "receive Jesus" at some point in our lives. As we concluded two weeks ago, profession of faith does not equal possession of faith because faith by definition perseveres. The question is not whether or not we professed faith in the past. The question is whether or not we have faith today that shows itself by obedience to God's Word. The author of Hebrews is addressing the whole church when he tells the Hebrew Christians to fear unbelief. So I am addressing each one of you this morning. And I am addressing myself as well.

We all need to fear unbelief because we all have unbelief in our lives to one degree or another. Some unbelief is obvious while some is not so obvious, but we all have unbelief in our lives. For example, a professing atheist is obviously filled with unbelief. But some of the unbelief in our lives is not so obvious. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Romans 1:16 says, “*The gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*” Do you believe that? Do you really believe that? If you do then you are probably telling people about Jesus on a regular basis. If you don’t believe the gospel is the power of God then you are probably not telling people about Jesus.

Philippians 4:19 says, “*God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*” Do you believe that? Do you really believe that? If you do then you probably don’t worry much about your financial security or health challenges; you’re probably filled with hope. But if you don’t believe that God will supply all of your needs then you may be worrying a lot.

I could give many more examples, but my point is this: we all battle unbelief. So how do we know if we have true belief? True belief will be marked by long term faithfulness to God’s Word; it will be marked by perseverance.

Now that is not to say that we enter God’s rest because of works; we enter God’s rest only on the basis of belief (as verse 3 makes plain), but...

True belief in God’s Word will be accompanied by obedience to God’s Word.

This also does not mean that we will live lives in perfect obedience to God’s Word. We will continue to struggle with the deceitfulness of sin and the desires of the flesh. But faith by definition perseveres and so we should be growing in obedience to God’s Word.

If we’re not growing in obedience to God’s Word then that is a good indication that we have unbelieving hearts. We should fear unbelief in our lives because belief and obedience are necessary to enter God’s eternal rest.

Let’s look at the second reason we should fear unbelief and disobedience to God’s Word.

Reason 2: Unbelief and disobedience are judged by God’s Word. (11-13)

The wilderness generation didn’t believe God and they didn’t obey. So God declared on oath to Moses that they wouldn’t enter his rest in the Promised Land. Moses then gave the people the bad news: they would die in the wilderness because of their unbelief. After Moses broke the news to them the people became very sorry for their sin. They told Moses they were sorry and decided to enter the Land. Moses told them it was too late and if they made an attempt to go into the Land they would fall by the sword. But they didn’t listen to Moses and marched into the Land anyway. They were slaughtered with the swords of the Amalekites and the Canaanites (Num 14:39-45).

Now with the whole story of the wilderness generation in your mind listen to Hebrews 4:11-13 very carefully.

4:11-13 *Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. ¹²For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow;*

it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

The writer of Hebrews has given a number of examples to show that Jesus is greater than something. Jesus is greater than the angels; Jesus is greater than Moses; the revelation we have in Jesus is greater than the revelation of the prophets; Jesus is greater than Joshua because he offers us a better rest than Joshua offered. When we come to verses 11-13 we have another “greater than” argument.

The wilderness generation was judged for their unbelief in the message Joshua and Caleb brought and so they fell in the desert by the sword. How much more should we fear unbelief in the gospel of Jesus Christ and judgment by the Word of God, for the Word of God is sharper than swords.

The Word of God will judge, and its judgment is greater than the judgment the Israelites faced in the wilderness. When I say the Word of God “judges” I’m speaking of two things: 1) The Word of God is a judge in a final sense. At the end of life we will be judged by God, according to His Word; all will be laid bare. 2) The Word of God is a judge now as well.

God’s Word exposes unbelief and disobedience.

If we will ultimately be judged by God’s Word then we would do well to let God’s Word evaluate where we stand before God today.⁴ If we can only enter God’s eternal rest by belief in God’s Word then let’s make every effort to believe now. Let the Word of God expose the unbelief and sin in your life, even if it involves embarrassment and shame. Let the Word of God get into you deeply, even if it is labor intensive and painful.

The Christian life is not an easy road. We are followers of Jesus, and he walked a hard and painful road. As his disciples we will have to endure hardship as well. But the Christian life *is* also a victorious road. For we know that it ends in rest for those who believe.

Do you see the paradox here? Our desire is to enter God’s *rest*, but we are called to make every *effort*. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves – only Jesus can save us, but we are called to make every effort to believe.

One way to make every effort to battle unbelief and disobedience is to spend more time with God’s Word.

God’s Word must be known in order to be believed and obeyed.

If you’ve been a Christian for very long you know that you should be spending time reading God’s Word. But reading God’s Word is only one discipline that is involved in knowing God’s Word. There are at least 6 disciplines necessary if we are going to know God’s Word.

⁴ G. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, pg. 167

1) God's Word must be heard on a regular basis. Hearing the Word of God preached is so important in the life of a believer. We believe strongly in the preaching of God's Word at this church because we believe that when God's Word is preached faithfully that God's people actually hear the voice of God. Your presence in this worship service every week is so important for your growth in faith.

2) God's Word must be studied on a regular basis. If you need help on learning how to study God's Word I would recommend joining a Precepts Bible Study. There are many good Bible studies available, but I am confident Precepts will teach you how to study your Bible.

3) God's Word must be memorized. The Psalm 119 tell us to hide God's Word in our heart that we might not sin against God (Ps. 119:11). A lot of you may be thinking, "I just can't memorize." Well let me exhort you – you're wrong! You can memorize. Your memory is like a muscle. It may be very out of shape, but most of you have the capacity to memorize Scripture. Start with one verse a month and gradually work your way up to a verse a week. You'll be surprised how much you can memorize over the course of a year. If you need some guidance in this area you may look into the Navigator's Topical Memory System. But let me qualify this by saying a head full of Scripture is not an end in itself.

4) God's Word must be meditated on. This is the discipline that we must not neglect if we are to battle unbelief in our lives. As we become more acquainted with God's Word and memorize it we need to let that Word sink into our hearts and reveal areas of sin and unbelief. I really recommend keeping a journal where you can wrestle with the areas in your life where God's Word is exposing unbelief and disobedience. Meditation is so important because it serves as the bridge between knowing God's Word and obeying God's Word.

5) God's Word must be obeyed. Wayne Grudem has said that we won't even be able to understand God's Word if we don't approach it with a willingness to obey it.⁵ I hope it has been made very clear in these sermons on Hebrews 3 and 4 that if we really believe God's Word it will be proved by our obedience to God's Word. Where there is a pattern of disobedience in our lives we should view it as a red flag that there is an area in our heart that doesn't believe God's Word. At that point we must seek God and ask him to help us see our unbelief. And when we see unbelief in our lives we need to pray the prayer of the father who wanted Jesus to heal his son; "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

If you remember two weeks ago we saw in Hebrews 3 that we need each other to persevere in the faith. When it comes to knowing God's Word this exhortation couldn't be more urgent. We need each other to know God's Word. We need encouragement, we need accountability. We need other believers to help us study the Bible. We need other believers to help us obey the Bible. We need other believers to help us memorize Scripture. We need each other in most areas of the Christian life. Let me blunt with some of you this morning. If you're not intentionally involved with other believers you are in real danger of falling into serious unbelief! Get in a Bible study, or join an ABF, or get in a small group, or find a mentor. You need other people exhorting you to persevere in the faith.

⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 108.

All of these five disciplines are indispensable if we want to know God's Word. But I do want to especially emphasize the sixth discipline.

6) God's Word must be read daily. My opinion on the reading of God's Word has been shaped most by Randall Rice who told me this: *God's people should read all of God's Word all of the time.* We know we need the Word of God for our spiritual nourishment as much as we need food for our physical nourishment. And we know that all Scripture is God breathed and useful. What that meant for Randall and what it has meant for me is that I endeavor to read the entire Bible through every year. Tom Macy challenged me to start doing this about 10 years ago and I took him up on his challenge. I bought a copy of Don Carson's book *For the Love of God*⁶ which includes a reading plan and brief comments about the passages assigned for each day. I have not been successful every year, but I have probably read through all of the Bible 5 times in the last 10 years and many parts of it 10 or 12 times. This discipline has literally changed my life. Through reading God's Word I have gained a love for God's Word, I have grown in my understanding of God's Word, I started teaching God's Word. As a result of the grace of God and this discipline of Bible reading, my life's passion is to know God's Word and to help others know it more.

[Ask Byron West to come and share his testimony⁷]

This last year I discovered the *ESV Study Bible*⁸ which has the best reading plan I've tried so far. It also has the best study notes I've ever seen in a Bible, which is helpful when you come across a tough passage.

There are many different Bible reading plans out there. You don't need to follow the plan I follow or the plan that Byron follows, but you should make every effort to know God's Word. You don't have to read through the whole Bible in a year to be a Christian, but you should endeavor to read through all of Scripture over time and it should be a daily discipline.

Tom Macy challenged me and Byron to read through the whole Bible. It has made a huge difference in our lives and so I want to challenge you to do the same thing.

The Michaelises and I will be out in the foyer after the service. If you want to commit to read through the Bible in 2010 or to read through it over the course of the next 2 years we would love to help. You can sign up to be a part of the Michaelis' *Through the Bible* class next year, they will help encourage you and keep you accountable to Bible reading. Or you can sign a commitment card where you indicate your intention to read through the Bible. We will email you throughout the year to help encourage you and keep you accountable. We will also have Don Carson's book *For the Love of God* and *the ESV Study Bible* available for you to order if you would like to benefit from the resources that have helped me in my journey.

⁶ Carson, D.A. *For the Love of God. A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word.* Wheaton, Ill: Crossways Books, 2006.

⁷ This testimony is included in the audio recording available on First Free's website.

⁸ Crossway Bibles. *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version.* Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Bibles, 2008.

In closing, let me say we all should fear unbelief and disobedience to God's Word. There is an amazing rest that is available to all who believe in the gospel found in God's Word. But belief in the Good News of Jesus Christ is not a one time deal. It's an ongoing faith. Faith by definition perseveres. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts – believe today and every day as long as it is called today.

Maybe you need to respond by putting your faith in Jesus for the first time. The day to respond to God's voice is today.

Maybe you've been in church your whole life and you're beginning to realize that you don't really have the kind of faith that transforms your life. The day to respond to God's voice is today.

Maybe you're seeing patterns of sin in your life that expose your unbelief. The day to respond to God's voice is today.

Maybe you know you've neglected true fellowship and accountability with other believers. The day to respond to God's voice is today.

Maybe you've neglected God's Word. The day to respond to God's voice is today.

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