

“OUR HOPE: JESUS LEADS US ON”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 4:1-11

Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. ²For 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. ³For 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. ⁴For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works;” ⁵and again in this passage, “They shall not enter My rest.” ⁶Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷He 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.” ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. ⁹There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. ¹⁰For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. ¹¹Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience.

Put yourself in the boots of those first-century Hebrew converts. Think of the stress and strain under which they lived. The persecution. Danger. Insecurity. Fear of imprisonment. The ever-present concern for loss of employment and property. Reflect upon the existential anxiety of those dear people living in a society wholly hostile to them, and you begin to understand how appealing a promise of rest would have been.

The practical thrust of our author’s message to them, and us, is that Jesus is immeasurably superior to any other road to God men might try to take. He is supremely and uniquely great. Therefore, it is sheer folly to not trust and obey Him fully.

To illustrate his point, he takes a brief excursion down memory lane (3:7-4:11). He asks his fellow Christians to reflect upon the implications of one of the saddest pages in Hebrew history. He reminds them of the children of Israel whom God freed from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Through a series of majestic and miraculous happenings, God guided them safely to the border of Canaan. Then, instead of claiming their inheritance, they turned back from the land of milk and honey to eke out an existence, and finally die, in the desert.

But, he says with great enthusiasm, the rest God prepared for the Israelites (and which they missed because of disobedience and disbelief) is now available to Christians. You can share the promised peace of God, if you do what they did not do: trust and obey!

But the message of hope is accompanied by a word of warning. History, to the writer of Hebrews, is not limited to the past. History is His-story. The record of God's action in life. The unveiling of eternal laws and principles. So this brief excursion down memory lane was not a mere nod to nostalgia. It was something loaded with practical implications for his contemporaries. And they knew it! Those young Hebrew Christians were in exactly the same boat as had been the children of Israel.

What was true of those first-century Christians is true of us. We, too, live under tremendous pressures from an alien society. The thought-forms and value systems which besiege us are almost wholly unchristian. Nor are we immune to the tensions characteristic of our time. The complexities of life take their toll upon saved-sinners and unsaved sinners alike.

However, the primary reason for the restlessness plaguing many of God's people is not external, it is internal. The product of indecision, divided loyalties, an inability or unwillingness to choose between God and mammon. Between ourselves and Jesus Christ. That's why we are restless. So the message of hope is accompanied by a word of warning, couched in the language of stern love, but, nevertheless a warning! To Christians floundering on the rim of a spiritual desert,

saved, but not enjoying it, the writer of Hebrews extends the promise of rest, provided they trust and obey.

God’s Rest Promised--If

What are the major strands in his message of hope and warning? There are several. I limit myself to three, and from them draw a simple conclusion. First, God’s rest remains and is ready for those who receive it. Second, hearing about the Promised Land and actually living there are two different things. Third, peace with God and the peace of God are not the same thing. My conclusion? When it comes to the everyday business of being a practicing Christian, trusting has trying beat ten to three. Look at these major strands and see how I came to that conclusion --

1. God’s Rest Remains And Is Ready For Those Who Receive It.

The message is unequivocal and clear. *“Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any of you should seem to have come short of it”* (4:1). The promise of rest remains. It is unchanged. God’s rest is ready for those prepared to receive it and enjoy it.

That God takes pains to warn us against the danger of our denying ourselves His rest through disobedience or disbelief, is proof positive the promise of rest holds good today. Canaan Land did not exhaust God’s rest, our author argues. There is a counterpart for Christians. It is the promised land of abundant living. That land is open to all who trust and obey Jesus, just as the offer of Canaan was made to all Israel. *“We have had good news preached to us, just as they also . . .”* (4:2).

Nor is this an impersonal offer of peace. The gospel is no mimeographed notice stuck up on a post office bulletin board for any who may chance to see it. It is an intensely personal thing. It is written and addressed to each and all of us, regardless of our station or standing in life. God has gone to great pains to point out that, *“Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved”* (Rom.10:13).

The personal nature of God’s invitation to peace is expressed in a most interesting way: *“let us fear lest any of you should seem to have come short of it”* (4:1). There are two traditional interpretations of the little phrase: *“come short of it.”* The first one says God judges us, finds us wanting, and deprives us of His peace. The second says by distrust and disobedience, we put ourselves in a frame of mind which denies us God’s loving offer of peace, because we feel unworthy. There is a measure of truth in both.

One writer, however, suggests a third possibility which, to my way of thinking, fits the context better. Christians should not be afraid of having arrived on the scene too late to enjoy God’s peace.¹ To those AD folks who were tempted to think the good old BC days were gone forever and God was not blessing in the present as He had in the past, the writer of Hebrews issues a poignant and personal word of hope. This is still God’s today. There is still a Canaan for you as rich as the promised land was for Israel. God is still as good and generous today as He ever was!

God’s rest remains. It is ready for those who will receive it. Therefore, *“fear,”* lest you miss it. There is a Godly fear that is good. It makes us run to God, not from Him. We are not to fear in the sense of being gripped by a slavish dread which immobilizes us, and sends us scurrying for cover. Rather, we are to fear in the sense of being motivated by a driving desire to possess a priceless treasure-- the peace of God -- which, if missed or lost, leaves us with a feeling of indescribable regret. God’s rest remains and is ready for those who receive it.

2. Hearing About The Promised Land And Actually Living There Are Two Different

Things. Notice what it was they did not believe: *“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”* (4:2). Think of that! They rejected the good news of a good report about a good land. And, incredible as it seems, chose rather to believe bad news of a bad report about a bad land.

They were impossibility thinkers. Grievance collectors. Fear feeders. People who went around

feeding their fear instead of their faith. As a result, they not only disturbed their peace, but destroyed any possibility of their entering into peace.

To be fair, we must admit this good news of a good report about a good land was the minority opinion. But it happened to be the right opinion! Because they failed to mix what they heard with the kind of faith which issues in action, the good news did them no good. As a matter of fact, it actually harmed them because it became one more level of insulation against the sound of God's voice as He tried to lead them,

There are many kinds of hearing. Careless hearing. Critical hearing. Cynical hearing. If these persist long enough, they produce calloused hearing. One catches the sound of what is being said, but does not grasp its meaning. To really hear what is said, one must understand and act on it.

The reason the message God gave the Israelites did them no good was because they did not hear it. They did not understand and act on it. They did not mix God's promise with trust in God's power to keep His promise, which would have made the promise effective for them. In other words, they were unprofitable hearers.

I am afraid that's a problem with many of us. Someone said it takes two things to make an effective sermon. A prepared preacher and a prepared people. In a quarter of a century of preaching, there has been only one time when I stepped into a pulpit unprepared. It came shortly after I had begun my first pastorate. A dear soul, trying to help, gave me some bad advice. She heard I was spending upwards of thirty hours a week preparing sermons. She thought there were other things I could be doing with that time and said, “You know, pastor, if you just stand up in the power of the Spirit, God will fill your mouth.”

I tried it, and He did. With hot air! After that debacle I pledged myself to never again stand in a pulpit place unprepared. It's a pledge I've kept. For this particular study I'm spending upwards of sixty hours a week in preparation.

However, there have been many, many times when I sat in a pew unprepared. I was not a prepared listener. I was not ready, emotionally and spiritually, to hear what the Spirit of God would say to me through His spokesperson.

You may remember the story of a young preacher in his first pastorate. Everybody in town was anxious to hear if he could preach, and on his first Sunday the church was full. He delivered a tremendous sermon. With great expectations everyone returned the following Sunday to hear him again. To their amazement, he preached the same sermon, word for word. They thought it was an oversight due to inexperience, forgave him and came back the next week.

To their amazement, he preached the same sermon again, word for word. This time the deacons visited him. “Pastor,” they asked, “do you only have one sermon?” “No,” he smiled, “there are many messages I would like the congregation to hear.” “How is it you’ve preached the same sermon three times?” He answered, “Well, after preaching it one time I observed it had little effect upon you. After preaching it a second time I observed the same thing. I have decided to continue preaching this sermon until you start practicing it. Then I shall preach another!”

He had more nerve than I do! Yet, I empathize deeply. Many Christians are dying from information overkill. They run here and there, from this class to that, that group to this, seeking more information. To an interested bystander, many of them are not using the information they already have. I can’t help but believe their need is not for more information, but to hear, that is, understand and act upon what they already know, so it makes a difference in their lifestyle.

We may hear the sound of God’s voice -- although if we persist in careless, critical, cynical listening, our spiritual ear-drums may become so callous we can’t hear the sound of the still small voice -- but we do not hear the word God is trying to communicate. It’s a word of hope. Direction. Faith. Life. Joy. But because of dull hearing, it is not understood and acted upon. Thus, it does us no good.

Hearing without appropriation by faith is no more spiritual food, than a banquet table of goodies is physical food for a person who does not ingest it. There is only one kind of hearing with positive, saving, healing, helping value. That is faith-full hearing, whereby a man stakes his life on what God says and acts accordingly. We are all familiar with the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” Whether you are aware of it or not, your actions are indicating to everyone about you that you are staking (resting) your life on something. The question is: Will what you are resting on see you through? All the way through. Not to the end. Beyond the end! Through eternity?

Hearing about the Promised Land and actually living there are two different things. The good news proclaimed to the Israelites did them no good, because it did not meet with faith on their part (4:2). But you and I can claim our Canaan if we connect God’s promise of peace with faith-full action. “*For we who have believed [do] enter that rest . . .*” (4:3). Which brings us to the third strand of this silver cord of hope and warning --

3. Having Peace With God And Experiencing The Peace Of God Are Different.

Throughout the book of Hebrews the writer uses the word “rest” (or peace) in three different ways. One has to do with the past. A second is connected with the present. The third is related to the future.

The past rest is the rest of salvation. It is being liberated from the bondage of slavery to Egypt. The present rest is the rest of abundant living. It is entering into the Christian’s contemporary Canaan. The future rest is the Christian’s great hope, when in heaven we finally appropriate the full provisions of our faith.

When we speak of having peace with God, we are referring to our past and future peace. Romans 5:1 says, “*Therefore, having been justified by faith,*” that is, liberated from Egypt, saved from sin, “*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” This is past, or salvation rest.

Other passages speak of our future peace with God, in heaven, when we shall see Him as He is, know as we are known, and rest from our labors.

Peace with God comes to us everlastingly at the moment we receive the Lord Jesus as our Savior. It is a gift of God. Therefore, it cannot be lost! Our peace with God does not rest upon what we do for Him, but upon our appropriation of what He has done and will do for us. It is His gift. Something we can never lose. Peace with God is an absolutely sure thing for the person who, by faith, receives the gift of life eternal which God’s grace makes possible.

The peace of God is something else again. It refers to the present. It does not depend on God, but upon us and our willingness to enter into what the writer of Hebrews calls “Sabbath rest”.
“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (4:9).

We Can Have God’s Rest Now

The writer introduces the subject of sabbath rest with verse 6. “*For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works’; and again in this passage, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’*”

The phrase, “*for He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day*” does not mean the writer of Hebrews doesn’t know his Bible, and can’t find the text he is about to quote. It is a literary device to introduce a quotation from Genesis 1 and 2. More about that in a moment.

The Israelites did not receive this rest because of disobedience (4:6). The psalmist David, although already living in the promised land, considered the rest not yet possessed by his people. He sees it as yet a promise to them if they would not harden their hearts (4:7).

Joshua (not Jesus as translated in the King James), who had led the people into the promised land did not give them rest or otherwise God, “*would not have spoken of another day after that*” (4:8).

Our Hope: Jesus Leads Us On!

“There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (4:9). There is an interesting and important switch of words in the Greek New Testament which does not appear in English. The Greek word for “rest” in verse 8 when speaking of Joshua, “*if Joshua had given them rest,*” is “*katapausis*.” It refers to that rest which might be defined as “cessation of travel.” The end of wandering. A chance to put roots down. Joshua’s rest meant going into Canaan and battling for survival! In the deepest sense of the word, “*katapausis*” or Joshua’s rest, left something to be desired.

Not so with Jesus’ peace. When the writer speaks of God’s rest (4:9, 10), the peace of God, he switches from “*katapausis*” to “*sabbatismos*” meaning sabbath rest. The use of “*sabbatismos*” sent the minds of his readers back to the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2.

These people had often heard their rabbis refer to a curious and wonderful fact . It was a favorite theme of the ancient Jewish teachers to point out that “on the first six days of creation it is said that morning and evening came. That is to say, each day (or period of time) had an end and a beginning. But on the seventh day, the sabbath, the day of God’s rest, there is no mention of evening at all. The other days came to an end. The day of God’s rest had no ending! It was eternal and everlasting. The rest or peace of God has no evening. No close to its day. It is forever and ever.”⁴ And, it is “*sabbatismos*” or the perpetual sabbath peace of God, our Father wants His children to enjoy in Christ.

Survival is no longer in question. We are out of Egypt. As Christians we’ve been saved from our sin. We have peace with God. Now, if we will let Him, the Lord Jesus, who led us out of Egypt and gave us peace with God, will lead us on to experience the peace of God. A peace characterized by the security and satisfaction of a completed task.

When God finished His creative work, obviously He wasn’t fatigued. “*Sabbatismos*” or the peace of God, does not refer to physical rest. It speaks of something far more wonderful, the

satisfaction God had in His finished work for creation.

God examined what He had made and liked it. “That’s good,” He said. “That’s good!” Over and over we find the phrase, “*and God saw that it was good*” (Gen.1:4, 10, 12, 18,21,25,31). He was pleased with what He had done. There was no need for further creative activity. With satisfaction He was able to contemplate the beauty, grandeur and completeness, the finished character of His work.

How could God ever enter into perpetual sabbath rest when in foreknowledge He knew sin would soon come along and soil His perfect work? Well, remember, God is not locked up in time as you and I are. He does not see things happening as a series of unrelated events. Rather, He sees all as a simultaneous happening. Part of an eternal now!

In His foreknowledge, God saw sin coming to soil His creation. Simultaneously, via His foreknowledge, God also saw the problems created by sin being solved through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Before “*the foundation of the world*,” God saw His marred creation redeemed by “*the precious blood of Christ*” (1 Peter 1:18-21; Hebrews 4:3b).

Before the problem of sin arose God had the problem solved! Thus, while sin grieved God, it did not destroy the peace of God. In His foreknowledge, God saw Satan defeated, and man, the crown of His creation, redeemed through Christ. Excuse me, but hallelujah!

This is something to really get excited about! God invites us to enjoy the peace He Himself enjoys. Sabbath peace. Creation peace. The peace of God. That means the problems besetting us need never overwhelm us. God, in His foreknowledge, already sees the problems as solved. Solved in a way that everything works together for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28).

The Christian life is not careless, in the sense of being without care. Jesus said, “. . . *in the world you have tribulation . . .*” (Jn. 16:33). But the Christian life should be carefree, in the sense of

our not being imprisoned by the inevitable cares of life. *“In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer,”* Jesus said, *“I have overcome the world”* (KJV).

That’s why the sabbath peace of God has no ending. In the same way that He was satisfied with His completed work of creation, God was satisfied with Christ’s finished work of redemption. It works. It does the job. It meets the need.

When we put the finished work of Christ together with the foreknowledge of God, we have the peace of God. We have God, who exists outside of time, operating in time, to make real to us, what is already reality to Him. Thus, we are able to rest in the certainty of a completed task in which all things, even evil things, work together for good (Rom.8:28; Ge. 50:20).

I have a friend who had a particularly knotty personnel problem in his business. The normal way to handle it would be to dismiss the person involved. But, doing so would have created questions requiring answers which, if given, would bring pain and hurt to innocent people. I asked him how he planned to work out the problem. He said, “It’s already solved in the foreknowledge of God. The Lord knew about the problem long ago . He must have known I could handle it together with His help, or He would not have permitted it. He never allows us to be burdened with more than we can bear. In His foreknowledge God has the problem solved. My prayer is for patience to give God time to work it out in such a way that good will come to everyone involved.”

That man had peace! From time to time, he was agitated on the surface. But down deep inside he possessed the peace of God. The peace which came from knowing a problem he could not solve without hurting others, had already been solved by God in a way that hurt no one. That’s fantastic!

This is what God wants for you. If you grasp the wonder of it you will never be the same. You will never again be overwhelmed by insurmountable problems. Instead, like the ocean whose

surface is sometimes made rough by the restless winds which blow upon it, while far below the surface is an incredible calm, so, too, the surface winds of life may cause you to feel, even show, agitation at times. But, because of a faith-full appropriation of the peace of God rooted in His foreknowledge, there will be a deep calm at the center of your being which can only be described in the language of scripture, “*the peace of God, which passeth all understanding*” (Phil. 4:7 KJV).

You might think if people knew all your problems, they would wonder how you could possibly rest! From the human point of view, emotional chaos should reign. But you know something they don’t know. You know God, in His love, has a plan for you in which everything works together for good. In His foreknowledge every problem situation has already been solved creatively. Therefore, you have a peace the world cannot understand. Wow!

We come, then, to the conclusion drawn from the message of hope and warning. In terms of the everyday business of being a practicing Christian --

Trust In God Has Trying Beat Ten to Three.

A young Christian came to his pastor with a problem. “Why is it, pastor, that I continually fall prey to temptation? I don’t want to. I try so very hard not to. Every day I hope things will be different.”

The pastor smiled and said, “You’re giving the devil too many tools to work with.” “What on earth do you mean by that?” the young man asked. “Well,” said the pastor, extending all five fingers on both hands, “when you T-R-Y to be a good Christian,” he curled up three fingers, “you leave the devil a hand and two fingers to work with. When you H-O-P-E to be a good Christian,” the pastor curled up four fingers, “that leaves the devil a hand and one finger to work with. But when you T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M,” he said, curling up all five fingers on both hands, “you leave the devil no tools to work with.”

Let me repeat our conclusion. In terms of the everyday business of practicing Christianity --

T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M has any effort to **T-R-Y** it on your own, beat ten to three!

Does that mean there is nothing for us to do? Of course not. We must strive “*to enter that rest*” (4:11). Strive in the sense of maintaining eternal vigilance. The price of peace involves striving to maintain balance between satisfaction and struggle. Between the satisfaction of a finished work in which there is no striving because Jesus has paid it all, and the struggle to understand the full meaning of what Jesus has done so, you can apply it to your daily life.

Our human nature does not like to struggle. But as Christians we have been called to a pilgrimage. A lifelong trek of vital dependence upon Christ. As with the Israelites of old, the option is always present: we can go on, or we can go back. The challenge is to go on.

Our problem is how to maintain the spiritual glow. The best way I know is to keep a balance between God’s part and our part. Between being in His will and staying out of His way.

That’s tough. We all like to solve our own problems and feel self-sufficient. But in terms of the everyday business of practicing Christianity, T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M has any effort to T-R-Y, beat ten to three.

So, stop trying and start trusting! T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M. Trust in Jesus who is our hope. Jesus who not only leads us out of the Egypt of sin into the experience of peace with God, but, if we let Him, leads us on to experience the peace of God, today! And that’s what you want, isn’t it?

Notes

1. Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews, p. 31.