

A Striving for Rest

By Sinclair Ferguson

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Test: Hebrews 4:1-13

PRAYER:

Let's pray together.

Our Heavenly Father, we sing your praises and hear voices adore and worship you. And there is something that rises within us that longs that the whole creation would be one triumphant choir of praise and adoration to you, our great and magnificent God. We marvel that you have become to us in Jesus Christ a tender Father, and that though you are the creator of the vastness of the cosmos, you have invited us to become your children. To know that your hand is upon our lives, that you are a father who gathers us into his presence to speak to us through his word. We thank you that so often in this room for ourselves, for multitudes who now see the face of Christ clearly and worship without sin and without end. We thank you that you have come so often here and opened your word to our hearts, and as though by an eternal magic, opened our hearts to your word. Lord, use your divine keys afresh. We pray today. Pick open our locked hearts. Show us afresh that you know us better than we know ourselves. And deeper. Show us that you love us more than we could ever have dreamt. Show us that our need of your forgiveness is far greater than we ever imagined. But that the saving grace of Jesus Christ is more powerful than we could ever have dreamed. And speak Lord to us because your servants are listening. This we pray in Jesus our Savior's name. Amen.

Please be seated.

INTRODUCTION: [00:02:15]

Now in our Sunday morning worship, we are making our way through the wonderful, if at sometimes mysterious book of the letter to the Hebrews. And we've come today to Hebrews chapter four, verses one through 13, and you'll find this passage in the pew Bible page 1002. Children who have their children's Bible. It's on page 1493. And as always, I think it will be enormously helpful for you if you're able to follow along. Just a word that will help us put this teaching in its context. At the beginning of chapter three, the author is urging us, the readers, to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus. And he's described Jesus in two ways. Jesus is the apostle of our confession and Jesus is the high priest of our confession. He takes two chapters to explain what it means that Jesus is the apostle of our confession, chapters three and four. And then from the end of chapter four, right through to chapter ten, he takes many chapters to explain to us what it means to have Jesus as our high Priest. Jesus is our apostle, just as Moses was God's Old Testament apostle. But Moses' apostleship failed because he was never able to lead the people into the promised land. Jesus is a far greater apostle sent from God, and therefore he says we should pay the closer attention to Jesus. And He has used Psalm 95 as a text. He is encouraged us not to harden our hearts in case we do not enter God's rest. And now, in chapter four, he is taking up that little point. Don't harden your hearts. Chapter three. Make sure you do not fall short of God's rest, in Chapter four. So this is God's Word.

SCRIPTURE READING:[00:04:38]

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,

(he's thinking about the people in the days of Exodus who didn't go into the promised land),

the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest as he has said, (Psalm 95) "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: (Genesis chapter two). "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. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest.

SERMON: [00:06:32]

Now, a question. Do you understand this? Strive -- to enter that rest. Interesting, isn't it? 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.

Many of my friends, as you would imagine, are preachers. Some of those friends who are preachers believe that if you are preaching from a passage in the Scripture, it is incumbent upon you to refer to every phrase, even word in that passage. And that you have not faithfully handled the scriptures unless you have made reference to every word in the text. I have, as you would guess, reservations about that kind of preaching for one reason. At least I know it would be true in my hands, it would be exceedingly boring. But there's a far more important reason, and it's this that the New Testament apostles themselves apparently did not preach that way. And we have a wonderful illustration of that here in Hebrews chapter three and four, where in order to make his point from Scripture, it's almost as though the author has remembered that some time before he had preached a little sermon on Psalm 95 that fits into his teaching precisely here. You notice, for example, he only makes reference to half of the Psalm. The second half. Not only so, but he focuses essentially on the two big ideas. Big idea number one is that we are always in danger of hardening our hearts when we hear God's Word. There is nothing more depressing or discouraging about being a preacher of the gospel than knowing as you give your energy to the preaching of the Word of God, you are actually effecting in people's lives the hardening of their own heart. And the more energetically

you do it with, the greater passion you do it, the more likely it is that hearts are going to be hardened in resistance against God's word breaking in. And he remembers these words from the 95th Psalm. When you hear God's voice, do not harden your heart. It's the great temptation, he thinks, whenever we hear about the Lord Jesus to harden our hearts. And even, as I say, these words, you know, if you're doing it. You may not like the thought that I should probe a little. But, you know, whether your heart is being hardened towards the Lord as I speak or whether your heart is being drawn out towards the Lord Jesus as I speak.

But then there is the second big point. Point number one, don't harden your heart. Which we looked at the last time. Point number two. So long as there is the promise of rest in God, do not make the mistake of falling short. So long as there is the promise of rest in God, do not make the mistake of falling short.

And there's something very strange about this at first sight, because he's talking about something that took place during the Exodus -- centuries before. How they had been brought out of bondage in Egypt and God had promised them the land flowing with milk and honey, a land in which they could find rest, deliverance from the bondage they had experienced these past centuries. And even although they sent spies and spies came out and said, "This is a goodly land. We should enter it." Most did not enter it because they did not trust in the promise of God to give them rest.

And so we might think that's dead and gone. That's past history. So why is it that he drags it up again and says to his contemporaries, so long as there is the promise of rest, you need to make sure you do not fall short of that rest.

He gives us, I think, three answers to that question. The first is because we have heard the good news of gospel rest. As they heard the good news of gospel rest. They heard the news of our physical, geographical rest in the context of which they could find deep rest of soul in the Lord. And he says, you notice to his contemporaries, the promise of entering this rest still stands, verse two, because good news came to us just as to them. We have heard good news of rest. Your greatest need, actually. Your deepest need because you are a restless soul by nature. But there is good news that God provides rest. Now, where have we heard this good news? He doesn't say as much, but we know where we have heard of this good news. And perhaps the most famous words of our

Lord Jesus, the comfortable words of our Lord Jesus. You who labor and are heavy Laden. Then come to me, says Jesus, and in me you will find rest. Take my yoke on you. Learn of me. For I am meek and lowly. And you shall find rest for your souls.

You know, the first hearers of those words did not think to themselves, "Oh, that's very nice if there's rest in Jesus." The first hearers of those words understood Jesus is promising to give us what Moses could not give us. A deep, satisfying, life transforming rest in the Lord. And so the author is saying to his contemporaries, since the promise of rest in Christ has been proclaimed to you. It would be the greatest tragedy of your life if you knew of that promise and did not come to the Lord Jesus to find rest.

But there's a second reason he emphasizes that this promise of rest still stands. Because he says, if you think about it, the promise of rest in the land was never the foundational, deep down promise of rest. The deep down promise of rest. Was the promise of rest in the Lord. That's why he refers. You notice in this context to the fact that even before the days of the Exodus, indeed, right at the very creation of the world, God had spoken about creating the world and then himself resting. And it's so organized man's life that one day in seven man would experience a kind of constant gospel symbol. One day a week of the need to find rest in the Lord. To know his presence. To live out of a sense of fellowship with him, of peace, with God, of harmony with God, and therefore to be able to live the whole of your life within the context of knowing that you lived with God and you walked with God. So that right from the very beginning God had given a weekly symbol to men and women. Of a much deeper rest than simply a physical cessation from labor. Or entry into a promised land.

And then there seems to be a third reason. He goes on to say, you notice in verses nine and ten, he says, "Well, if you think about it", verse eight, "if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day". Joshua did give them rest, didn't he? Joshua actually brought them into the land. But the fact that after Joshua had brought them into the land, God says, "Today, if you hear my voice, make sure you enter into the rest." Very clear indication that that entry into the land under Joshua was never the deep seated soul, satisfying rest of grace to which God was calling his people. And so he adds in verse nine "Today", there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Now most modern commentators think that he's looking forward here to the rest of heaven. It seems to me he is actually speaking about what we call the Lord's Day Sabbath. This

language is not used of heavenly rest in the Bible. This language is used of the day of rest that God has given to his people. And I think his argument is this. The very fact that now that Jesus has come and that Sabbath day has been turned into the first day of the week from being the last day of the week. The very fact that there is for us in the Gospel, a day of Sabbath rest when we are able not just to stop work, but consciously to rest in the Lord and to be with his people and to be refreshed by his presence, to be ministered to and fellowship, to be built up by his word, to have Sunday school together and family time together and casual time with the saints of God. That we are able to enjoy that rest once a week is an indication to us that the invitation to the deep down rest that you can find only through faith in Jesus Christ is an invitation that is still there. And my dear friends, how badly we need it. This is Bible 101. God has made you to rest one day a week. This is New Testament Gospel 101. You rest in Christ and your life is transformed. And most of the people to whom you speak tomorrow who are not believers may say to you, How was your weekend? I want you to say this to them. It finished on Saturday night. And if they say, well, my weekend began on Friday night and it went through to Sunday night they tell you all you need to know about the difference between being a Christian and a non-Christian? You live the week an entirely different way because you live your life an entirely different way. The man or woman of the world works hard and longs for the weekend to stop so they can stop his work. The Christian believer begins his or her week resting in the Lord, and as a result, that resting in the Lord transforms, influences, creates a different atmosphere to everything that I do. And so I live my life as a Christian believer. If I found this deep rest in Jesus Christ, I live each week of my life out of that rest and into my service.

It's never wise for me to dabble in anything scientific. But this is like Newton's laws of motion, isn't it? A body at rest tends to remain at rest. A body in motion tends to remain in motion. You watch the unbeliever and the way the unbeliever spends the weekend. The body is still in motion. You watch the believer and how the believer spends the whole week, the body, the person, is still at rest in Jesus Christ and it's from that resting position in Jesus Christ that emerges the poise and the stability that enables the Christian to live with dignity and without panic in this world. Yes. That's all old phooey. It's all old hat, isn't it? It is nonsense. This is old style religion. It's absolutely nonsense. Do you know how many trillions of dollars the pharmaceutical companies make out of prescriptions that are given to people who have found no rest? The idea how laughable we moderns are. We're so scientific. We're so intelligent. We can despise this old

fashioned Bible idea of needing a Sabbath day, and we can't see ourselves clearly enough to discover we are a pharmaceutically addicted society. And God from the creation of the world has given us the recipe for deep seated rest from which we live the whole of the Christian life. And we have despised our birthright. We fools. We have despised our birthright. You know the kind of things we say at legalism, isn't it? Let's talk. You just mentioned the Sabbath day. It's legalism, isn't it? Well, I've said to you before, you know, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of Saint Andrews and the US Golfing Association produces a huge book every second year to explain to people how the rules of golf work. And I've never heard anybody say about those books, "pure legalism, play the game any way you want." No, You play the game the way it was designed. If only we would learn this. You see, this isn't about legalism. The observation of days or the non-observation of days is about something far deeper than that. It's about whether you are resting in Christ or not.

Let me say to you, if you're a teenager and you find yourself scrambling to do your homework at 7:00 on a Sunday night. That's the clearest evidence you could have if you could only see it. That you're not really resting in Christ. You spoiled the other six days by not doing your homework in them, and you're in the process of spoiling the seventh by the fact that it's been hanging over you all wretched day.

Now, some of you parents are going to go home and say, did you listen to what he said? What about you? Isn't it amazing? How the simplest principle that God has given to us. I mean, you only need to be able to count to seven. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. As long as between hands and toes, you have seven digits, you can do this. And I rest in Christ on day one. And I find that that rest in Christ goes on through day seven. I wonder if you've got Christianity 101.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,
Come unto me and rest.
Lay down, thou weary one,
Lay down thy head upon my breast.
I came to Jesus as I was
Weary and worn and sad.
Found in him a resting place.
He has made me glad.*

It's not rocket science. And to be a great theologian to understand this. You just need to be able to count to seven. And begin with Jesus. And so he's saying, oh, the madness of your lives, he's saying.

And this is why it goes on very strangely to say the word of God is sharper than any two edged sword that appears to have no connection whatsoever to what he's been saying about resting in the Sabbath. What's the connection? Ah, well, you, you maybe felt the connection. That's what he's teaching us here that gets inside us. That exposes us. Actually, the language he uses here. "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed." That word exposed would better be translated helpless. We're all helpless when the word of God comes. And I was nine, I think, somebody in my elementary class at school got this marvelous book with pin figures in it. Teach yourself Judo. And there we are nine year old boys ready to be, you know, fifth Dan, black belts or brown belts and dreaming of huge people coming to attack us; and, ah-ha, boom, boom and down you go. And the first couple of pages, I never got to page four, but the first couple of pages had some absolutely terrific moves. I can have you screaming if you give me the opportunity for these terrific moves, especially the one behind the ear lobes. And then there was the one where you went for the jugular. Ah-ha! Boom! Gotcha! Now, you know there was a wrestling move in Greco-Roman wrestling where you went for the jugular. And your opponent was rendered absolutely helpless. And that's the term he uses here. When God's word goes for the jugular. He's gotcha. And sometimes it's the simplest thing. Sometimes it's just this, your mind is restless. Your heart is restless. Your life is restless. You can't stop. And you don't know where to go. And he's saying don't fall short of entering the rest so long as the invitation is there. And today the invitation is here. As surely as these words come out of my mouth. The invitation is here today from the Lord Jesus. If you are laboring and are heavy laden. Burdened down. Dear friend, come to Jesus and he will give you rest. And from that rest in Jesus, everything else will be transformed. Well, let's trust him for that. And know of a surety at the opportunity to enter the rest is still here, today.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the restfulness of His heart. We come to you in our restlessness. We thank you that

there is a place of quiet rest near to your heart, in our Savior Jesus Christ. And we pray that through your grace you would lead us there. And we ask it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.