

Sermon 19, The Rest of God, Hebrews 4:1-11

Proposition: Now is the time to rest in Christ's finished work by obeying, worshiping, Sabbathing, and believing.

- I. Application: Fear falling short of God's rest, vv. 1-3a
 - A. You Will Fall Short if you Don't Believe
 - B. Those Who Believe Enter the Rest
- II. Explanation, vv. 3b-10
 - A. Psalm 95:11 says those who anger God are excluded from His rest, v. 3b
 - B. Gen. 2:2 says that God has rested since the 7th day, vv. 3c-4
 - C. Psalm 95:11 says that some will not enter God's rest, v. 5
 - D. Therefore
 1. Some will enter God's rest, v. 6a
 2. The wilderness generation failed to enter because of disobedience, v. 6b
 3. Today is the time to enter God's rest, v. 7
 - E. Settling in Canaan was not the full promised rest, v. 8
 - F. Therefore, the call to enter Christ's rest still stands
 1. Christ rests after saving the world as God did after creating it, v. 10
 2. We rest with Him in two ways
 - a) Through obedience and worship
 - b) Through the Sabbath day
- III. Application: Strive to Enter the Rest rather than following Israel's Example, v. 11

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I trust you all know the name of Lewis Carroll. Before writing *Alice in Wonderland*, Carroll lectured in mathematics at Oxford. To people of a certain cast of mind (few of whom attend this church), some of his best work comes out of the union of his nonsense side with his mathematical side. I speak, of course, of his textbook on *Symbolic Logic*. That book contains 60 problems in symbolic logic. I bring this up because our text this morning is arranged rather like one of these Lewis Carroll exercises in logic, where premise is heaped upon premise and it is left to the reader to put the premises into a logical order and divine the conclusion. Carroll, for instance, gives us this:

- (1) All writers, who understand human nature, are clever;
- (2) No one is a true poet unless he can stir the hearts of men;
- (3) Shakespeare wrote "Hamlet";
- (4) No writer, who does not understand human nature, can stir the hearts of men;

(5) None but a true poet could have written “Hamlet.”¹

According to the answer key, the conclusion from these five premises is the very boring “Shakespeare was clever.”

Well, we have a similar problem in symbolic logic before us this morning, but its conclusion is spelled out: Strive to enter God’s rest. Nonetheless, we are going to spend some time studying the premises and discussing their implications for us; next week, Lord-willing, we will return and speak more directly about the conclusion of the premises. Today, I hope to show you that the premises add up to this: Now is the time to enter God’s rest.

I. Application: Fear falling short of God’s rest, vv. 1-3a

This is the fifth Sunday that we have spent looking at the Hebrew writer’s sermon on Psalm 95, and yes, we will spend at least two more Sundays on this magnificent sermon because it is so rich and nourishing, the strong meat that belongs to those who are mature.

Thus, if I can review for just a moment, I will remind you that Psalm 95 warns us about the wilderness generation. God swore that generation would not and could not enter His rest. If we do what the wilderness generation did, we will also be excluded from God’s rest.

A. You Will Fall Short if you Don’t Believe

In particular, the writer tells us, you will fall short if you don’t believe. This “falling short” is a reference to the wilderness generation, who got close to the borders but never actually crossed into the Promised Land. The same is still true: you can be a fellow-traveler with the church most of the way, but flake out at the last minute and refuse to take the final step of entry into God’s promised land. The reason you would refuse to take that step is that you failed to believe. That’s the message here. Those who don’t believe fall short. It takes faith to get into heaven. If you don’t have faith, you won’t be allowed in the door.

B. Those Who Believe Enter the Rest

Of course, the positive side of that message is that those who do believe will in fact enter God’s rest.

Now, how much do you have to believe? The answer is, and only can be, “enough.” There is no way to measure levels of faith. There is no way to say “You need two grams of faith; a single gram is not quite enough.” You have all heard me quote the Puritan: “A weak faith takes hold of a strong Christ.” If you trust in Jesus even a little bit, He will save you to the uttermost.

Do you want to rest at His feet and learn from Him? Then trust Him. Put your faith in Him.

II. Explanation, vv. 3b-10

Well, we will return next week and discourse at greater length about faith and fear. But I want to move quickly to the pile of premises, what you could almost call the logjam of premises, that sit here in this passage. Allow me to pull out what seem to be the three big ones, and then we will talk about the lesser premises and deductions from the major premises, and how they all relate to our faith in Christ and entry into His rest.

¹ [Symbolic Logic \(gutenberg.org\)](http://Symbolic Logic (gutenberg.org))

A. Psalm 95:11 says those who anger God are excluded from His rest, v. 3b

The first premise the author brings forward in our text this morning is that Psalm 95:11 says that those who anger God are excluded from His rest. Do what He hates, and you will not enter His rest. We noted this already: God is allowed to make big decisions when He's angry. One of the big decisions He makes is to exclude from His rest those who anger Him by refusing to learn His ways. As we saw two weeks ago, Jesus says that you will find rest for your soul when you take His yoke and learn from Him. Christian discipleship means learning from Jesus. Those who do not learn His ways make Him angry and therefore do not find rest for their souls.

B. Gen. 2:2 says that God has rested since the beginning of the 7th day, vv. 3c-4

This rest of God is an ongoing reality; Genesis 2 informs us that after six days of creating, God rested the seventh day. But it never says that He stopped resting. It does not mention an evening on the seventh day. And therefore, God's rest has been ongoing since the foundation of the world. His rest is not something new; it is something old, as old as creation itself.

In other words, when the writer urges you to strive to enter God's rest, he is not talking about some newfangled idea. It is an old idea, an idea that is mere hours younger than the human race.

So those are the first two premises: God excludes those who anger Him from His rest, and His rest is something He has been doing since the seventh day of the world's existence.

C. Psalm 95:11 says that some will not enter God's rest, v. 5

That said, the writer brings forward a third premise: Some will not enter God's rest.

Now, that's an interesting thing to insist on after he's already said it several times. What is the point of saying it again?

I would suggest that first, we need to be slammed out of our complacency. I heard this week of a woman who said, "If Hell exists, I'm sure it's empty."

She was willing to acknowledge a bare possibility that Hell is a real place. But what she gave with one hand she took away with the other. The Hebrew writer is not interested in those sorts of semantic games. He already asserted that anyone who makes God angry is excluded. Rather than saying, "But aha! No one has ever made God angry, so no one is excluded from His rest!", he says "Some did make God angry and did get excluded from His rest. They have no excuse. They are out."

The premises are clear. Some people actually have angered God enough to be excluded from His rest, which is an ongoing period of refreshment after the work of creation.

D. Therefore

What conclusions should we take from these three premises — all of which, by the way, are directly from the pages of Scripture? Thankfully nothing so anodyne as "Shakespeare is clever." When you do the work to understand a symbolic logic problem, the result is somewhat profitable — a better understanding of symbolic logic. But when you do the work to understand Biblical premises, the result is "profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Ti 4:8). In particular, it holds out the promise of rest, because to

understand God's word is to become familiar with the ways of Christ, and to do that is to learn to rest.

Well, thankfully, not only are the conclusions not nearly so anodyne as "Shakespeare is clever," they are also drawn for us by the writer himself. He draws four implications from the three texts he has quoted.

1. Some will enter God's rest, v. 6a

The first is the converse of the proposition "Some will not enter God's rest." That converse, of course, is that some *will* enter God's rest. Yes, the wilderness generation failed to enter, but their very failure is a positive sign. "Some will not enter" implies "some will enter."

2. The wilderness generation failed to enter because of disobedience, v. 6b

Who? Well, naturally, the ones who didn't do what the excluded ones did. If you want to enter God's rest, don't act like the wilderness generation. They heard the good news all right, but they disobeyed it. God promised "I will give you the land." They did not accept that promise; they disobeyed it by failing to enter the land and possess it when God said "Go into the land and possess it."

They didn't fail to enter because God failed to keep His promise. They didn't fail to enter through sheer bad luck. They didn't fail to enter because this is how God treats Hebrews. No. They failed to enter by their own lack of gumption to believe God's promises, listen to the faithful spies, and go up into the land. In the same way, you can refuse to enter God's rest. You can lack the faith to believe the report of God's servants, who say "Yes, you can have Heaven!" You can lack the gumption to do the work of the Christian life, the gumption to walk up the path to Heaven. Many fail to enter because they are unwilling to forgive, to let go of their bitterness at God or a fellow human being. Others fail to enter because they are unwilling to give up their sinful pleasures, or their respectability in the world's eyes, or a thousand other things that the world, the flesh, and the devil alike hold out before us and attempt to tempt us with.

3. Today is the time to enter God's rest, v. 7

But believe, and obey. Trust and obey, for there's no other way to enter the promised land. When should you do this? Today. That's the answer. Psalm 95 says "today," Hebrews repeats "today," and I'm proclaiming to you now — today's the day. Don't say to yourself, "I'll settle this with God later." On the day I'm writing this sermon, I have on my to-do list two things to do later, two things I'm putting off till an opportune time. One is to discuss with my wife a possible investment opportunity that my brothers have invited me to join. Another is to research a ministry opportunity with world missions that I was invited to participate in last Sunday. Those are two things that I need to do, but don't need to do today. But deciding to close with Christ — that is something you need to do today. If you will hear His voice, do so today. If you decide not to listen today, then you have decided not to listen at all.

E. Settling in Canaan was not the full promised rest, v. 8

The Hebrew writer brings forward one additional premise in his heap of contentions. This is not a direct quote so much as an obvious statement about a whole book, the book of Joshua. Joshua

describes Israel's conquest of the land. The statement is this: Joshua did not give them rest, because Psalm 95 continues to challenge God's people to enter His rest. If they already had rest, it would be absurd to call them to enter it.

Now, last week we looked at a text in Deuteronomy that spoke explicitly of God giving rest to His people after they entered the land, and how they ought to use that rest to worship Him. So far so good. But settling in Canaan was not the full promised rest. It was rest, but there is a greater rest to be had.

F. Therefore, the call to enter Christ's rest still stands

And that's why Ps. 95 calls us to that greater rest. The promise of rest still stands; it did not end when Israel was kicked out of the land, for it was not dependent on the gift of Canaan. It is God's own post-creation rest to which we are called, a rest that cannot be changed or broken by earthly unrest. But the writer takes it even farther. He speaks not just of God's post-creation rest, but of Jesus' post-redemption rest.

1. Christ has entered rest after saving the world just as God did after creating it, v. 10

That's why v. 10 suddenly lapses into the singular: "For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (Heb 4:10 NAS). I would capitalize the second "His" too, because we should understand the verse to be talking about Jesus. "For the one who has entered His rest has Himself also rested from His works, as God did from His."

Why do I say that this verse is primarily talking about Jesus? Because it is absurd to relate this verse primarily to justification, to say that once you get saved you take a sabbath from your wicked, non-Christian works just as God rested from His great work of creation.

I repeat: it is absurd to have the Hebrew writer compare the new Christian's cessation from sin to God's cessation from the work of creation. The two works are utterly incommensurable. Rather, the only work great enough to be worthy of comparing with God's work of creation is Christ's work of redemption. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2Co 4:6 ESV). Do you notice what Paul does there? He compares the work of creation to the work of redemption. God's opening words, "Let there be light," are directly comparable to God's opening action in saving us, which was to shine the light of Jesus' face in our hearts. In the face of Christ we see and know the glory of God. "Let there be light," in other words, is not merely God's opening statement on the first day of creation; it is also His opening statement on the first day of your new creation and mine.

It is true that the man who enters God's rest by taking Christ's yoke begins to rest from his labors to be justified by works in God's sight. But the primary reference in this text is not to justification, but to Christ's vindication. He entered into Heaven to sit at the right hand of God, the same scene conjured in Hebrews 1: "When He brings the firstborn into the world, He says 'Let all the angels of God worship Him.'"

When that happened, when Jesus returned to Heaven vindicated and glorious after His resurrection, He entered into His rest. The rest of Jesus after saving the world is directly comparable to the rest of God after creating it.

Now, here's the good part — the overwhelming part: We are invited to enter *that* rest. That very much includes justification and resting from our own works. But it is bigger than justification. It is coming to Jesus, taking His yoke, and learning from Him to be meek and lowly of heart. That's how you find rest for your soul.

Jesus no longer has to save the world. He does not have to suffer all of that misery again; praise God! He is done; the work is finished. He already said so on the cross. He has entered His rest, just as God entered His.

2. We rest with Him in two ways

How do we rest with Him in this rest?

a) Through obedience and worship

Well, to repeat what I said last week, Jesus put it as clearly as possible: take His yoke of commands, carry His burden of obedience to His commands, and learn from Him to be meek and lowly of heart. Ps. 95 fills in the rest of the picture: You learn from Him by listening to His voice in corporate worship. When you have rest, you worship. When you worship, you learn to enter His rest.

So how do you enter Christ's rest? Through obedience and worship. That's how you will find rest for your souls. Obedience and worship are the way to enjoy God's rest. As we said last week, idleness is not the way. If you have no yoke and no burden, you are not finding the rest of Christ that's spoken about in this chapter.

b) Through the Sabbath day

So rest with Jesus. The day on which you supremely hear His voice with a soft heart is the Sabbath day, when He preaches to you through His chosen servants. It is the day of rest — God's day of rest. What was called "rest day" in Genesis is called "Lord's Day" in Revelation. Coincidence? Of course not! "Rest day" has become "Lord's Day" because it is the day on earth when we get to experience God's heavenly rest. The one who stops his daily round and comes to worship enters Jesus' rest.

III. Application: Strive to Enter the Rest rather than following Israel's Example, v. 11

So that's the point here: Strive to enter the rest, rather than following Israel's example and rejecting the rest because the promised land does not appear to be worth it. Brothers and sisters, believe that Heaven is worth it. Don't let the world, flesh, and devil make you stop believing.

How do you enter the rest? By believing. By worshiping. By listening to Jesus and obeying Him with a soft heart. That's how you enter the rest. It takes diligence and striving. You have to work to rest. There is no passive resting, no "well, rest just happened to me when I quit trying." The writer's message is emphatically not "Let go and let God." It is "Hang on to God, and He will bring you into His rest." Amen.