

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part sixteen

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KEEPING THE SABBATH - ENTERING INTO GOD'S NEW COVENANT REST

Hebrews 4:1-10 - "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."

I was 12 years old. My next elder brother, Ed, was 14. I can still vividly remember the Sunday afternoon. The weather was warm and sunny. We came home from church and dad had barbequed burgers on what we used to call the hibachi. Everyone was done eating. Mom had settled into her traditional Sunday afternoon nap. All was right with the world.

The events that ensued are a bit of a blur. My best friend, Danny, had just come through the back gate that gave entrance from the back lane. In his hands he carried a football. And, in one of those reckless moments of my misspent youth, Danny threw the ball to Ed, who, in one of those moments when carnal excitement totally blocks out holy thinking, threw it to me.

That's right. What started out as a seemingly innocent afternoon ended, as all sin snowballs, with three Christian boys eventually playing catch with the football on Sunday.

As it turned out, my mother hadn't yet hit the sheets in her bed. And she and dad stormed out the back door to find what I can only assume appeared to them to be the children of Israel dancing around a golden calf at the base of the mountain. Then came the question - how could they have raised Christian boys who didn't understand what it meant to ***"remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy?"***

Of course, this was not the first time I had been reminded of the ***fourth commandment***. I had grown up in church all my life and heard pastors summon those who tended to drift away from church once the weather warmed to ***"remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."*** This wasn't a day for the beach or the pool (though no one had a pool back then). It was a day for church.

More recently the Sabbath command has been making a more contemporary comeback. People are urged to hold burn out and stress at bay. God didn't create us as beings who can burn the candle at both ends for sustained lengths of time. He gave us the gift of a ***Sabbath rest***. This has been redefined as a time of inner nourishment and re-grouping. We need a weekly Sabbath to center our hearts and wean us away from the callous noise of the rat-race. So, ***remember your personal "Sabbath day."***

So there are three pictures. And at this point I need to offer ***two convictions***:

First, each of these three examples - however misguided - contains a needed emphasis. My parents may not have been theologically careful enough with their wayward, football tossing boys. But I think it ***is*** true we have lost much by making Sunday just like any other day of the week, with a quick church service tacked on to the beginning. Secularism can't be counter-balanced with such light-weight discipline. And future generations will bear the scar of our selfishly indulged gospel freedom.

The same could be said of pastors who were desperately trying to fill empty seats on Sunday night by reminding people to ***"keep the Sabbath day!"*** Even if their old and new covenants were somewhat skewed, it's unarguably true not many Christians need ***less*** time in accountable, committed fellowship with the body of Christ on earth. The ***desire*** behind the pastor's plea was sound even if the ***theology*** was not.

And finally, you'll get no argument from me about the need for a regularly kept day - a so-called ***"personal Sabbath"*** - a time set apart - for rejuvenation, relaxation, meditation, and refreshment. Life can't be sustained constantly wound up tight. God designed us

for varied rhythms.

So my **first conviction** would be there is much to be considered in each of these three Sabbath situations. Some are a bit strange to our ears, fair enough, but there are long forgotten elements of necessary reminder in each as well.

On to **conviction number two**. Whatever we may think about each of these three Sabbath situations, **not one of them has anything to do with the most extensive, detailed Sabbath account in the New Testament**. And that's the focus of our teaching time today - at least the time I've not already used up.

1) **THERE ARE THREE PICTURES OF "REST" IN THIS TEXT AND EACH OF THEM PICTURES A DEEPER REALITY IN CHRIST**

There's a lot going on in these verses. In chronological order (not necessarily in their textual order) there are three **rests** described. **First**, there is the **seventh day** rest when God completed His work in creation. This rest is described in **verse 4** and **verse 10**:

Hebrews 4:4 - "For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: **"And God rested on the seventh day from all his works."**

Hebrews 4:10 - "....for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works **as God did from his.**"

Second, there is the **rest of the promised land**, missed by the rebellious generation in the wilderness at Kadesh. The references to this rest are scattered throughout the entire passage. You can pick them out in **verses 2, 6, 8**:

Hebrews 4:2 - "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.**"

Hebrews 4:6 - "Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and **those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience....**"

Hebrews 4:8 - "**For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.**"

So that's **two** rests described. The first, at the close of the creation account. And the second, on the border of the promised land. There's one more mentioned:

Third, there is a promised rest **still in the future** that the **creation account rest** and the **promised land rest** only **picture in prophetic form**. Our entire text is built around the idea there is a **rest remaining - a rest yet to be entered into**. This is repeated too frequently not to be considered the entire point of this passage:

Hebrews 4:1 - "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.**"

Just to be clear, God's rest on the seventh day of creation is a completed rest. And by the time David is quoted in the words of **Psalm 95** in our Hebrews text Israel had been dwelling in the rest of the promised land for centuries. And yet, according to our writer of Hebrews, there is a promise of rest **still standing**. Here's the next reference to this remaining rest:

Hebrews 4:3 - "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.**"

So here, the comparison between God's **completed** Sabbath at creation and the **rest of the promised land** missed by that rebellious generation at Kadesh is clearly made. There's still another reference to this third remaining rest:

Hebrews 4:8 - "**For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.**"

Our writer makes the obvious point that if **Joshua** had given Israel the rest God had in mind we wouldn't still be looking for another rest **long after the land was finally entered**.

So this is point number one. There are **three rests** in our text. Two are past. One is still a live option. And the first two rests - at the completion of **creation** and at the entry point to **Canaan** are prophetic pictures designed to **point to a greater reality beyond themselves**.

2) **GOD'S SEVENTH DAY REST AFTER CREATION HOLDS UP GOD'S COMPLETED CREATION WORK AS A PROPHETIC PICTURE POINTING TO THE COMPLETION OF HIS REDEPTIVE WORK IN CHRIST**

In other words, what was being prophetically pictured in God's seventh day creation rest is the **redemptive reality** stated in **Hebrews 1:1-3** - "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. [3] He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...."

"Are you sure, Pastor Don? That's a big statement. How do you **know** the creation Sabbath rest was only a prophetic picture pointing to the finished work of redemption in Christ?"

For sure you shouldn't just take my word for it. This is the explicit teaching of the whole New Testament - **Colossians 2:16-17** - "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. [17] These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

These are Paul's concerned words to followers of Christ who are trying to find redemption and life in the temporary **shadows** of the Old Covenant rather than the **solid, permanent reality of the Christ**. The **Sabbath** is called the **shadow**. The Christ is the reality **casting** the shadow. In other words, the difference between Christ and the Sabbath is the difference between the **skyscraper** and the **shadow of the skyscraper**.

This is not just theological mumbo-jumbo. This matters. You can have a great office in a skyscraper. You can have a lovely condo in a skyscraper. You can stay warm in the winter in a skyscraper. You can't find any of that in the **shadow** of a skyscraper. The whole coming and work of Christ is to call all people **out** of the shadow.

Remember, God had a **plan** when He rested from His finished creation work in Genesis. It wasn't that He was just bushed from all that creating. God never sat down under some tree, wiping His sweaty forehead saying, "Boy, I'm just beat. If I have to create one more tree I'm going to go out of my mind!"

No. His creation rest was intentionally pointing to another **rest** - one the writer of our text in Hebrews says still **remains open** (9). There has come about another great **completed** work. There is a **rest firmly standing** - a rest from human works of merit for divine favor - a rest from the dead pursuit of relationship with God in the maze of man-made religion - a rest from the pain of real guilt that can never be erased by the distraction of empty pleasure or wealth.

Remember it today. There is a **Christ-centered meaning** behind that seventh day divine rest. **The completion of creation was orchestrated to point to the completion of redemption**. This is the reason for the Sabbath pattern. It was never meant as a **stand alone event** anymore than the entire **Old Covenant** was meant as a permanent **stand alone covenant**.

3) **THE PROMISED LAND REST RESISTED AT KADESH IS A PROPHETIC PICTURE THAT WHILE REDEPTIVE REST IN CHRIST IS FREE IT IS NOT AUTOMATIC**

Hebrews 4:6-10 - "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."

If we were to cheat a bit and look ahead we would realize we only get the **first-fruits** of our redemptive rest in Christ in this present age. You would have to zip all the way into **Hebrews chapter 11** to get the full picture:

Hebrews 11:8-10 - "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. [9] By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as

in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. [10] For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."

Hebrews 11:13-16 - "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."

So the rest we enter into through faith in Christ is *actual* but not *finalized*. But the main point of today's text with its repeated warnings about the *rest-resisting generation at Kadesh* is we must never confuse *free* rest with *easy* rest.

Hebrews 4:1, 6-7 - "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....[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."

Think for just a minute about that generation on the edge of the promised land. They had been supernaturally delivered from Egypt. They could never have delivered themselves. What grace God showed!

But there's something else really striking. They had all left Egypt with the goal of entering the promised land - the land God had promised years earlier to Abraham. That's where they were heading all along. That's *why* they left Egypt. The promised land was the *goal*. And then, a whole generation says "*No*," right at the point of entering the very land they left Egypt to reach.

Plans and goals aren't self-sustaining. What they intended at the beginning they *rejected* at the *finish*. Starting is not the same as finishing. That's the whole point of the repeated emphasis of our text between the *decisions of yesterday* and the *continued faith of today* - Hebrews 4:6-7 - "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."

"*Today*." It's an urgent word. It calls us all to focus. You can dream about your conversion in the distant past. You can long for the actual glory of the new creation in the future. But this is where we live - *today*.

"*Today, if you hear his voice*" (7b). There's *opposition* today - not so much in our part of the globe - not yet. But there is certainly cultural ridicule and pressure to conform. There are *distractions and idols aplenty*. And this danger is *especially* seductive in our part of the world.

Remember why you started out in Christ. Remember the goal. Drive your heart relentlessly into redemptive rest in Christ. Soon it will be fulfilled in all its splendor. Refuse to die in the wilderness. There's no life to be had there. Never, never, never harden your heart to the "*today-call*" of Jesus.