

Duty Arising from the Promise of Rest (Heb. 4.1-10)

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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. ² 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 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. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." ⁵ And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest." ⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ 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." ⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Introduction

Our text for today (Heb. 4.1-10) continues the warning about heart hardening of people *within* the church. A springboard for discussion is the rebellious conduct of *God's people* in the wilderness on the way to rest in the Promised Land where they put God **to the test ... for forty years** (Heb. 3.8-9) and caused Him to say, **They shall not enter my rest** (cited in chapter 3, and now again in our section, 3.11; 4.3). Now, as we shall see, the biblical writer broadens the idea of God's rest by going back to original creation. Then, he further develops the notion of rest by moving forward from the wilderness wanderings to Joshua's day when Israel had entered the Promised Land and thus *into* God's rest (4.8). There is some difficulty here in the fact that He takes us back through David, Joshua, and the church in the wilderness to the promise of Genesis 2.2.

God's rest is the thread that ties the pieces of this chapter together. Thus, my title for this message is "Duty Arising from the Promise of Rest." We will cover this subject in two main points: 1) the duty that this promise grounds and 2) the promise that grounds this duty.

1A. The Duty that this promise grounds

"Therefore" in 4.1 informs us that the duty now coming into view builds on the danger and dangers of heart hardening cited in chapter 3. Hence, he speaks of the duty to be afraid: **let us fear**. Now, however, the writer focuses attention on God's promise of rest as a basis for this duty to be afraid. **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.**

The duty is indicated by the words "**let us fear lest any of you.**" This not only includes the writer with his readers (us); it also includes the mutuality the writer called for earlier (exhort one another, 4.12, **exhort one another every day**). In other words, we should have this reverential fear as a church body with regard to individual members: *let us fear* regarding *any of us*. This is a corporate fear that translates into joint actions; particularly, into the action of mutual exhortation with open-minded humility because of the deceitfulness of sin. It is a corporate duty of one anothering fear, fearful one anothering, or fear laden, fear oriented mutuality.

The duty of mutual admonishing, encouraging, instructing, and helping is to take place on a regular basis (today, every day) *with a sense of awe, reverence, and fear* of the consequences of heart hardening by the deceitfulness of sin. Hence, he repeats, **do not harden your hearts** (4.7).

We need to admonish one another with regard to an appearance, to something that seems to be the case (v. 1b, **lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it**). Surely, the idea of appearance prevents us from any kind of infallible looking into the hearts of others. This is not an invitation to destructive meddling (Phillips, *Hebrews*, 117), constant temperature taking, or the work of being spiritual police men or women. Nonetheless, the concern here is with even the appearance of failure of entry into God's rest.

What is the duty here? At the least, it is to be fearful regarding the appearances of evil and to conduct ourselves accordingly by honest conversation and mutual exhortation. We will carry ourselves with a spirit of "all for one and one for all." We will be in prayer for one another when we see weaknesses emerge. We will seek each other out for fellowship in the word to give mutual help to strengthen feeble knees and lift drooping hands (Heb. 12.12). It is like the case of Aaron and Hur holding up the hands of Moses and giving Israel victory in battle (Ex. 17.12). Pastors need this holding up of the hands, but we all need it at one time or another as well.

The tone of this is like the protective fear a parent, or a loving sister, or a caring brother. It is a loving, exhorting, encouraging, helping, lifting up, and instructing fear with respect to serious weakness that puts someone on a road that leads away from entry into rest. Sometimes that will involve instructing those who oppose themselves persistently. Their stubbornness calls for patience on our part in hope that God will grant repentance to the acknowledgement of the truth. Thus, the exhorting will be timely, kind, patient, and gentle (2 Tim 2.24).

If we speak the truth in love honestly and humbly, we can remove the experience of crisis management. Then we can take this text to be a word about fear laden mutuality that should be part and parcel of our Christian walk rubbing shoulders together as brothers and sisters in Christ's family. The goal then is that we help each other travel the heart softening road (because of the refrain: do not harden your hearts: v. 7, **Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts**).

Therefore, the church today is like Israel of old. We are being tested and how we respond is crucial to our walk with God. We are not to harden our hearts in unbelief, rebellion, disobedience, quarrelling, complaining, opposing God, and opposing God-appointed authority. Instead, we are to take the path of heart softening actions in faithful and obedient conduct. The heart softening actions of mutual exhortation, instruction, encouragement, admonition, and helpfulness are central in this fear-filled mutuality.

2A. The Promise that grounds this duty

What then is the promise that remains that encourages us to take up the duty of fear-laden mutuality (or one anothering fear)? We need to define this promise as clearly as possible if we are going to understand the complexities of verses 2-10. In view here is the promise of entry into eternal rest with God now by faith. We need to unpack this promise like unpacking a stuffed suitcase. The suitcase is Canaan. When we open it, we have two full sides. On one side is the promise of entry now by faith; on the other side is the promise to faith of entry at the end of history. We can state two things: Canaan promised entry now and entry at the end of history.

1B. Canaan promised entry now by faith

Accordingly, the text speaks of the way of faith and the way faith receives the benefits of the gospel: ² **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 **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.** ⁴ **For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works."**

By these words, the writer encourages and grounds the call to fear laden mutuality. He speaks of the benefits that faith receives and those benefits that unbelief forfeits.

Clearly, the church in the wilderness had the gospel as we have it (**good news came to us just as to them, v. 2**). Here, we can make some observations about the church then and now.

1) Israel's failure.

Israel in the wilderness (the group being compared with the church throughout) did not receive the benefit of the gospel; they did not receive the benefits that the gospel promises: **but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened (4.2)**. There are some textual problems with this verse, but no matter which way we go with them, the end result is the same: the absence of faith led to the loss of gospel benefit.

2) The church today

The church today stands in the same position with Israel with the gospel ringing in our ears (or vice-versa: **For good news came to us just as to them**). We have the gospel promises; we hear the message in regular preaching. By faith in Christ *we enter the rest they were promised: For we who have believed enter that rest* (4.3). What did Canaan promise? In one sense, it promised rest with God in the wilderness on the way.

This is the case for us today as the negative example of the wilderness church shows: **as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,'"** (4.3). The disobedience of Israel in the wilderness stirred up God's wrath against them so that He swore in a negative promise that they would not enter His rest. Thus, all the Israelites who came out of Egypt with Moses above twenty years of age died in the wilderness. Except for Joshua and Caleb, their bodies fell to the earth in the desert outside of the Promised Land and outside of God's rest. Why did they die in the wilderness without receiving rest with God? They died because of unbelief.

How does this apply to us, such that we enter "that" rest; the very rest that they missed out on?

What did Israel have at their fingertips, notably, there in the wilderness? What they had in front of them was not just Canaan, the land over there to which they traveled. Canaan represented the rest that God promised to His people: rest with Him in His rest *now on the way* in their journey through time. That becomes clear when the writer connects Canaan with creation: **"As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,'" although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.** ⁴ **For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works"** (4.3-4).

In other words, entering His rest in Canaan symbolized rest with God that He promised to them *there in the wilderness* to be received by faith. On one hand, it is clear that the Lord promised rest in Canaan that they forfeited by disobedience; therefore, He said, **"As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest'"** (v. 3). On the other hand, the writer tells us that they had the promise of God's rest at their fingertips because of God's promise from the beginning of the world. God promised entry into His rest from the inauguration of His rest at the end of the six days of creation. Therefore, He states that they did not enter God's rest "although" it was available to them as a promise from the foundation of the world: **although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.** ⁴ **For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works"** (4.3-4). This is why there is an abiding "today" to the gospel promise. There is the "today" of the wilderness, Canaan, David's day, the day of the writer to the Hebrews, and our day. The reason for this abiding "today" is the fact that God's promise of entry into His rest is a constant since He laid the foundation of the earth in six days and rested on the seventh day.

That *there is always a today* put before us on the earth since the very beginning is the first lesson here from Israel's failure: **Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience** (4.6). We enter it now by faith (4.3).

2B. Canaan promised entry in the future by faith

Now, let us not forget that in Joshua's day the OT church entered God's rest by faith. They entered literal rest in the land that they conquered by faith. But, the writer tells us, that was not the final rest for the people of God as is clear in the promise of another day by David in the Psalms: ⁷ **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."** ⁸ **For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on** (4.7-8). Canaan pictured rest with God now (in time, on the way through history, in the wilderness, and in the land), but it looked beyond itself to the coming city in glory. From the creation of the world and to the end of history, the promise of entering into rest with God by faith within history and in glory abides as a gospel overture: by faith the saints of old looked for a better country, a heavenly one (Heb. 11.16).

¹³ **These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.** ¹⁴ **For people who speak**

thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city (Heb. 11.13-16).

Canaan was never the promised rest in a definitive way or as an end in itself. It was a provisional rest that pointed beyond itself to rest with God in His rest. On one hand, Canaan was a reminder that God gives entry into His rest now within history. On the other hand, it was a reminder that God gives entry into eternal rest with Him in glory. This resting with God in His rest always had a now and a not yet to it. It was always a summons to humble faith in the sovereign God and king of creation.

Conclusion

1) By faith in Christ, you enter ahead of time into the eternal rest yet to come.

There is an abiding today to God's promise. The rest of soul that Jesus gives is a foretaste of the glory to come. It is a taste of heaven ahead of time to know and walk with the Lord Jesus as your prophet, priest and king. As He said, ²⁸ **Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"** (Mat. 11.28-30). Faith in the risen Lord is the way that you will make it through the wilderness where He is testing you for your good and His glory.

2) This promise, this blessing now on the way, reinforces one another's fear.

The Holy Spirit tells you to have this kind of fear in light of the promise: **while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it** (4.1). Speaking the truth to one another in love, helping each other through times of weakness, and exhorting one another every day as long as it is called today is your duty because you have rest of soul and peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us fall down before the majesty of our God who created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day; may we honor Him as sovereign Lord of all that He created and made; may we hear the promise of rest with Him in His rest that follows working six days like He worked; by the blessing of the Spirit may we enter that rest now on the way in refreshing anticipation of that "sacred, high, eternal noon." To Him be all glory now and forevermore, amen.