


# **“God’s Rest”**

**HEBREWS 3:7-4:11**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1132)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
September 18, 2011**



Several years ago, researchers contacted more than a thousand people in the U.S. and asked them what they looked forward to more than anything. We might assume that people would be looking forward to getting a large bonus, or maybe they would be looking forward to going on some kind of exotic vacation. However, more than anything, Americans are looking forward to getting a good night’s sleep. Seven out of ten adults said that they look forward “a lot” to sleeping well. And yet when we start looking into the value of rest, we find that sleep problems are estimated to be one of the leading health concerns in the world around us. Various studies tell us that we now sleep, on average, roughly 6.9 hours every night, almost an hour less than we did just a few decades ago. More than half of all American adults say that they have problems sleeping at least a few nights each week. Almost 1/3 have trouble sleeping every night. Roughly 20% of all auto crashes are sleep-related, and between 30-40% of all heavy truck accidents are sleep-related. Proper rest, therefore, is very important, and yet it is also quite elusive.

Well, as we think about rest in terms of what the Bible has to say, we realize that God also puts a priority on rest. We remember that God created the world and everything in it in only six days, but then He rested on the seventh. And then, under the Law of Moses, God used His rest as an example as He commanded the people to take a day off once every seven days. Certainly we are no longer under the Law of Moses today (as it was given only to the Jews and was abolished at the death of Jesus), but we still see that God values taking a break from time to time. As my dad sometimes says by way of reminder, “The human body was designed to get more done in six days than it could get done in seven.” In other words, if we take some time to unwind, we can actually accomplish more in six days than if we worked nonstop for seven days. Over and over again, therefore, the Bible teaches not only that we are to work hard, but it also teaches us to rest.

When I first started working on this lesson several weeks ago, I actually started by going to the Bible looking for a passage on heaven. As I got into it, I realized that I have preached on heaven quite a bit through the years, so I kept looking for an encouraging passage—something that would encourage us to keep on hanging on until we get to our final reward, something that would encourage us as a congregation, and I kept coming back to a passage in the New Testament book of Hebrews, a passage about the ultimate rest that remains for the people of God. I am referring to a passage in Hebrews 3-4. In this passage, the word **“rest”** is used a number of times, and it’s interesting, because the Greek word behind it is the root of our English word “pause” (*katapausis*).

By way of review, the book of Hebrews was written to Christians from a Jewish background who were being tempted to go back to their Jewish faith. The theme of the book, then, is: Jesus is Better! We find in the first two chapters that Jesus is better than the Old Testament prophets and that Jesus is better than the angels. Well, this would have been kind of interesting, but the author of Hebrews really stepped on some toes in the opening verses of Chapter 3 as he explains that Jesus is also better than Moses. Moses was a big deal, and to say that Jesus is better than Moses would have been a really big deal. And so at this point, the author was bringing the original readers of this letter to the point of making a decision. Since Jesus is so much better, what are you going to do about it? Will you stick with Jesus, or will you go back and make the same mistakes that your ancestors made? Will you push forward, or will you fall back? Will you press forward to the rest that has been promised to us, or will you miss it like those people in the Old Testament missed the Promised Land? In Hebrews 3:5-6, the author says that Moses was faithful to God as a servant, but that Jesus was faithful as a Son. With that, let's pick up with Hebrews 3:7, and let us then continue through Chapter 4:11. Starting with Hebrews 3:7,

***<sup>7</sup> Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, <sup>8</sup> DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS, <sup>9</sup> WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED Me BY TESTING Me, AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS. <sup>10</sup> "THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION, AND SAID, 'THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART, AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS'; <sup>11</sup> AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, 'THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.'" <sup>12</sup> Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup> For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, <sup>15</sup> while it is said, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME." <sup>16</sup> For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? <sup>17</sup> And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup> And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? <sup>19</sup> So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. <sup>2</sup> For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. <sup>3</sup> For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, "AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST," although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. <sup>4</sup> For He has said somewhere concerning the seventh day: "AND GOD RESTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY FROM ALL HIS WORKS"; <sup>5</sup> and again in this passage, "THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST." <sup>6</sup> Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience, <sup>7</sup> He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS." <sup>8</sup> For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. <sup>9</sup> So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. <sup>10</sup> For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. <sup>11</sup> Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.***

As we look back and as we let all of this sink in a little bit, I would like for us to consider 1.) The fact that we can miss the wonderful rest that God has promised, and 2.) The fact that we need to focus and work hard to make it.

I. **But as we look back at this paragraph, let us consider, first of all, the fact that WE CAN FALL SHORT AND COMPLETELY MISS THE AMAZING REST THAT GOD HAS PROMISED.**

And I certainly hate to be negative about such a positive subject, but when we look at the illustration that the author provides, it is truly a tragic and heart-breaking situation. We think back to the situation with the Israelites as slaves in the land of Egypt. They were abused, they were in bondage, it was absolutely horrible, but the Bible teaches that God heard their cries for help, and God intervened. In fact, God promised a rest. In Exodus 3:7-8, the Lord said to Moses, ***“I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey....”*** That was God’s promise. God basically said: I will give you this beautiful land, I will give you homes you did not build, and I will give you vineyards you did not plant. However, as the people left the land of Egypt, they whined, and complained, and moaned, and groaned, and they failed to live up to their end of the covenant. So, that journey that should have taken maybe a week or two turned into what was basically a forty-year long funeral procession! All of those twenty-years old and older died in the wilderness with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who had faith in God’s promise of a land of rest. The people, therefore, died out at a rate of roughly 90 every day for 40 years. Can you imagine having 90 funerals every day? But that was the consequence of missing the rest that God had promised. Instead of rest, God condemned them to a life of wandering, walking and wandering for days, and months, and years, until they died in the wilderness.

Well, with that in mind, the author of Hebrews brings that ancient example into the present and uses it as a warning that we also can miss God’s rest. We can miss the eternal pause that God has promised. As we begin, therefore, let us look at what they did, and let us learn, so that we can make it to God’s rest.

First of all, as we look at their mistakes, we realize (in Chapter 3:8) that the people had ***“hardened their hearts,”*** they had ***“provoked”*** God in the wilderness, which led to a lifestyle of disobedience. I don’t know if the author is nailing down one particular incident or more of a lifestyle of rebellion, but Paul gives us more detail in 1 Corinthians 10, where he explains that the people craved evil things; that is, they wanted bad stuff. They looked at the world around them, and they wanted what other people had. Does this ever happen today? They started worshiping idols; that is, they put things ahead of God. Does this ever happen today? They were involved in sexual sin; that is, they were driven by lust, and passion, and desire, and those passions caused them to violate God’s law. Does this ever happen today? They tested God. They grumbled, and whined, and moaned, and complained. I don’t know about you, but it seems to me that all of these things are still a danger for us today. They had hardened their hearts to the word of God, which led to disobedience.

And going back to Hebrews 3:10, we also find that the people missed God’s rest because they were ignorant. God said, ***“They always go astray in their heart, and they did not know My ways.”*** In other words, the people did not know what God wanted them to do; and that was not God’s fault, but the people were not interested in listening. They had no appetite for spiritual things. As we might say today, the people did not study their Bibles during the week. They failed to learn, and so their hearts became hard.

In verse 12, we find something else that might keep us from entering God's eternal rest, and that is, an evil, unbelieving heart. Of all people, the Israelites had every reason to believe in God. They started as slaves, but then they saw the Ten Plagues, they had God literally leading them with a pillar of cloud by day and with the pillar of fire by night, and then they had the crossing of the Red Sea, and then the manna and quail, and then the water from the rock. On top of all of that, the Bible tells us that their clothing did not wear out for 40 years. Can you imagine that—not worrying about new clothing for more than 40 years? They had all of this evidence, and yet they failed to believe.

The writer of Hebrews, then, is pointing out a parallel—just as the Israelites failed to enter God's rest because of their hardened hearts, because of ignorance, and because of unbelief, in the same way Christians can also miss God's eternal rest for the same reasons. And so this passage about our ultimate home in heaven comes across really as more of a warning. We want to make it into God's rest, but in order to make it we need to be aware of some danger. So, this has been more of the negative, but now let's move on to the more positive side of it as we consider the fact...

## II. ...that when it comes to God's eternal rest, **WE ARE TO MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO GET IT.**

And again, in some sense, we can rest in Christ here in this life—our sins are forgiven, we can take our concerns to God in prayer—but in another sense, all of this is just a taste of the great pause that is still to come. The writer illustrates in Hebrews 4:8-9, ***“For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.”*** In other words, just as the people finally made it to Canaan and yet still had another rest coming in the future, so also, we still have another and more complete rest still waiting for us out there on the horizon. And so that we do not miss it, there are not only certain things we need to avoid (as we have already discussed), but there are some positive things we need to do. There are some actions we need to take.

And as we look back over this passage, one of the first very basic ways to make sure we make it into God's rest is to make sure we listen to God with an open heart. And again, let's think about the Israelites. They had the promise that they were headed to a land flowing with milk and honey, and yet they failed to let that promise take hold in their hearts. That's what they did wrong. But looking at it from the positive side, what should they have done? Well, obviously, they should have listened to the promise, and they should have believed it. They should have allowed that promise to change the way they behaved. Notice Hebrews 4:2, ***“For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.”*** So again, that's what they did wrong. But on the positive side, what the author of Hebrews is saying is: You heard some good news just as they did; now, you need to unite what you have heard with your faith in that word. In other words, we need to have faith in God's promise. And if we believe that a great pause is coming, we need to live like we believe it. We need to hear the truth and make it our own—not something that other people believe, but something that we believe.

And here's the danger: If we hear a warning or a promise from God's word and just kind of shrug it off, the longer we shrug it off the harder it gets to take God's word seriously, and the longer we fail to take it seriously, the greater the danger that we will miss the promise completely, just like the Israelites in the wilderness. Every time we say to ourselves, “Well, I know I shouldn't be doing this,” and we do it anyway, our hearts get ever so slightly more calloused. It's almost as if a little layer of skin grows over the heart, like we might get a callous on our hands after doing some yard work. The callous is tough and has no feeling. That's what happens to our hearts when we put off doing what we know we need to do. That's why we see the emphasis on

obeying God **"today"** (back in 3:15), **"Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me."** To avoid provoking God, then, we must accept His word with humble and open hearts.

There is another positive lesson we can learn from this passage, and that is: If we hope to make it into God's eternal rest, then we need to encourage each other every single day. The temptation to miss God's rest is so constant and dangerous that we absolutely positively need to help each other fight it off. Making it to God's rest is a group effort; in fact, our faith depends on it. And so when we see a brother or sister start to drift or slip, we need to step in and say something. Do we believe this? I don't mean we need to say something to someone else ("Hey, we haven't seen so-and-so for a while"), but I mean we need to say something to them—with love, out of concern—make a call, stop by for a visit, send a message, drop a note in the mail. As the author of Hebrews says in 3:13, we are to **"...encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."** I realize that in our culture we have been trained to keep our noses out of other people's business, but the Bible teaches that we must encourage each other daily, that we need to be concerned about each other to the point of actually saying something. Can you think about a fellow Christian you haven't seen for awhile? What about today? Wouldn't today be a good time to stop by for a visit after lunch? If we put it off, remember: That skin grows over our hearts, and we become calloused to doing what we know we need to do. As the Bible says, we need to do it, **"...so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."** That's not just for them, but that's also for us. If I do not encourage someone, then my faith gets weaker, and I get hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

For just a moment, think about how that journey from Egypt to Canaan could have been different if the people had encouraged each other as they should have done. One guy says, "Ugh, we don't have any good food out here," and someone else says, "I know, but at least we're out of Egypt," and someone else says, "Yeah, you're right, but that land flowing with milk and honey is just a week or two away," and someone else says, "Yes, but God is good, and He will take care of us." Of course, the people didn't do that, but they joined in on the whining, and God got sick of it. Let us not make that same mistake on the way to heaven. As King Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 4:10,12, **"...woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.... And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart."** When we have the support of our Christian family, it is much more difficult for Satan to get us off the path.

There is something else we need to keep in mind on our way to God's rest, and that is, we must strive to enter. And at first maybe this sounds like a contradiction; at minimum, it is a little bit ironic, that we must work hard in order to rest. Have you ever had one of those restless nights, and have you ever tried to force yourself to sleep? That's kind of hard to do, isn't it! We can't just squeeze our eyes tightly shut and grit our teeth and think that we can force ourselves to go to sleep. But then on the other hand, we also know that getting a lot done and having a productive day and working until we're tired can sometimes work wonders.

I'm thinking about the passage that was read for our Scripture reading this morning, the passage where Jesus said, **"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."** In the NASB, there is a footnote on verse 28 that says, **"Come to Me, all who work to exhaustion...."** Very interesting! If you have worked yourself to the point of spiritual exhaustion, come to Jesus, and you will find rest. It is also interesting that Jesus told us to take His yoke upon us so that we would find rest. A yoke was that wooden bar that was worn by oxen so that they could plow as a team. Jesus, then, is making an offer: If we come to Him, He doesn't just take all of our troubles away, but He will share the burden, and we will find rest for our souls. In Hebrews 4:11, therefore, the author says, **"Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest."** Let us strive and be diligent so that we make it into that eternal rest.

**Conclusion:**

I know that a lot of us here this morning are tired. I know that some are just drained. I know that some have carried some serious burdens for a long time. For those who may be wondering how long you can hold on, I would simply offer the encouragement that we don't need to hold on forever. Rest is coming. And until we get there, we do need to keep on holding on. Don't give up! It'll all be worth it when we get there. Here in this life, we have our sins forgiven, and what a blessing that is, what a weight has been lifted, but we can look forward to an even greater rest, a permanent rest. Like students look forward to summer break, like runners look forward to the finish line, and like we may go to work and look forward to the weekend, there is a break coming. It's not here yet, so don't give up, but hang on just a little while longer. As the author of Hebrews has said, "**...there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God**" (Hebrews 4:9).

The Bible teaches that Jesus took our sins to the cross. We accept what He did for us when we repent of our sins and allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, please let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)