

God's Promised Rest

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is Hebrews chapter 4. We read in verses 1 to 13 and it's on page 1205. While the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear, lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed entered that rest, 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.

For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way, and God rested on the seventh day from all his works. And again in this passage he said, they shall not enter my rest.

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day.

Today, saying through David so long afterwards in the words already quoted, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.

[1 : 21] So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For whoever has entered God's rest, has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul, and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Good morning, everyone.

My name's Andy, assistant pastor here at Grace Church. Great to see you this morning. And there's an outline on the back of the service sheet, and do follow along on the screen behind me. John's prayed, so we're going to make a start.

Here's our question. What is the right thing to do when you hear a fire alarm? I guess lots of us know that. Maybe you have fire drills at school.

[2 : 28] You know exactly what to do. Maybe in the office, you're a fire marshal, and you have a high-vis jacket to wear, and you know what to do. What do you do when you hear a fire alarm?

You make your way quickly, calmly out of the building to the closest fire exit, and you gather at the muster point. We all know that. Although I was in a cafe this week with a friend, and the fire alarm went off, and do you know what happened?

Absolutely nothing. People carried on working on their laptops. People kept eating. People didn't even break conversation. They just kept going, and a panicked staff flustered around trying to work out what was wrong, and then turned it off.

The right response to hearing the alarm is obvious, even if people don't make that response. Well, then the issue at the heart of this Bible passage today is what is the right response to hearing the word of God?

When the sound of God's word reaches our ears, what are we to do? As we saw last week in chapter three from Hebrews, the writer sounded the alarm.

[3 : 39] He is very mindful of a former generation of the people of God who heard God's word but failed to make the right response. They didn't respond with faith and trust in God's promises.

That's how the writer starts in chapter four. So if you look down at verse one, it says this, Remember the storyline from last week?

God's people had been rescued from slavery in Egypt and were on their way to their very own land that God promised them. As they approached the land, spies were sent in.

This is what the children are learning in a Sunday club as well, so ask them afterwards. Spies were sent into the land to scope it out. Two returned saying the land's great, it's amazing. God has promised it to us.

Let's go, let's get into it. But they didn't listen to Joshua and Caleb, those two spies. The people were not united by faith with them in the good news they heard.

[4 : 55] They instead listened to the unbelieving spies who were worried about the size of the people and said, it's just too big for us. We can't go in. They didn't trust. And so they fell under the judgment of God with none of that adult generation entering the land.

And instead they spent 40 years wandering in a desert in the wilderness and died there. It's a sad tale. And the writer retells it in Hebrews as a cautionary tale, seeing the parallels with believers in his own day.

As we thought, the people he's writing to are in danger of drifting away from Jesus and his message of salvation, drifting away because of sin, drifting because of the shame and the pressure that comes with associated with Jesus and living publicly for him, and drifting into living by sight, tempted into the visual trappings of Judaism and temple worship, putting their confidence in other things and not Jesus.

And into this situation, the writer sounds the alarm. He urges them to make the right response to God's word. And now in chapter four, he's going to set out what that will look like.

And he's got one big idea, one big point this morning, with four sub points, one big point. We must strive to enter God's rest.

[6 : 25] We must strive to enter God's rest. The punchline comes in verse 11, if you look down. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

It's an awful thing to have tickets to a getaway or something, but then to discover they won't get you anywhere. Five years ago, the world's oldest travel company, Thomas Cook, went into liquidation. Planes were grounded, thousands were stranded abroad, and the UK government launched Operation Matterhorn to bring home some 150,000 stranded holidaymakers.

Imagine you had your savings invested in a ticket for a holiday from Thomas Cook, the holiday of your dreams. And you've got your tickets on your phone, you printed them out, you went to bed dreaming of long days on the beach or whatever it is.

And when the news broke at 6 a.m. the next morning, you realise the tickets for your holiday, well, they're not worth the paper they're printed on. It's now an empty promise.

[7 : 35] It's a vain hope of a holiday. Now, if you and I are going to strive to enter God's rest, that verse 11 wants us to, we need to be certain that the promise actually means something and that it actually still applies.

It's not just a vain hope. And the writer knows that too. And so he begins to show us from the Old Testament, first sub-point, that the offer of God's rest still stands.

The offer still stands. If you remember from chapter 2, a few weeks ago, the writer describes the end goal of the Christian faith. The end goal that we're going to is Jesus restoring humanity to the place that we were made to be and taking us to glory as his sisters and his brothers in a world to come.

And in chapter 3 and 4, the writer uses the same idea, but he's coming at it from a different angle, using the language of rest. Now, rest in the Bible doesn't mean relaxation or slumping in front of the sofa after a busy day or pottering in the garden.

Rest refers to a promised land that the first generation didn't enter. Chapter 3. Have you look back at chapter 3, verse 10, 11, that we looked at last week.

[8 : 56] Therefore, I was provoked with that generation and said, they always go astray in their heart. But they have not known my ways. As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.

Now, if we read Numbers 13 and 14, where that's from in the Old Testament, it's clear that what they won't enter is a land. They will die in the wilderness. But the language used here to describe that land is rest.

And for us, we can't enter that rest. The second generation entered the land under Joshua. That's been and gone. But actually, God's rest in these chapters refers to something greater than the promised land, something beyond.

It actually refers to that Sabbath day. If you look at chapter 4, verses 3 and 4. For we who have believed enter that rest, 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, for he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way, and God rested on the seventh day from all his works. Verse 4 there, direct quote from Genesis 2, verse 2.

[10:13] Week 1 in our Bible overview, in our growth groups, we saw the seven days of creation. And in the first six days, God made everything. And on the seventh day, God rested.

That's the key difference. And another key difference is that in the first six days, end with that phrase, there was evening and morning the first day, there was evening and morning the second day, and so on and so on.

But the seventh day doesn't have that phrase. He's telling us that this is meant to be an ongoing rest that God has entered into. And this is the rest we were made to share in.

Being in God's presence, in his perfect world, enjoying him, enjoying his perfect creation. That is real rest. And the writer to Hebrews wants to show us that that offer of rest wasn't completed when the people entered the land.

That is still on offer. And he proves that to us by saying, well, King David, whilst they were in the land a hundred years later, wrote Psalm 95 that is quoted in these verses.

[11:26] And he writes about warning people not to harden their hearts and so they won't enter God's rest. So logically, the writer to Hebrews is saying, well then, the rest is still to come.

Clearly, they didn't actually enter God's rest that Genesis 2.2 speaks about. He sums that up in verse 8. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. In other words, he's being quite technical here, but simply put, he's saying the offer of God's rest still stands.

The offer is there. There remains a full and final Sabbath rest to enter into. Now, our world is full of offers, isn't it? We love a good offer.

I don't know anyone has paid full price for a sofa with all the offers that are on. The DFS sale never ends, does it? I checked this morning, the autumn sale is still on, which will then become the winter sale, then the spring sale, then the summer sale, and we go round and round again.

[12:41] The offer doesn't end, does it? Well, in a much, much more glorious way, the offer at the heart of the Christian faith still stands today, an offer of God's rest to come, where we can join God in a joyful celebration, being in his presence forever.

that seventh day ongoing rest in a renewed world. And to press that home further, the writer reminds us that Jesus is there now.

Jesus is already there. At verse 10, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Hebrews started with this great journey of Jesus, starting as the preexistent Son of God. He came down. We thought about Christmas a couple of weeks ago. He came down to secure salvation for us through his life, death, and resurrection, and ascension.

And now he rests. He rests from his work of salvation, of redemption. It's finished, Jesus cried, on the cross. And as Hebrews 1 says, he is sat down at the right hand of God on the throne.

[14:04] We might have lost rest through our sin, but Jesus has won it back. And so the writer's saying, through Christ, God says to us, you can enter my rest, you can live with me in my perfect world to come.

We have this awesome future ahead of us. And that is what the writer thinks will motivate us to keep going, to keep striving. And we often have things in the future, don't we, that motivate us to keep going.

The holiday or something, something in the diary to focus on, to aim for. It keeps us going as we look to the future. Well, how much more can we look forward to and be excited by what's coming in the future when Jesus returns?

A renewed world, true rest in God's presence for eternity. that is excitement that should keep us going through the ups and downs of the Christian life.

And so, as the writer points it home, he says, well, we are to keep striving together. Keep striving together. Verse 11 again, let us therefore strive to enter that rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

[15 : 21] Now, it can seem strange, can't it, that he calls us to strive, to push hard, to run hard. After all, we're called Grace Church. Throughout our service this morning, we've been thinking and praying about God's grace and thanking him for God's grace.

We believe we are saved by grace through faith and not only, and not through any of our efforts or our good works. And that's true. So why do we need to strive?

Surely the Christian can sit back and relax, can't they? Well, the Bible never says that because our salvation is based in Christ, secure in Christ, that we can kick into neutral gear and just sit back and relax and coast until we reach the end.

Instead, Hebrews will tell us that the truly saved person is the faithful person, the one who will keep running the race, of the Christian life with the help of the Holy Spirit, striving to not drift away from him, but to stay true to Jesus right to the end.

And notice this is something that the writer includes himself in. Verse 11, let us therefore strive to enter that rest. The people of God have to strive together as a community.

[16 : 45] Two weeks ago, Park Run celebrated its 20th birthday. It started in 2004 with 13 runners and five volunteers.

And now 10 million people take part worldwide. And I guess, I don't know, but I guess part of that success is down to striving together. After all, if you do Park Run, you can run on your own at any time, can't you?

Dulwich Park is open, Brockwell Park is open, but when you're with others, there's a family that encourages you to keep going. Well, likewise, in the Christian faith, we have the family of God. We are to strive together, encouraging one another to keep going, to help each other get to the finishing line. And when we see others drifting, drifting into sin, drifting due to suffering, when we are to effectively put our arm around them and encourage them to keep going, to strive together, holding fast to Jesus.

And so, we need others. We need other Christians. The people on your row need you. We need our growth group. We need our youth group.

[18 : 04] We need to each other to encourage us and they need us to exhort one another as we saw last week in chapter three. That is a big part of how we respond to God's word.

So, the offer of rest still stands, the writer says, and Jesus is there now. So, keep striving together. And lastly, letting God's living word do its work in our hearts.

I've changed that from the handout. Let God's living word do its work in our hearts. Striving is to do with listening. That comes all the way through chapters three and four as he starts.

Today, if you hear his voice. And I'm sure that's why the writer finishes the way he does in verses 12 and 13. If you look down. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword.

piercing to the division of soul and of spirit of joints and of marrow and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. As God speaks through his living word, the Bible, it's as though God is with us in person.

[19 : 18] Which is why when he quotes Psalm 95, he says, as the Holy Spirit says, it's present tense. God's word is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword.

I guess the image of a two-edged sword might make you think of a medieval knight clumsily hacking away with a sword. A better way of thinking about it is thinking about the surgeon's scalpel, a precision instrument cutting someone open, dividing joints and marrow.

And once the word of God has penetrated to the depths of our being, there is no more hiding. As he says in verse 13, and no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Once the word of God has cut us open, so to speak, we lie on the surgeon's table. Our hearts are exposed to God himself. And over the past two chapters, we've heard the fire alarm of God's word, the warning to not harden our hearts.

And I have very little idea of how everyone in this room is responding to that. You're all polite, but you're mostly awake.

[20 : 46] Probably very few of you are checking emails or playing games on your phone, and if you are, you're doing it very discreetly, thank you very much. But I've no idea of what's going on in your heart, and you have no idea what's going on in my heart, but God does.

He knows how each of us responds to his word. I guess it's unsettling to know that. But just as a surgeon wields a knife to heal, the Bible is a knife that God wields to heal, to show us where we fall short of living for him, our sin, where we're tempted to drift, also we can come back to Jesus for forgiveness and to keep striving.

Maybe we have recently felt the scalpel of God's word pierce us. at this point we have a choice, don't we? We might be tempted to close up our Bibles and never read them again, or we can let God's word do its work to open us up.

What happens next all depends on whether we trust the surgeon. Because if we trust the surgeon, if we trust Jesus, then we'll gladly open our hearts to let his word do its work and receive that message of forgiveness and to keep striving.

Just as we close then, I mentioned Park Run earlier. I did some reading. It's got four principles, Park Run. Weekly, free, for everyone, forever.

[22 : 29] Now three of those are actually achievable, aren't they? But it won't be forever. Nobody really wants to run forever, do they?

Come on. Nobody really wants to keep striving without ever finishing. Well, now is the time of striving in the Christian life.

As we listen to God's voice in Scripture, today, if you hear his voice, we are to respond in the right way. Not hardening our hearts, but paying much closer attention to what we've heard.

And in doing so, we are striving to enter that rest. And unlike Park Run, that rest is forever. Joining God and his son in a joyful celebration of being in his presence forever.

A seventh day, ongoing rest in a renewed, perfect world. let us therefore strive to enter that rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

[23 : 40] Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, your living word. Please help us to listen to you and to strive together to encourage one another to get to the finishing line, trusting in the Lord Jesus to the end.

Amen.