

**Hebrews 3:12-4:13**  
**(Psalm 95:1-11)**  
**“Strive to Enter That Rest”**

**Introduction**

These verses may well sound strange to our ears, because we do not argue a point in quite this way. But they would not have sounded odd to their original readers, because this was a typical mode of rhetorical argument in the first century, and if we read it carefully, we will see certain things that unite the passage and serve as interpretive clues. We see the repetition of the word “today” and the repetition of the idea of “rest” and the desirability of entering into the rest that God offers his people. So obviously, we need to understand what kind of rest the author has in mind, what exactly he is commending here, and how his repeated use of the word “today” is intended to show the urgency of our understanding, believing and obeying this exhortation.

We begin with the final verses that we looked at together last week,

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 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.... As it is said, ‘Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’ (3:12-15).

Clearly, the repetition of the word “today” is meant to show that the issue is urgent, that we are in danger of the disobedience that comes from unbelief, and of falling away from the living God and the salvation that he offers. So, then, the “rest” that the author continually refers to must have to do with the salvation that he is exhorting us to receive. The question, then, is whether he is referring to the present experience of the believer, the peace that Jesus promised and that the world in its rebellion against God cannot know (John 14:27), the peace that the apostle Paul said surpasses human understanding (Philippians 4:7), or whether he is referring to the future hope of entering at death into God’s eternal rest.

In order to understand what he is telling us, we need to look more closely at the four expressions or pictures of that rest that the author uses in these verses: he speaks first of the rest promised to those delivered from Egyptian bondage and represented by entering into the Promised Land. He then goes back through time to the Genesis account of creation and refers to the seventh day of God’s rest from his creation. And then he brings in the idea of the Sabbath that flowed from both of those two biblical pictures. In the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), the reason for Sabbath observance was to rest as God rested from his six creative days. In the second giving of the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 6), the reason given for Sabbath observance was God’s deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt. And he points to the future, our eternal rest when God makes all things new.

So the principle of resting and reflecting on God's having saved us by his grace, is at the heart of what we should observe and celebrate on this and every Lord's Day, which we celebrate on the first day of the week rather than the seventh, because the first day was the day of Jesus' resurrection, as well as of his resurrection appearances, and of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church, so that even in the first century Christians began to gather together on the first rather than the seventh day, observing it as the "Christian Sabbath."

This morning, we will take all four ideas found in our text – of God's rest from his work of creation, of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, of the Sabbath day of rest, and of our eternal rest when at last the Lord makes all things new – in order to try to understand the meaning of the "rest" to which we are being called in our text.

## Body

### 1. What do we learn from the various pictures of the promised "rest" ?

*God's "rest" from his work of creation.* This is the first and defining picture of the meaning of the Sabbath rest: it mirrors the "rest" of God after he created the heavens and the earth. Does this mean that God created the universe and has been utterly inactive since? No, of course not. What it means is that God rested from his unique creative work and calls us, who spend our labors imitating his creative work, to rest as well one day out of seven. However, it means more.

*Israel's "rest" from its wilderness deliverance.* So, too, the author of Hebrews tells us that Israel's deliverance from bondage and slavery in Egypt was a picture of our deliverance by grace from bondage to sin and death; that the wilderness wanderings of God's people were not God's plan for them, but were rather the result of their refusal to trust that the same God who delivered them out of Egypt could lead them into the fullness of his promises and give them the land of promise and rest. They turned an eleven-day trip into a forty-year journey.

*The future eternal "rest" promised to God's people.* As the author of Hebrews points out, God's Sabbath is not merely a twenty-four hour day but is rather his eternal existence, which he invites us to enter and share through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, our Sabbath rest is always to be a reminder and a foretaste of eternity with God, sharing the joy and delight of his presence and his love forever. The land of promise was also a picture of eternal life – life that we enter fully at death, but that is offered to us even now if we receive the sealing of the Spirit, a down payment and foretaste of the glory yet to be revealed.

*Our weekly “rest” from our daily work.* When we worship on the Lord’s day, we are called to enter into the land of promise, the place that God has given us and into which he calls us to enter and enjoy the wonder and glory of his presence. When we are called to worship, we are called to cross over and enter into the glory of his presence. This should come home to us in power when we gather week by week on the Lord’s Day. How sad if the day merely becomes for us a day of work around the house or sport or trivial pursuits that do not draw our hearts toward all that God offers us of his presence and power and salvation.

## **2. How might we miss the “rest” promised to God’s people?**

*Through unbelief.* In the wilderness, Israel interpreted the present in terms of the past rather than in terms of the future. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they were very selective in what they remembered and in what they anticipated: rather than remembering the Exodus deliverance from bondage, they remembered their food and their beds in Egypt. Rather than anticipating all that the Lord had promised in a land “flowing with milk and honey,” they anticipated the giants they would have to fight in order to claim their possessions.

*Through disobedience.* They refused to do those things that would encourage and build their trust in God, always insisting on what could be seen and felt and tasted, rather than resting in and enjoying those opportunities to step out in faith and see God fulfill his promises.

*Through hardening of our heart.* There is always a movement away from God that is seen in Israel’s history and described by the apostle Paul in Romans 1:24, 26 & 28, that ends in a heart that is hardened to God.

## **3. How do we enter the promised “rest” of God’s people?**

*Through Spirit-empowered endeavor: “Strive to enter” (411).* This may at first seem strange, because we are seeking rest, yet we are called here to strive for that rest promised by God. The antidote to a hardened heart is worship that is “in spirit and in truth.” It is actively, intentionally, energetically giving oneself to the Lord in worship. Until we do that, we cannot begin to know him deeply. It’s like someone who holds back in love: until you give yourself actively and intentionally, until you are willing to lose some measure of control and even risk appearing foolish, you cannot know the height and depth and breadth of love. You press in, ask, seek, knock, until the door to intimacy and joy is opened. On the far side of the door is the rest you have been seeking all your life.

*Through Spirit-enlightened submission to God's Word (4:12).* The Spirit of God renews our minds through the Word of God, which calls us to trust, not the values of our culture or its ways, but in the unchangeable and unchanging Word of God. That Word is alive and active, piercing, searching revealing our motives and thoughts and desires. Until you begin to be immersed in God's Word, not only studying, but memorizing it, meditating upon it, feeding on it, you will not have your mind renewed and refreshed as God wants to renew and refresh you.

*Through Spirit-enabled surrender to the presence of the living God (4:13).* The hearing of God's Word is a call to glad obedience, as we recognize that God's Word is truth and life, and that our whole happiness rests on our trusting and obeying his Word, seizing upon his promises, and making it our highest ambition to enter his eternal rest through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

So, then, where do we start? How do we "strive to enter that rest"?

*Look back* upon the finished work of creation and redemption. Life flows forth from the first explosion of creation when God said, "Let it begin!" So too, new life flows forth from the finished work of Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit upon his people, transforming the old and beginning even now the final act in the lives of those who are his.

*Look ahead* to the promised rest in store for God's people when at last he consummates history, recreates the cosmos in the new heavens and new earth, raises up his people from death, wipes away our tears and says, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

*Live today* in the rest, the deep shalom, of your union with Christ, where all has been accomplished, all secured, all made sure and certain, and where "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

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