

Why We Have a New Testament Sabbath

Hebrews 4:9-16

Halifax: 9 October 2022

Introduction:

Today in our sermon series from Hebrews we are going to take a closer look at what we are taught in Hebrews 4 about the Sabbath that remains for the people of God under the New Covenant.

- We need to look a little more closely at this because it is matter that is often disputed in our modern times—which is sad because it is a glorious day!
 - In the entire history of the world, the weekly Sabbath has often been ignored and neglected, but in the history of Canada and other once Christian nations, it has only been in the last century that we and our churches have gone from neglecting the Christian Sabbath to denying that it even ought to be kept!
- If you were to go back a hundred years, you would find Lord’s Day observance in the confessions and doctrinal statements of almost every denomination... Baptist, United, Presbyterian, Reformed, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and so on.
 - Not only that, but if you look at the laws of the civil magistrate, you would find prohibitions against operating businesses, factories, and trades on Sunday.
 - We had many such restrictions in Nova Scotia when I moved here in 1983, and even when this church was started in 1997.
 - For the most part, changes in Sabbath keeping arose, not by coming to new understandings about what the Bible teaches through honest exegesis, but because of the rejection of the authority of the Bible and of God.
 - Because we did what Hebrews warns us about—we hardened our hearts and refuse to enter into God’s rest.
 - Our rejection of the day of rest is symbolic of our rejection of the rest itself that is associated with the day.
 - However, there are some who do hold to the authority of the Bible who reject the Sabbath, looking at it as an institution of Moses that was removed with the temple and the sacrifices when Jesus came.
 - The problem is, the Sabbath was not instituted by Moses, but at creation right along with marriage.
 - For this reason, it is one of the ten commandments which are not temporary ordinances, but moral obligations (again, think of marriage).

So, all that to say, this is a subject that we need to look at more closely.

- We need to see that the observance of a New Testament Sabbath does remain and to consider how it is to be used and what benefits we can expect from it.
- If we think rightly about it, we will look at missing it like missing a holiday with the person we love.
- I have done a whole series on the Sabbath in the Catechism series, but today we will focus on how the Sabbath is presented to us in Hebrews 4.
 - Last week I preached on this entire chapter in one sermon, but I also told you that we would be looking more closely at some details in future sermons.
 - So though I will read from verse 1, my main focus will be on verses 9 & 10.

Please listen now as I read this chapter to you... beginning in Hebrews 4:1

- This is the word of God. Be careful to receive it as such.

Hebrews 4:1-16: Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. ² For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard *it*. ³ For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: “So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest,’ ” although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴ For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh *day* in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works”; ⁵ and again in this *place*: “They shall not enter My rest.” ⁶ Since therefore it remains that some *must* enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again He designates a certain day, saying in David, “Today,” after such a long time, as it has been said: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” ⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. ⁹

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. ¹⁰ For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His. ¹¹ Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. ¹³ And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account. ¹⁴ Seeing then that 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 cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are, yet* without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

May God bless His Word to our understanding as we consider it more closely.

I. The first thing I want you to see is that we still have a Sabbath in the New Testament.

A. The epistle to the Hebrews, being written to Jews, is very interested in presenting the changes that have come in our worship now that Jesus the Messiah has appeared.

1. The emphasis of Hebrews, as we have seen, is that what we have now in Christ is better than what Israel had.

- The revelation from God is better because now He has spoken to us through His Son.
- He is a better apostle than Moses, a better priest than Aaron, has a better sacrifice, and a better temple (now in the heavens).
- We have better promises and a better covenant.

2. In our text, we are shown that the Sabbath *remains* and that it is a *better Sabbath*.

- As we saw last week, the rest that Joshua brought the people to in the land of Canaan was good, but the rest that Jesus brings us into is better.
- Verse 8 points out that if the only rest that God had in mind had been the rest of entering the land of Canaan, then David would not have spoken of another day of rest for them to receive from God.

- The central focus of this whole chapter is to show us that the promise of rest remains and that it is better than ever.
- B. Verse 9 declares plainly that there remains a rest for the people of God.
1. Words cannot be plainer.
 - What God’s people have had all along—even back to the creation of the world, they still have.
 - Rather than taking away their rest, God has retained it for His people.
 - It is a very direct statement as if someone had asked the question of the author of Hebrews,
 - “You have told us of this rest that the people of old did not enter into and you have warned us to take heed lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief such that we are prevented from entering God’s rest.
 - “Are you telling us that there is still a rest for us to pursue now like there was when Moses brought Israel out of Egypt and the Lord promised them rest in the land of Canaan?”
 - And the answer is, “Yes indeed, there remains a rest for the people of God.”
 - They were exhorted to enter God’s rest in their day and did not;
 - Then, in Joshua’s day, they did obtain the land.
 - And after that, David exhorted the people in his day to the enter God’s rest even though they were then in the land...
 - And now we are told that there still remains a rest for us to enter if we are the people of God.
2. The rest that is spoken of in chapters 3 & 4 has three characteristics in every age.
 - a. First, that it speaks of the completion of some great work that God has done for His people—He rests because the work is finished (accomplished).
 - At creation, it was the creation of the heavens and the earth for us. We were to receive our habitation from God and use it as from His hand, communing with delight in Him, praising Him and honouring Him.
 - This is still true.
 - At Canaan, the great work that God prepared for them was the preparation of a land to dwell in where He would be revealed to them as their redeemer—through all the ordinances of the temple—and where they would have the privilege of restored communion with God after the fall—forgiveness, acceptance, provision from God, enjoyment of God, guidance and instruction.
 - And now, in Christ, it is the promise of acceptance and communion with God through the work of Christ on the cross that ultimately is heaven, but that is now enjoyed in the church and her ordinances and fellowship.
 - Heaven was held out as the ultimate promised rest at Creation, in Canaan, and now in the church, it is the rest we are called be sure that we enter at last.

- b. Second, that God’s rest involves a day that is associated with the promised rest, a holy day whose purpose is to commemorate the work that God has done for His people, to thank Him for it, and to seek to enter His rest.
 - At creation, it was the seventh day of the week that was appointed to be observed as a holy day when the people rested from their work to remember God as their Creator and to give thanks to Him and dedicate their lives to serve Him as their Creator.
 - At Canaan, it was still the seventh day of the week, only now they were to observe it also in remembrance of how He had brought them out of bondage in Egypt and given them this land that they might serve Him as His people. They were to give thanks to Him and rest in His provision and look for the final rest that was represented by Canaan.
 - And in Christ, the day was changed from the seventh day to the first day of the week because it was on the first day that Christ completed His work when He rose from the dead. On that day, they were to praise Him for His saving work and to dedicate their lives to Him, to trust in Him afresh as their redeemer and as the certain way to heaven.
- c. Third, that the rest in these chapters is in every case of a completed work for God’s people that they are exhorted to enter—to receive from God as a blessing and benefit.
 - The great danger warned against at creation was to eat the forbidden fruit which was the test given to our first parents to see if they would live in the earth that God had given them for Him—which they did not.
 - The great danger warned against for God’s people at Canaan was to harden their hearts under their trials in the wilderness and refuse to enter the land because they saw no great value in being God’s people.
 - And the great danger in the time of David was similar—though they were in the land, the danger was that they would harden their heart and refuse to serve God as His people—not seeing the value of being reconciled to Him.
 - For us and for the Hebrews to whom this epistle is addressed, the danger is also to harden our hearts as if salvation in Christ is not worth the trouble—so that we do not continue with Christ, but turn to idols and the world.
- So again, three things that Sabbath rest involved—a work completed by God for His people, a day to commemorate that work, and an exhortation to enter in to blessing of God’s rest (the work that He had completed for them).
- 3. The word that is translated *rest* in verse 9 is a different word than the word that is used the other ten times in this passage to speak of God’s rest.
 - It is a unique word that is deliberately used and that would have stood out to the original readers—the word *sabbatismos*.
 - This word emphasises that not only the completed work and the call to enter it are in view, but also the observance of one day in seven to commemorate that work.
 - There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.
 - There is still a day of rest to be observed every seventh day in the New Covenant now that Jesus has come and has finished His work.

II. Verse 10 shows us that the New Testament Sabbath that remains for the people of God is based on the finished work of the Son of God.

- It says (verse 10): **For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His.**
- A. This seems to speak of Jesus who entered God's rest when He finished the great work that the Father sent Him to do for our salvation.
 - 1. Some say that it speaks of the believer who ceases from his own works when he enters God's rest.
 - That is indeed what believers do when they are converted.
 - It is true thing in itself, but it does not fit with what we find in this verse.
 - 2. Let me explain why I believe this is speaking about Jesus as the one who has entered God's rest.
 - a. First, because in talking about God's people throughout this passage, it refers to them as "we" or "they," not "he."
 - Here it suddenly speaks of an individual who has entered God's rest instead of "we" or "they" who must enter God's rest.
 - b. Second, because it speaks of one who has already entered into God's rest—it is in the past tense.
 - If this is talking about salvation, we have not yet entered into God's rest—we are not in heaven yet.
 - Yes, we have ceased from works as the way of salvation, but we do not cease from our work because we are called to work out our salvation, we are said to be now in Christ created for good works, we have to strive to enter into His rest, we are called to bear persecution and press on for the high calling of God in Christ.
 - Jesus, on the other hand, when it comes to the work of our salvation, has finished His work.
 - He announced from the cross that "It is finished" when He had borne the curse for us, and then He entered into death for us and that was finished when He rose again for our justification.
 - Now He has, as it says in Hebrews 1, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. He has finished His work and reigns until we are made His footstool.
 - c. What's more, verse 10 says that He ceased from His work (or rested from it) *as God did from His.*
 - This does not fit if it is the believer ceasing to rely on his own works for his salvation because his cessation is not the cessation of work that is complete, but of vain work that is forsaken!
 - When God ceased from His work of creation, it was because of a job completed and well done—it was a rest of satisfaction that He might enjoy His work that He has done.
 - With the believer, it is rejection of his own works to rely on the work of another... not at all a ceasing as God did from His.

B. If verse 10 does speak of Christ, it beautifully harmonises with the rest of the epistle to the Hebrews. It shows how Christ is superior.

1. Creation and redemption from Egypt to Canaan are great works, but redemption from sin and death to heaven is a greater work!

- At creation, God finished creating a habitation for us where we could serve Him in harmony with Him, with each other, and with all that He had made and we fell.
 - But then in His grace, He called together a people and gave them the land of Canaan where they were called to live in harmony with Him and with each other and with the land that He had given them.
 - It was a rest that represented the restoration of paradise, and it was a very imperfect one at that.
- But now Jesus has done a better work and provided a better rest.
 - He has atoned for our sins and sat down at God's right hand, and we have a better rest in the church than Israel had in Canaan.
 - It is a better work with a better rest because it is the work that will bring us to glory.
 - We have already entered into the His finished work by faith so that we are pardoned by His saving work, and the day is coming when we will be with Him in glory forever and ever in His Father's house.
- The overall theme of Hebrews is that, in Christ, there is a better work accomplished that leads to a better rest.

2. The work which Christ completed is so much greater even than the work of creation that the Sabbath day was changed from the seventh day to the first day of the week.

- God rested from the work of creation on the seventh day, thus the seventh day was consecrated, but Jesus rested from His work on the first day of the week, so now the first day is consecrated.
 - Keep in mind that this change was already known to the Hebrew Christians because the first day was consecrated by Jesus Himself.
 - There was a dispute in the church about whether the seventh day should also be kept, but there is no dispute in the scriptures about whether the first day was to be kept as the Christian Sabbath.
 - For this reason, the author simply refers to the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God as a known fact without mentioning the day change.

C. But for your sake let me show you briefly the evidence for change of the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first day of the week.

1. Jesus began the pattern of meeting with His disciples on the first day of the week—the day He rose from the dead...

- Turn to John 20 and you can see this...
 - a. Look at John 20:19:

- **John 20:19: Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.”**
- You see how John emphasises that it was still the first day of the week, the day that Jesus rose, when He met with them.
- b. And now look down at John 20:26 and you will see that He met with them again on the next Sunday...
 - **John 20:26: And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, “Peace to you!”**
 - Now you know how the Jews count days—
 - Unlike us, they include the day that the event started in the count...
 - That is why even though Jesus was crucified on Friday and rose again on Sunday, the Jews say that He rose on the third day and even that He was in the tomb for three days...
 - They count Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.
 - So when John says that Jesus met with them after eight days, he means that He met with them on the first day of the week again.
 - After His resurrection, Jesus began the pattern of meeting with His disciples on the first day of the week...
 - This is what was prophesied in Psalm 22 where our Lord says that after God accepts His sacrifice,
 - **“I will declare Your name to My brethren, in the midst of the assembly I will praise you...”** and...
 - **“My praise shall be of you in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him...”**
 - and then He goes on to talk about how the whole world will come to worship because of what He has done.
 - Jesus instituted this worship when He met with His brethren on the first day of the week to declare what God had done and to give thanks.
- c. And that is not all...the day of Pentecost was also on the first of day of the week.
 - And of course that was the day that Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon His church.
 - The prophets had promised that the Spirit would be poured out on God’s assembly to give them new life...
 - And the day that the LORD chose to give life to His assembly was Sunday, the first day of the week, the day that He had risen from the dead which is also called the Lord’s Day.

2. But how do we know that this pattern of keeping the Sabbath on the first day of the week is to continue?
 - We know because the church under the leadership of the apostles, who did nothing but what the Lord commanded, began to meet on the first day of the week.
 - Acts 20:7 shows us that after the churches were established, it was their custom to gather on the first day of the week.
 - Paul extends his stay until the first day of the week so that he can meet with them.
 - Also, in 1 Cor 16:1-2, he calls upon the churches to take up their collection for the poor in Jerusalem on the first day of the week.
3. Finally, there is the testimony of the early church.
 - The fathers of the early church speak of first day observance from the very beginning and it has continued with very little opposition to this day—
 - surely, because it was started by Jesus and there was never any reason to dispute it.
 - Here is one example from the early church—it is from the book called, “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles” written in about 125 AD, 25 years after the Apostle John is believed to have died:
 - “But every Lord’s Day do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving.”

TRANS> So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God—and it is a better rest.

III. Why did God give us this day?

- A. We have it that we might remember the work that God has done for us.
 1. We remember His work of creation and His work of redemption.
 - Without a day set apart to remember it, we will soon forget it over the years.
 2. We gather together as our Lord has commanded us to hear what He has done and to consider how He wants us to live.
 - It is very sad to see so many who forsake the assembly.
 - God commanded in Leviticus 23 that we are to have a holy convocation—a called assembly—on the Sabbath Day and that remains for the people of God.
 - And in Hebrews 10:25, we are told not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as some do.
 - The very name of the people of God is the church which means the assembly.
- B. We have this day in order that we might praise God for His finished work.
 1. In remembering what God has done, we are to praise Him and give thanks for it.
 - We sing praises and we receive the Lord’s Supper, with rejoicing in what He has done.
 2. We also consecrate ourselves to Him and we present our tithes and offerings, remembering that all we have is His.
- C. We have this day that we might consecrate ourselves afresh to Him.

1. Hearing His word, we see our need for His forgiveness and sanctification—
 - We see changes that we need to make in our attitude, in our behaviour, in our service to God and to others.
 2. It is a day to confess our sins and repent of them—and then to come and find rest in the finished work of Jesus.
 - It is a day for making vows, promising our service to Him.
- D. We have this day to call upon the Lord, who is eager to bless us through His works of creation and redemption.
1. Seeing our need of His grace, we come to His throne of grace to find grace and mercy in our time of need.
 2. We remember that He is a faithful High Priest who is ready and able to pardon us and to help us. We cry out to Him for ourselves and others.
 3. We pray for our nation and for the lost.
- E. We have this day to maintain our joy in the Lord.
1. It is a day of feasting, not fasting, for Jesus has finished His work and now lives as our redeemer.
 2. We abstain from our ordinary work and recreation to celebrate and keep the feast.
 3. It is a holy day—a day consecrated to God—to commune with Him and rejoice in His finished works. A day we don't want to miss.
- F. We have this this day to maintain a holy fellowship with other believers in His work.
1. We engage in fellowship with each other, encouraging one another and exhorting one another in the works that God has done for us.
 - Of course we can do this and should do this on other days, but here is a day set apart for us to be together and to encourage each other.
 2. We also are to help each other, to minister to one another's needs in whatever way we can.
- G. We have this day as a testimony to the lost of the gracious mighty works of our God.
1. By consecrating the day, we show that we love the Lord, are serving Him, and trusting in Him. It is a testimony that we are His people. It distinguishes us.
 2. We also can invite them to come and hear the gospel.
 - That is one of the best ways to reach them.
 - We have several people who are now members who came to know the Lord because a friend invited them to church and they kept coming.

Conclusion: How glad we ought to be that there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

- It would be a great loss to be without it.
 - We were not made for the day, but the day was made for us.
- So how are you doing with the day?
 - Are you making the most of it?
- This is the Day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!