

Congregational handout; outline sermon text on following pages

Sermon Notes & References

“Pursuing the Promise of Rest”

Hebrews 4:1-9

May 18, 2014

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^A Hebrews 3:12-13, Psalm 95:8, Exodus 17:7
^B Deut 1:20-22; Num 13:2,17-20,27-33, 14:1-4,22-23; Ps 95:11, Heb 3:17-19

^C Genesis 2:2, 1:32, 2:3; Mark 2:27; John 5:17
^D Psalm 95:7-8, Joshua 23:1
^E Matthew 11:28

A. Israel in the Wilderness

1. Background to our Text

- a. the book of Hebrews, to be understood, demands of those who read and study it, to have some knowledge of the events of the OT
- b. for example, 3 weeks ago, Israel's hardness of heart led to the warning 'Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.' (Hebrews 3:12-13)
- c. when did that hardness of heart take place? ... at what event?
- d. to answer that, we had to go back to Psalm 95 which is quoted repeatedly in Hebrews 3 and 4
- e. Psalm 95 has a worship and a teaching portion and was regularly used in the services in the temple and later the local synagogues
- f. Psalm 95:8 says, "Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, As in the day of Massah in the wilderness" – that identified the event which took us in turn to Exodus 17, where only 2 months after leaving Egypt, the people are complaining on account of the lack of water and testing '... the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us, or not?"' (Exodus 17:7)
- g. well, time went on, Israel saw many more miracles and provisions from God, and even beheld His power and heard His voice out of the mount Sinai at the giving of the law – but the murmuring did not cease

2. An Example to Avoid

- a. more than a year has passed, and Moses has led this people to the very border of the promised land of Canaan: the events are recounted by Moses to the people in Deuteronomy 1:20-22, "'I said to you, 'You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the Lord our God is about to give us. 'See, the Lord your God has placed the land before you; go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has spoken to you. Do not fear or be dismayed.' Then all of you approached me and said, 'Let us send men before us, that they may search out the land for us, and bring back to us word of the way by which we should go up and the cities which we shall enter.'"

- b. the history is given in Numbers 13; Moses received God's directions, "Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers' tribes, every one a leader among them." (Numbers 13:2) – not just any men, but leaders from each tribe
- c. the men are named and then instructed (Numbers 13:17-20), 'When Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he said to them, "Go up there into the Negev; then go up into the hill country. See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. How is the land in which they live, is it good or bad? And how are the cities in which they live, are they like open camps or with fortifications? How is the land, is it fat or lean? Are there trees in it or not? Make an effort then to get some of the fruit of the land." Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes.'
- d. for 40 days the spies traversed the land, cut down a single cluster of grapes that it took two men to carry, and returned to report
- e. (Numbers 13:27-33) 'Thus they told him, and said, "We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there. Amalek is living in the land of the Negev and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan." Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us." So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size. There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.'"
- f. and despite
- (A) the positive reports of Caleb and Joshua
 - (B) the repeated promise of God that He was giving them this land
 - (C) all that they had seen God do in the past year and a half
 - (D) Numbers 14:1-4, "Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept

that night. All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt." – and, but for the intercession of Moses, God would have destroyed this unbelieving people there and then

- g. nevertheless God declared (Numbers 14:22-23), 'Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it.'
- h. or, as expressed by the Holy Spirit in Psalm 95:11, God says, 'Therefore I swore in My anger, Truly they shall not enter into My rest.' ... that is the background to today's text, the example given from Israel's history that Christians are to avoid.
- i. for this reason, therefore, the preceding chapter in Hebrews ends with these words, "And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief." (Hebrews 3:17-19) – which brings us to ...

B. Entering God's Rest 4:1-2

- 1. Warning from the Foregoing (verse 1)
 - a. Therefore
 - (A) given the history of Israel just narrated
 - (B) given what has just been said in Hebrews chapter 3 – and really there should be no break, these two chapters are one argument
 - (C) verse 1 begins: "Therefore, let us fear lest ..."
 - (D) let us as believers in Jesus Christ take a lesson from Israel;
 - b. The Promise Still Holds
 - (A) that is the premise of the next part of verse 1
 - (B) "... while a promise remains of entering His rest, ..."

- (C) the fact that Israel failed in that instance to realise God's promise
 - (D) in no way has annulled that promise
 - (E) it remains as certain and solid as ever because, as we shall see in a moment, of the very nature of that rest
 - (F) so if the promise remains, the possibility of entry remains, as does
- c. The Possibility of Coming Short
- (A) "let us fear if, ...any one of you may seem to have come short of it."
 - (B) if Israel – with all their advantages, with all their experiences – could fail to enter the rest that God had provided for them – has failed to receive the blessing of the promise, so can we
 - (C) this is a sad thing regardless of what the phrase 'may seem' means – reckoned, judged or thought to have fallen short of receiving it
 - (D) so let us be clear in this respect as to what is ...

2. The Vital Ingredient (verse 2) ... it is ...

a. Not Simply Hearing the Gospel

- (A) "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; ..." had good news preached to them
- (B) this is what unites the Christian to the children of Israel – that we have heard the good news ... the promise of God
- (C) how often was that promise repeated to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve Patriarchs, their descendants enslaved in Egypt?
- (D) how often in the last 18 months had they heard that promise over and over, & should have sung "I am bound for the promised land"?

b. The Element of Faith

- (A) something was missing; they had a hearing disability
- (B) for it says "... but the word they heard did not profit them, ..."
- (C) hearing the promise did not bring the blessing of the promise
- (D) something was missing
- (E) "... because it was not united by faith in those who heard."

- (F) faith is the vital ingredient in transforming God's promise into man's possession ... and Israel lacked it and failed to obtain rest

C. The Nature of God's Rest 4:3-5

1. The Rest Still Exists (verse 3)

a. We Came to Faith, We Now Enter

- (A) "For we who have believed enter that rest, ..."
- (B) the writer of Hebrews turns squarely to the Christian
- (C) a Christian is simply defined as one who believes in Jesus Christ; a person who has entrusted his whole being into Jesus' care
- (D) and having done that – note that this was expressed in the perfect tense, a past event with a present effect – having turned to Christ
- (E) then it is stated that 'we ... enter that rest' – in the present time
- (F) how that happens in the here and now is an open question, but perhaps it might be better understood as 'we are entering' ^{–{2}}. – by faith we started out on a hike through God's new creation which has as its terminus, God's rest. So that rest is ...

b. A Present Reality, A Future Realization

- (A) for verse 3 concludes, "... 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."
- (B) that rest existed, for
 - (1) one: it was already ready and waiting when God made the solemn declaration that the men of Israel should not go in
 - (2) two: God finished His creative works back in Genesis 1, and this rest is not something He had yet to create depending upon certain actions and responses of mankind
- (C) thus, God's rest existed, and though Israel did not enter into it because of unbelief, that rest still exists, waiting for us to enter in

2. Participation in God's Rest (verses 4-5)

a. God's Own Rest

- (A) then in verses 4 and 5, the writer puts together what seem to be two, very disparate quotations from the OT
 - (B) the first in verse 4 is from Genesis 2:2, "By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done."
 - (1) in Genesis 1 there is an account given of creation, from the very beginning to its consummation in the creation of man himself, made in the image of God
 - (2) "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:31)
 - (3) mankind having been created God's work was finished, and so "Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made." (Genesis 2:3)
 - (4) which gives an additional, deeper meaning to Jesus words, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) – a celebration of creating man
 - (5) now every other day of creation is defined by the phrase, 'and there was evening and there was morning' but not the seventh day, from which we know God's seventh day Sabbath – God's rest – still persists
 - (C) the second, in verse 5, is a repetition of that quotation from Psalm 95:11, 'They shall not enter my rest.'
 - (1) and by so linking these verses the writer leads us to see that the rest into which Israel failed to enter, was not merely the land of Canaan – that was only symbolic and illustrative
 - (2) but rather participating in God's rest for which man exists
- b. The Real Rest
- (A) then, which was created before God entered His Sabbath rest, is that place where God's people will be with their God, and He will be with His people according to the purpose of His creation
 - (B) it is His Father's house in which are many dwelling-places, to which Jesus has already gone to make ready – not to create it – to make ready for the arrival of the people of God
 - (C) it is not a place of inactivity – "But He (Jesus) answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."" (John 5:17). The point of this reply to the charge that Jesus had broken the sabbath by performing an act of healing on that day is this: "You charge me with breaking the

sabbath by working on it. But although God's sabbath began after the work of creation was finished, and is still going on, He continues to work – and therefore so do I." –{3}.

(D) God's rest is a place of fulfilment and satisfaction; and we have ...

D. The Hope of God's Rest 4:6-9

1. It's There to Be Entered (verse 6)

- a. the existence of anything in God's creations – however so seemingly trivial; and science has discovered this over & over – is for a purpose
- b. and because it is God's purpose, it is not to be thwarted
- c. verse 6 begins the final argument of this section concerning God's rest, "Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience," which sums up the two points made thus far
 - (A) that rest – by its very nature and being – still remains; waiting
 - (B) the adults of Israel who died in those 40 years of wilderness wandering – who had received the good news; who had heard the promise of the land – did not realize the promise
 - (C) because of their disobedience; because they did not believe
- d. and now the writer of Hebrews goes on to dispel the unspoken objection, 'but the next generations of Israel did enter Canaan'; for,

2. Canaan Not the Real Rest (verses 7-8)

- a. returning to the book of Psalms he again quotes from Psalm 95:7-8, 'He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."' and this is the point:
 - (A) this Psalm was written many years after Israel had entered Canaan
 - (B) it was long after Joshua 23:1, "Now it came about after many days, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side, and Joshua was old, advanced in years,"
 - (C) yet, God was still speaking of that promise as current, as "Today"
 - (D) even more notably, this reiteration of the promise continued every time that Psalm was read in the temple, the synagogue, and in the assembly of Christian believers – Today is the day to pay heed

b. hence Canaan was only symbolic of God's rest for His people, verse 8: "For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that." – that is, God would not have said 'Today' in Psalm 95, if the real rest had been in Canaan

(A) from which we are drawn to this marvellous conclusion

3. The Real Rest Is Coming (verse 9)

a. "So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God."

(A) it is a Sabbath rest

(B) it is the rest that is related to, and participation in the Sabbath that God has taken upon His finishing creation

(C) it is the fulfilment of God's purpose and plan for which He created the cosmos, and in that cosmos, created man in His own image

b. if God saw that everything was very good, and took satisfaction in His Sabbath rest, how satisfying and fulfilling that Sabbath rest must be!

E. Conclusion –

1. "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.", said Jesus. (Matthew 11:28)

2. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts

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ASV American Standard Version of 1901
AV Authorized (King James) Version of 1769
NAS New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition)
NIV New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NKJV New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers
WEY The New Testament in Modern Speech © 1902, 1912 R. F. Weymouth

Some of the commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

Barnes – *Notes on the New Testament, et alia*, by Rev Albert Barnes, Gall & Inglis, Edinburgh
BM – *Biblical Museum*, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870
EBC – *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, Michigan
 Hebrews, by Leon Morris
EGT – *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, Hodder & Stoughton
 Hebrews, by Marcus Dods
Gill – *Exposition of the Old Testament, Exposition of the New Testament*, by John Gill, D.D.
Kerux – The sermon & illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick at the web-site, www.holwick.com.
NICNT – *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*
 The Epistle to the Hebrew, by F. F. Bruce
RWP – *Robertson’s Word Pictures of the New Testament*, by Dr. A. T. Robertson
TYN – *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*
 Hebrews, by Donald Guthrie

2. Strictly speaking, in the Greek this would require the present participle rather than the present indicative. It does seem better, however, to understand it this way than as the generalised present.
3. NICNT, *in loc*.