



ALL THE REST

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Illahee Jazz Band tryouts took place this week. That meant that Isaac had to be at school by 6:30 every morning. If all goes as planned, that means he'll have to be at school at 6:30 every morning for the rest of the year. Now I support the arts. I think music should be in the schools. I just think children's music will sound much better to parents who have had more sleep.

I still haven't adjusted my schedule to go to bed earlier to make up for the loss, so I have been dragging a bit this week. Then by yesterday, the one day I could have slept in a little bit, my internal clock woke me up at the same time anyway and I couldn't fall back asleep.

A little frustrating, but I will say that all this fatigue has made me especially tuned in to our topic for this morning, which is rest.

Could you use some rest? Do you feel like the pace of life is too much for you? Ask a few people, "How was your week?" and you'll hear statements like "It was so busy," or "It was really stressful." Most people I run into find life to be at least a little wearying, physically and emotionally.

But what about spiritually? How are we doing? Are we needing rest, and if so, what would that look like? As we touched on briefly last week, the author of Hebrews had some thoughts on the subject.

We caught that in a negative way last Sunday. The Israelites were standing on the brink of entering the promised land, then backed off because they didn't trust that God could help them win the fight it would take to go there. So God said, "you're not going to enter my rest. You will be rest-less – wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years."

They missed out on God's rest. Except for Joshua and Caleb, who did trust God and who wholeheartedly pursued him and – 45 years later – was still alive to enter the land and see God's promise fulfilled.

Entering Canaan was a literal, physical picture of reaching a place of rest. This morning, as we come to Hebrews 4, the author swings his spotlight around to us and talks about what rest means for the rest of us.

Hebrews 4:6 -13

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before:

*"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts."*

There's an old advertising theory that you have to hear something about three times before you remember it. That's why in so many commercials they repeat the toll free number over and over. Call 1-800-555-1212. That's 1-800-555-1212. Operators are standing by. 1-800-555-1212. For at least a few minutes after the ad is done, you have that number stuck in your head. So even if you didn't get the chance to write it down, you may make it to the phone and dial correctly.

Maybe that's a clue to who the author of Hebrews was. Maybe he worked in advertising. Because this is the third time in just a few verses that the author has quoted these lines from Psalm 95. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Once again, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." I can't think of another place in Scripture that uses the same quote like that three times in a row.

What that tells us is that this little line is central to what the writer wants to say. He wants these words to be burned into our brains.

We spent some time last week looking at the idea behind the word Today, how it gives us opportunity -- right now -- and a sense of urgency -- right now. We can still respond to God because it's still Today. And we talked about the end of that sentence, hardening our hearts. We discussed the evidence of closing ourselves off from God and what that looks like.

But we didn't say anything about the middle of the sentence "if you hear his voice." That's the piece we want to talk about this morning. It's very much tied into what the writer wants to say about rest. But let's read a little more before we dig in.

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.

Joshua and Caleb DID eventually take the people into the land of Canaan. The Israelites physically reached their destination. But the author of Hebrews says that just getting into the land wasn't really entering God's rest. Because if it was, then why would David write Psalm 95, warning the people not to harden their hearts again or they wouldn't enter God's rest? The people already lived in the land, so the word "rest" had to have a more spiritual connotation. And that's what the writer of Hebrews is interested in.

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

Then comes a passage that's familiar, but one that you rarely hear read within this larger context:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

That paragraph feels like a big shift in subjects. We were just talking about rest, but then BOOM – we're talking about God's word. Have we moved on to a new topic?

Grammatically, the author links these two sections together in a way that doesn't allow them to be treated as separate. In his mind God's word is tightly linked to God's rest.

So that's the section we're looking at this morning, and if you're like me, you're probably going, "Well, I caught a little bit about God's word being like a sword, but I'm not sure what I learned about rest. That part just sort of flew by."

This is one of those chunks of Scripture you can't breeze through if you hope to understand it. We've got to roll up our sleeves and do the hard work of taking it apart piece by piece.

To see how everything connects, let's go back to the beginning. The author starts off by laying down a condition. He says,

Entering rest depends on hearing God's voice.

Remember that repetitious verse? "Today, IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, do not harden your hearts." Why not harden our hearts? Because when the Israelites did that, they missed out on the promised land. There's a direct correlation between how we listen to God and whether or not we experience his rest.

That raises some questions. What is God's voice and what does it mean to hear it?

There's an old story about a native American who lived out on the prairie who decided he wanted to go visit his friend in the big city. So he did, and it was a complete culture shock. All the choices, all the crowds, the lights and the noise. One day, the two of them were walking downtown, when all of a sudden the Native American stopped and said, "Shh – did you hear that?"

His friend looked at him kind of strange and said, “Hear what? It’s the city. There’s all kinds of noise.” Sirens, traffic, street vendors, cell phones. But his friend interrupted him and said, “There it is again.” Then he walked over to a flower box in front of one of the apartments, and there under one of the plants was a little cricket, chirping away.

The city guy was astonished and asked, “How did you catch that? Your hearing is amazing!” To which the Native American replied, “You could hear it, too. You just have to know what to listen for.”

We all have the capacity to hear God’s voice. It doesn’t take super spiritual ears. We just have to know what we’re listening for.

The other day, Karin’s dad, Lee, had a difficult meeting with an employee in the school’s administration, and he was having to confront him about how he wasn’t doing his job. Things were not going well in the meeting at all. The discussion wasn’t going anywhere. Then all of a sudden the phone rang. It was Karin’s mom, and her dad knew it, because she’s the only one who uses that line. So he interrupted the meeting and took the call, although the other man didn’t know who was on the line.

Karin’s mom asked, “Are you in your meeting?” And Lee said, “Yes.” She said, “I’ve been praying for you and the Lord told me that man is depressed.” Karin’s dad said, “Thanks for calling. I’ll talk to you later.”

Then he went around from behind his desk and sat down right next to the man and said, “How are you doing?” The man said, “I’m okay.” Lee said, “Really? Because you strike me as someone who may be struggling with depression.” Then the man broke down and out poured all these things in his life that he was feeling depressed about. And it ended up being a powerful breakthrough in their communication.

That’s a pretty dramatic example of hearing God’s voice clearly.

When you think of hearing someone’s voice, what comes to mind? Talking, right? We normally don’t hear God talking out loud to us. But if we break down the idea a little further, what do we hear when we hear someone talking? Words. We hear the words someone speaks. So saying we are listening for God’s voice is the same as saying we are listening for God’s words, or more to the point, his Word.

The primary way we hear God’s word is through Scripture. That’s his voice written down for us. The primary way we see God’s word is through Jesus. He’s God’s voice personified.

Now we can also hear God’s word through a gut feeling, our conscience or the Holy Spirit, the way Karin’s mom did. But those occasions are a bit more rare, and they always need to be measured against what we know about God’s written voice and his personified voice. If the voice we hear in our head isn’t consistent with those two reference points, we can be sure it’s not God we’re hearing.

His word to the Israelites last week was, “I’m giving you this land. Stick with me and I will take you to a place of rest.” And the people heard that. They just didn’t believe it. As the writer of Hebrews said just before our section today,

Hebrews 4:2

...the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

Hearing with faith is the equivalent of taking someone at their word. And we don’t often do that in our society. Nobody takes politicians at their word, and with good reason. They rarely seem to keep it. Nobody trusts what their employer says about taking care of them in their retirement, because of the capital letter E (for Enron). People used to believe everything they read in print, but we know we can’t do that anymore. We can’t even trust the manufacturers who say our toys are safe, because they keep taking them back.

We’ve developed a healthy skepticism when it comes to anybody’s word, and in large measure it is justified. The trouble is, we take the same jaded, cynical attitude into the way we hear God’s word. We assume he will be just as unreliable as everyone else in our world.

Don’t get me wrong – I’m not saying that we should believe things that go against reason. I’m just saying that when it comes to God, reason can only take us so far. For example, let’s say you feel a tug to go on a church mission trip. You just can’t seem to get it out of your head. It keeps coming up in conversations with your spouse or friends. Bible verses seem to jump out at you that remind you about the trip, when suddenly you think, “Maybe God is putting this on my heart.” Then you instantly think, “No – I don’t have enough vacation days saved up and I can’t afford it anyway.”

So let’s say you convince yourself that’s the sensible thing to do and you stay home. You did what was reasonable. But you’ve still got that feeling in the back of your head that you should have gone. You don’t have rest, you don’t have peace, because you didn’t follow what that little voice inside was saying.

Now suppose you DID choose to go. Would that have been an unreasonable, irrational choice, given the fact you didn’t know where the money would come from? No, because God has established a pattern of providing for people when he asks them to do something. Just ask anybody who went on any of the D’Iberville trips. It takes faith to follow God’s calling, because you don’t know HOW he’s going to meet the need. But it’s not illogical to trust him, because 1., You believe he genuinely has asked you to go, and 2., He’s shown that he’s faithful when we obey in that way.

Hearing combined with faith means acting as if God is true to his word, before I can see it fully. And as unsettling or risky as that may sound, the author to Hebrews says that is

the key to finding rest. The way we live with and relate to God's word will determine our experience of rest.

It then makes sense when Jesus, the Living Word, says:

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.

It is in his role as God's voice that he calls us to rest. One commentator I read this week said, "He didn't say, 'come to my teaching', although he used teaching. He didn't say 'come to the church.' He said come to me. He himself is the source of rest. It's how we engage him that shapes how well we rest.

And this brings us to the next question, which is, "What do we mean by rest?" We've already established that our writer knew it meant something more than just getting into the physical land of Canaan.

And while it will be true and full when we reach eternity some day, I don't think he was only talking about our future in heaven. He says that we are joining God in his rest, which began when he was done with creation. He uses a present tense instead of a future tense when he talks about God's people entering that rest. So while we do look forward with it to that day when it will be complete, on many levels we can also enjoy it here and now.

If we were to define rest based on this passage, it might help if we break it down as "resting from" and "resting in."

What do we rest from?

Wandering

Up until the moment of decision, the Israelites had been moving forward with a purpose. They left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and marched across the sands with the intent of getting to Canaan. Once they refused to enter the land, they were at a bit of a loss. When you don't have a destination, you wander aimlessly.

Have you ever felt like your life is like that? Everyone is searching for something. But most of the time it's a wandering kind of search, because we're not sure what we're looking for. We just feel like there's got to be more to life. I think I've quoted that John Mayer song before where he says, "Something's missing and I don't know how to fix it."

Part of the rest that God gives us is a rest from that wandering. We can know our purpose, we can know what's been missing because it's God. He becomes our destination. When we say yes to him, it gives meaning to our life journey.

Craig Barnes, the author of Sacred Thirst says it this way: “I think that the goal of the church is to turn the meandering nomad into a pilgrim. Pilgrims are people who travel with purpose.”

God turns meandering nomads into pilgrims. We can have rest from our wandering.

Weight

When you see pictures of refugees who have been forced to abandon their homes, who are hoping to find food and shelter, you often see that they carry all their earthly possessions with them. I imagine the Israelites fleeing Egypt in similar fashion, with all their belongings on their backs. On their heads. In their hands. To be a wanderer is to carry the weight of your world yourself. There’s nowhere to put it down.

And as I see it, to enter God’s rest is to rest from the weight we’ve been carrying. That’s the quote from Jesus: Come to me all you who are burdened. You who are heavy laden. You who are carrying the weight of guilt. You who are shouldering a load of shame. You who are tired of trying to manage it yourself.

Jesus says, “Let me take that for you.” Isaiah says, “surely he took up our iniquities and carried our sorrows.” Our load is lightened when we come to Jesus.

Are you trying to carry someone else’s load of sin for them this morning?

Work

Part of the reason for what lightens the load is that when we come to him, it is a recognition that it is time to rest from our work. The author of Hebrews cited God as the example. Just as he rested from his work, entering his rest for us means stopping our work.

It’s a stopping of what we’re doing. We quit working to make do on our own. Jesus died for us because we couldn’t do enough work on our own to ever be done. Imagine racking up a huge bill on a credit card and each month not even being able to pay the interest. Even though you’re making payments, your bill isn’t getting any smaller – it’s getting bigger.

As hard as we work at paying off our own sin, we’re adding more to the bill all the time. Which brings us back to Jesus and his invitation. Are we able to trust that he really truly took care of it for us, or do we keep trying to step back in and do it ourselves? If we’re able to have faith in him, it will lead to rest because we won’t be struggling so much to do the impossible.

Even the idea of working to make blessings happen in our lives is something God calls us to rest from. Listen to one man’s journal that Larry Crabb quotes in his book, *The Pressure’s Off*:

I want to believe, I desperately want to believe, that if I “do the right things,” all will be well. Whether in parenting, work, marriage, whatever – I hope for a cause-effect relationship in my life. I’ve come to realize that I made a deal with God. I’ve arrogantly come to him, not to know him, but to parade my efforts. And then I presented my checklist to God and said, “I did all this. NOW PRODUCE!” My fist was clenched in his face. I never saw it. I thought I was praying for blessings.

God invites us to rest from working for blessings because that’s not how he operates. He’s given us everything in Jesus, and asks that we set down our shovels and hammers and just come to him.

War

After Caleb and Joshua finally led the Israelites into the promised land and defeated their enemies, look at what the text says:

Joshua 14:15

Then the land had rest from war.

God’s rest was one of peace. The enemies had been defeated.

Look, being a Christian is no piece of cake. Problems don’t go away. But at least our struggles are no longer our own. It’s not just us waging the war. Here’s what God had told Joshua as they were about to face their enemies:

Deuteronomy 3:22

Do not be afraid of them; the LORD your God himself will fight for you.

The Lord your God himself will fight for you. Hallelujah! Whatever your battle is today, God offers you rest in the middle of it because it’s no longer just you.

Our resting is not just a “resting from” – it’s also a “resting in.”

Resting in:

Belonging

The very word “Hebrew” means “one who passes over” or “sojourner”. That’s how the people viewed themselves – they thought of themselves in terms of their activity, because they had no home. Once they were established in Canaan, that wasn’t what defined them anymore. They were better described as Israelites – descendants of Israel and occupants of the land Israel. Who they were took on more meaning than what they did.

We are constantly trying to define ourselves through what we do, to find worth in our activity. God says we can rest from that and just be his children.

Years ago, Mother Teresa was approached by a monk who was grumbling that the rules of his superior were getting in the way of his ministry to lepers. He complained, “My vocation is to work for lepers.” To this Mother Teresa replied gently, “Brother, your vocation is not to work for lepers, your vocation is to belong to Jesus.”

I read an article this week that said we’re living for the first time in history when people don’t get their identity from their home and family. They go out in search of it. You have to find yourself in a career or a marriage or something else. And if one of those doesn’t work out, you scrap it and recreate yourself with different choices. We see ourselves as being the product of our decisions.

What a relief to know that we’re more than that. We’re defined by our home, which is Jesus. We belong to him, he loves us completely. He grounds us and gives us rest in knowing who we are.

Blessing

Look again at one of our verses from Hebrews:

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God...

This is the one and only time we find this term “Sabbath-rest.” We’ve all heard the term Sabbath, which refers to the seventh day of the week. That was the day God rested, and to commemorate that, he gave his people that day of rest as a gift and a sign.

When I was growing up, my parents sought to apply that principle in our family on Sundays. I always associated that “day of rest” idea with what we couldn’t do. It wasn’t a day to go shopping (a lot of stores were even closed on Sundays back then). It wasn’t a day to do yard work. When I was old enough to get a job, I had to find something where I didn’t have to work Sundays, or at least not during church.

As wise as it may be on many levels to have a day like that once a week, that’s not what this passage is talking about. It’s using Sabbath in a different sense, and it’s not so much about what rest rules out as what rest includes.

For the Israelites, Sabbath was seen as celebration, as a joyful time of praising God. It was about what you **COULD** do – not what you **COULDN’T**.

When the writer of Hebrews talks about Sabbath-rest, he’s saying we’re invited into something joyful where we can bless God and be blessed by him. We’re allowed to enjoy him and find fulfillment, because worshipping him is what we were created for. It taps into the core of who we are. Jesus is our Sabbath-rest.

Baring

A final “resting in” category is what I call rest in baring – baring our souls, being known and seen for who we really are. This is where we come back to that closing section about God’s word that ends by saying:

Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

That hardly sounds like rest. It sounds a little frightening and exposed. But I think it is rest, because we spend so much time putting on masks and pretending to be someone we're not, putting on a show for the world.

But God sees right through it.

J.P. Moreland says we spend our lives creating and then managing and protecting our false self -- and that Jesus is "profoundly uninterested in that project."

The lie of Satan is that we have to guard our dark inner secrets at all costs, because if they get out, we'll die. People will reject us. God will hate us and abandon us. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We are now able to let down our defenses to quit pretending. We can rest in being our most naked selves before God.

How do we get there? Hebrews says it's God's word that cuts through us like a sword. The more time we spend with God's word, the more we'll see ourselves for who we are.

The L.A. Times recently ran a story about a naval base in San Diego. It's been around since 1969, and nobody thought much about the barracks there. But then Google Earth came along, giving the world satellite images of what the base looks like from the air. And what you see is a giant swastika, which has outraged people around the world. A different perspective showed something that could never be noticed from the ground. And now that it's known, the Navy is taking steps to alter it.

We aren't going to naturally see ourselves for who we are. It takes the different point of view that comes from God's word. We think of ourselves as reading our Bibles, but really the key is letting the Bible read us. What about us needs exposing?

Are you needing "rest from" or "rest in" this morning? God offers us both through Jesus.