

Hebrews 4:1-13 “Working to Rest”

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Deep soul rest. Can you imagine that? When was the last time you felt deeply rested? Will you close your eyes with me for a minute and try to go there? Envision some time where you felt deep rest? Maybe it was pushing back from the table after Christmas dinner, your belly full, your grandkids running around laughing, Christmas carols playing in the background.

Some of you I know, for you, the kids need to be napping, not running around. You're picturing that and you're hearing waves ashore on the beach. You read your book. You talk to a friend.

Maybe the time you're picturing was after you'd finished mowing the grass or weeding the flower bed or organizing the closet, whatever, and you're sipping ice-cold lemonade on the back porch and smelling the freshly mowed grass and the birds are chirping. Maybe some of you are thinking of a moment in this room after we'd sung that song or read that scripture that you love and you're coming to the Lord's table and you could just breathe deep inside and feel at rest.

[2:12] I suspect that some of you may be honest enough to admit right now, even with your eyes closed, you can't hardly envision a time where you felt the feeling like that of deep satisfaction and peace and nothing else was bombarding your mind, your senses all the time.

Maybe Jesus wants to invite you into that in your very soul deep down today. He already has, right? He's already extended that invitation. Now Hebrews wants to extend it again to all of us and explain it to us just a little bit more. You can look at Hebrews 4 now. That was a long time for some of you. We've arrived at Hebrews 4.

The author has just finished pleading with God's people not to harden our hearts like God's people in the wilderness who didn't believe in the wilderness. Who didn't believe him so they couldn't enter into the promised land because of their unbelief.

Chapter 4 verse 1. God's very word inviting you into rest. Therefore, 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.

[3:58] 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. 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 afterward, 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.

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.

[5 : 06] 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 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. This is indeed God's word.

Let's ask for his help. Father, you've given us something that is alive and active and sharp. the sword of your word, and it cuts deep. And if we'll listen, it will show us things in our hearts, sometimes things we don't wanna see.

Would you do that this morning? Would you make us have soft hearts that are open to the surgery you would do on us?

[6 : 23] Because we trust that you're doing it for our good, to heal us. Help us. Speak to us and help us hear and respond.

In Jesus' name, amen. My heart for us this morning is that you not just listen, but that together you taste some of the rest that God offers, at least enough of a taste that it makes you long for more.

Okay? I'm gonna try not to overdo the explanation of this. You may have noticed as we read, the passage talks a lot about rest. Took me hours of study to figure that out.

Just kidding. But when you read it, while it's obvious it's talking about rest, it may be a little tough at first reading to know even what he's talking about.

There's so many different things. By rest, do you mean complete physical inactivity? Doing nothing? Do you mean a Buddhist sense of nirvana, like out-of-body experience I'm gonna have?

[7 : 40] Is it some kind of out-of-date concept of a slower pace of life than I've ever experienced? Is that... Well, as he's talking about it, the preacher of this sermon to the Hebrews once again quotes other scripture passages to help us understand what he means.

So let me look back at the rest he keeps talking about and help us see that the rest Jesus offers for our souls is, these are my words, God's joyful satisfaction with his, just reverse the words, contented celebration of finished work.

I think it will help to look at the rest in this passage chronologically in the Bible's story. He's gonna hit several different epics in that story and we learn here first, God is the first one to rest.

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

It's God's first, right? If you look back to Genesis 2, you realize God looks around at his glorious creation and he's just pronounced good, good, good, very good.

[9 : 12] And he blessed the seventh day. How did he bless it? He blessed it by resting. Resting is good.

Not just necessary because you're tired. God wasn't tired here. He was satisfied. He was joyful.

Maybe like that grandparent pushing back from the table, looking around at the family and the home at a life's work. Delightedly.

God was finished with his work of creation. Now we know when we say that, God didn't cease activity entirely. He was still upholding, sustaining, protecting, preserving his creation.

Jesus says his father is always working. But there is this really worthwhile celebration of the completion of a massive undertaking, right?

[10:14] Maybe you've felt that. In this case, God's work of creation. This, in some way, is the rest that the writer's talking about.

My rest, God says. It's his that he's gonna invite us into. That his people have either failed to enter into or they're being called to later in this passage.

There's another season of rest highlighted here, of course, maybe the easiest one to see. It's the rest in the promised land. Here, primarily, when he's talking about this, this is rest God was inviting his people into that they were missing out on, right?

40 years in the wilderness. Even though they heard the invitation, they missed it. Now, Joshua would eventually lead the next generation into the promised land where they would settle.

God would give them rest from all their enemies, all defeated, right? Before God's people could rest. Of course, who did the work to make sure that they could?

[11:23] It's very clear as you read through the book of Joshua, God is the one, whether it's Jericho or the Jordan River or whatever it is, God is the one doing this work to bring them into the land, but then they were able to enjoy his provision joyfully, gratefully, peacefully, plenty of work to be done in the promised land, but they could do it while at rest.

Notice in the description of promised land rest that God was giving his people not the full and final rest, the rest in him, but rather giving them a beautiful picture of that rest.

That's why he tells us in verse 7, several hundred years after Joshua brought the people into the land, David in Psalm 95 says, today, don't harden your hearts, but trust God's voice.

Come and find rest for your souls. Verse 8, for if Joshua had given them rest, the real thing, God would not have spoken of another day later on.

Joshua did give them some rest, right? Brought them into the land, but not entirely God's rest, complete with a joyful satisfaction.

[12:39] So the rest God offers is more than physical inactivity, it's more than temporal peace and no more war, it's always celebrating his finished work, in this case, his work of redemption from their enemies rather than creation.

So the preacher makes clear that there is still a rest for God's people. Generations after Exodus and the wilderness, the promised land, and the Psalms.

Verse 9, so then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Don't miss this. In this context, what he's saying is you and I can still enter into God's rest.

It's an invitation to you. It's an active, present reality that he invites us to enjoy with him. And then it clearly goes beyond this world.

It remains a rest for God's people always to enter into. We start tasting it here, and it goes on forever.

[13:50] He's telling you that you can be joyfully satisfied. You may not believe that. You can be joyfully satisfied, that your soul can begin to settle into a contented celebration, salvation.

Not because you just quit. You just settled for something less, but because you finally found the real thing, the true soul rest that you were made for.

Before we wrap up looking at this idea of rest in this passage, notice God's rest that began in the garden and is offered to us here with him is also in the future.

In this passage, we understand that because it remains and because the promised land wasn't the real thing, but rather a sign, a pointer to God's true rest.

Listen to how Revelation speaks of it. Blessed, blessed indeed, says the spirit are those who have died in the Lord, that they may rest from their labors.

[15:04] That's what is offered to us that we look forward to even beyond this life. Once again, in this passage, you notice rest is what? It's a blessing.

It's a good gift. And in some way, even eternally, we cease from our labors. We rest from our works.

As verse 10 told us, we would have to in God's rest. God's rest involves that we stop our works. There's a sense in which work is finished eternally.

We rest forever. Thankfully, we know by now, don't get confused, there is work in heaven. We know by now that doesn't mean that there's total inactivity, just disconnection from everything and eternal boredom.

That's not what he's describing. He's describing a never-ending party, right? Joyful celebration, satisfaction, with deep contentment.

[16:11] How is that possible? With God. Without burdens. Without tears. Without pain.

Don't that just help you? Don't you start tasting rest when you think about that? I'm with God. I'm without anything to burden me. I'm without any struggle or sorrow.

What I mostly would like to do is talk the rest of our time about how this passage tells us to enter into this rest. It is such good news.

It's so freeing. It's so life-giving, but it's so hard for us. But briefly, before we do that, I don't want to skip over the urgency that God gives this invitation.

This is not a casual. I know you get something like this. Hey, come to the party if you like. Drop by sometime. Say hey. If it's convenient. That's not the kind of invitation.

[17:16] Listen to the words. Verse 1. Let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. He's saying approach this invitation to rest with reverence, with sobriety, because God is saying these are matters of whether you are with him or not.

With him, the greatest good, the one your soul was made for, the one you so deeply need. And we're reminded that some of those among his people who have seen and heard of him missed out on the rest he offered.

They heard the invitation you're hearing in a different generation, in a different way, and they missed out. Thus it's urgent that you respond while the promise of entering his rest still stands.

When is that? Today. Today. It's like, it reminds me of the pastor who once said that Satan seeks to convince us not that there's no heaven or there's no hell, but that there's no hurry.

That, oh, I'll get to that later. I'm going to just keep rushing on with life until it's too late, until my heart has gotten hard to hearing God's voice called to me over and over and over.

[18:44] No, the preacher says, today strive. Make every effort to enter God's rest. Friends, please don't file what we're about to hear about how to enter God's rest under optional or unimportant things.

How tragic would it be for anyone here this morning to hear this invitation, to have it extended to you again and to miss out on true rest forever, never to know what you really were made to experience.

Listen to the invitation and reply, please, please reply. Verse 11 boils it down for us. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Don't let it happen to you. Don't get left out in the wilderness like them. Instead, strive. Make every effort. Urgently prioritize this rest.

Now that's confusing. That feels like a paradox, right? Work hard to rest. You know, get really focused on calming down.

[20 : 14] What's he talking about? What does it look like? How can we not just brush that aside and say, ah, it was exaggeration, strive to enter, it's no big deal, really?

No, he's saying something important. What does it look like when we enter Jesus' rest? Can we just take a couple minutes and be honest that most of us know what it doesn't look like?

If the rest we're talking about is joyful satisfaction, contented celebration, finished work, it doesn't look a lot like 21st century America, does it?

people trying to control our own lives or perhaps having given up on controlling our own lives, trying desperately to control our children's lives or our neighbors or our coworkers or our world.

Somewhere we're going to find it. Y'all, even the most successful of us, those who control the best, are tired, tired of it. There's always something more to do because deep down, why do we have to do those things?

[21 : 26] Because deep down there's always something else to prove, isn't there? Someone else to control, something else to fix. It's not all right, it's not all the way it should be. We know God's joyful satisfaction does not look like an impatient parent lashing out at a stubborn toddler.

We know God's rest does not look like a ranting social media feed that reflects a deeply discontented heart. We know contented celebration does not look like a frantic student anxiously awaiting test scores to decide if life's even worth living for the next four years.

We know Jesus is not inviting us into being a controlling boss who manipulates and distrusts and yells when someone makes him look bad. But we've all been those people.

at times, haven't we? We've all desperately tried to work ourselves into significance, into comfort, into success, into rest.

I want to suggest to you something that might seem, as you actually think about it, too good to be true. What if the rest Jesus offers actually involves you needing to do nothing else?

[22 : 48] rest? What if there was not yet one more thing you needed to put on your list of things to do in order to find rest? What if it looked like someone who, who when life jostled him, stood firm and was able to remain calm and to listen to a child crying or to comfort an anxious friend because you had rest?

rest? I want to give you a picture of this for what we're about to unpack. Recently, I was in the Atlanta airport. It's a great place of rest.

And I needed to get to the next flight quickly. I had to take one of those airport shuttles. I had just enough time, I thought, to grab a smoothie and then to run to catch the shuttle.

So I didn't slow down for other things. So here I was with my carry-on, my smoothie. I had my coat off so hot on the plane, carrying the coat laptop bag, and needed the phone out to make sure I didn't miss boarding for the next flight, right?

So I mean, I'm probably looking a little bit strange. And I made it down, rushed into the shuttle, just in time to get on board and hear the voice remind me to hold on to something.

[24:13] I looked up at the door in front of me and it said, you know, I don't remember the exact words, but make sure you hold on, sudden stops or whatever. And I thought, that's true. That is correct.

I've heard that before. That's really important. But I don't have a free hand. And I'm pretty strong.

This is what's going through my mind. I'm stable. I can stand. And sure enough, the start was just fine.

So I let my guard down. And there I was sipping on my smoothie when the next stop got me. It wasn't pretty. I'm going to try not to reenact it too much.

I do want you to know I did not actually hit the ground, okay? But in order for that not to happen, I did drop the phone, the laptop bag, and the coat.

[25:10] They all hit. And I let go of them and just at the last moment was able to grab that pole that I could have been holding on to to begin with. You also need to know I did not drop the smoothie.

Somehow I dropped the right things and held on to that one. Saved me from further embarrassment and injury. But rest in that moment looked like letting go and holding on.

Letting go and holding on. That's what God through Hebrews wants to tell us to do today. Both of those things. First, let go. Let go of your own works.

Boy, this is hard. The theological word for this, at least one of them, is repentance. Notice verse 10. Whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

To enter God's rest, first stop. Let go of your own works. Here's why.

[26:28] If rest is this joyful satisfaction with finished work, how can that ever be yours? How could you ever do enough for God?

How could you ever be certain that you'd done enough for eternity? That you'd found rest? That you were good enough for God?

The finished work to give you his rest has to be his work. Really important.

It's just the same with creation, right? It's just the same in the promised land. God has actually been teaching his people this for thousands of years. They just miss it most of the time.

It's especially important. He really drives it home when our sins are being handled. How's this going to work when our sins are being dealt with? All the way back to when he instituted the day of atonement for his people.

[27:32] It was a day each year that a goat was going visually to bear away the sins of the people from the camp. God says, on that day in Leviticus 16, you shall do no work.

Because atonement, forgiveness for your sins, it's going to be made for you. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest.

Why? Don't miss it, God says. When the work is done to make you right with me, to keep us in relationship, you're going to do none of it.

And I don't want you to miss that. You do no work. So, if you're going to make every effort to rest, the preacher says, you need to be exposed before God.

How insufficient on your own you really are. That is the primary reasoning behind the famous verses about God's word as a living and active two-edged sword that exposes us to our souls so that even the motives you don't realize you have are seen by God.

[28:49] God, this is a little scary. Now, you're rightly, you're supposed to feel the sense of I'm undone. No one is good enough.

You've got now to let go of your good works and cling to Him. I don't think we struggle to realize striving to rest.

We know what it's like to have a long list of things to work on before we can rest. We have to finish the list, right?

To check it all off. That's why you even sit at a beach on vacation and your soul is not at rest. Maybe everything else is slowed down but the phone buzzes and it's news from back home and what really interrupts my rest is that I can't control it.

The kids complain but what really interrupts my rest is feeling like I'm not a good enough parent. That doesn't go away at the beach.

[29 : 56] To taste even a day of rest think of all the things you're going to have to let go of. I'm going to have to let go of my phone. I'm going to have to let go of my fearful grip of control. Let go of outcomes as Bill Nash helpfully reminds me so often.

God says the list to do to enter his rest is so long you'll never get through it but Jesus has.

He has trusted and obeyed and suffered and sacrificed and loved and lived perfectly so God's rest is joyfully satisfied with his finished work.

You have to let go of yours. He's the one who's done it. In case you haven't connected these dots yet that means repent of your sins where you run far away from Jesus and live your own way not his.

You've got to repent of that and also repent of your own attempts to replace Jesus' finished work with your own. Those times where you think I'm going to be good enough not to need him today.

[31 : 13] I'm thinking if I'm spiritual enough God will love me. I'm thinking I'm going to perform well enough that I'll finally be certain that I'm eternally okay because I was good enough today.

Are you kidding me? Do you see how you can end up with an armful of really good things but you're going to have to let go of them to hold on to something really stable or else you'll fall?

See God actually has something absolutely stable for you to hold on to. This is not just a let go message. That feels kind of nice but it's not enough.

There is something and someone worth clinging to. You know already you've been here the last few weeks Hebrews is going to tell you Jesus gives you a better rest than Joshua.

Yes. The message of Hebrews 4 is believe this good news. Believe it not merely when you hear it over the loud speaker not merely when you read it on a door in front of you.

[32 : 25] believe it when life throws you off balance. Really hold on to it. Actually trust him. A life of repentance and faith.

The people back then heard the good news verse 2 but they didn't unite hearing with faith. They didn't enter rest because of unbelief.

So how do you enter? Verse 3 we who have believed enter that rest.

Listen it is that simple. God's rest the ultimate joyful satisfaction is yours when you trust Jesus.

Jesus told us the work God called us to do was believe in the one that he sent. Trust him. It is that simple and it's that complex for people like us arms full of good works and good things to do.

[33 : 44] Hearts full of mixed motives lives full of wanting to live our own ways this becomes very complex for us.

We must drop our arms full of control and performance and pride to cling to Jesus sovereign care his perfect trust his steadfast faithfulness it is true he will come through I can lay my deadly doing down down at Jesus feet and stand in him in him alone gloriously complete God's word cuts deep he shows you things you didn't even want to see in your own heart but not merely to expose!

You that's not the end goal also to heal you right that's why the Sabbath day is such a gift to our hearts it helps us let go and hold on ladies come talk about it together this afternoon it helps us let go of the work that we think we have to control to manage our lives and our world and practice resting and letting God control the world he's so much better at that trust me let God care for us look he's actually got you doesn't need help the Sabbath is rest now as a foretaste of rest eternally from burdensome meritorious wearying work that saps our souls it's also a great day for holding on tightly to Jesus there is so much you can do to celebrate his finished work right the glorious perfection of what

Jesus has done obviously we gather for corporate worship to hear about it to sing of it to confess what we know to be true and then having worshipped him if you leave with your heart certain that Jesus is caring for you that true rest that your soul is having then you're freed up to care sacrificially of your time and your money for your neighbor for your lonely brother or sister for your needy friend you got time but more than that you've got a soul freed to live like that there's so much to do and God has designed your heart and his world where it works like this an object at rest tends to do what stay at rest it tends to he's made you that way if you can actually start there then when when Monday morning comes early when the kids are crying when anxieties around you are attacking you may get busier your body may be doing more but your soul has entered

God's rest not just on Sunday because you now know you can enter that every day you can be joyfully satisfied with what Jesus has done for you contentedly celebrating his finished work from which you can never be shaken nothing you do today is going to change what Jesus has already done amen so you're you're stable you're solid you're standing firm that's rest I want to come celebrate his finished work at this table before we do I just want to confess to you what many of you already know which is the irony that I would talk to you about rest stop laughing and it's not nice many of you know that I have struggled with rest my whole life I have serious control issues that often hurt people around me

[38 : 14] I battle spiritual pride as a good firstborn pastor's kid become a pastor that's part of just part of why I needed a sabbatical a few years ago sabbatical is a fancy word for sabbath for someone whose heart needs months rather than days to reset with God's rest I was forced lovingly to let go of all of the good things that I carry around most days preaching sermons counseling visiting people let go of it and I found when I did that I was worried about how God and I would get along when I wasn't doing those things do you see the lack of faith there what commends me to

God when I'm not doing stuff for him God I'm worried and I was forced to sit! with God's word and watch it expose that selfish prideful restless heart that had so little it felt to offer God no sermons or anything and in a fresh way as God's word did that I became desperate for Jesus you know what that feels like I need I need something else to offer God better than me I hope you've tasted that or maybe you can taste it right now that I need his finished work which in that moment was so obviously so much better and so much more than anything I had I don't have time to describe all the ways that when that happened God met me there to show me he loved me to fill me with joy to set me at!

I just tell you that to let you know from someone who struggles with rest that there really is rest there when you let go and hold on when you're willing to let go of your works and you're willing to hold on to Jesus it is so much better just just peek ahead one verse to next week this is what he's going to tell us when you're exposed by God's word you have to see Jesus your great high priest you have to hold fast to him by faith it's your only option it's why Jesus gives us this sacrament it's a gift for people who desperately need rest and won't find it anywhere except in him Jesus comes to tell you again today it is finished he says push back from the table for a second look at

Jesus perfect work he has trusted God loved neighbor sacrificed himself conquered enemies rest joyful satisfaction is yours because of him it's what he was telling his disciples when he sat with them the night he was going to be betrayed and he broke bread and he gave it to them as I ministering in his name give this bread to you he said take and eat this is my body given for you do this in remembrance of me in the same way after supper he took the cup and said this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins those were ours so as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the

Lord's death until he comes you say he took what was rightfully coming to me so that he could give me a life I've never deserved no one should come to this table and look at what we've done and say yeah that's enough that's good enough no we must see here Jesus what he has done for us so that when he says it is finished enough we really believe it if you trust him come kids I want to talk to you for just a moment we love for you to come to these tables with your parents when we celebrate the Lord's Supper you get to see what it is up close that we're celebrating but I want you to remember that just like adults you need to trust

[43 : 35] Jesus yourself you need to have an understanding of what this bread and this juice mean and Jesus love for you before you come and take it yourself you'll get to talk with the elders and they'll approve you at some point to come and to be taking these with us if you're wondering about that if you're saying I'm ready or I think I might be or I'd like to be there's actually a class that starts today right after this service for you you can make one of your parents come with you because they have to but that starts if you're wondering that or wondering if this might be a good time that's one great way to start that conversation because we love getting to celebrate this together as a family across generations let me pray and then we'll do that together Jesus for this gift we give you thanks mostly because it reminds us of such a better gift your finished work to give us rest rest for our souls rest now rest forever if we haven't tasted it yet this morning would you would you use these common elements that we might taste the rest that you've purchased for us

Holy Spirit work in our hearts that that would be true use our bodies to that end we're yours and you made us this way so help us now to rest in you afresh in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org to!

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