

Sermon 10: Hebrews 4:1-10: Entering God's Rest

OUTLINE

Faith—persevering not justifying

Rest—final not present

Works—striving not saving

INTRODUCTION

We hear a lot about justifying faith, by which we are saved through the receiving of the free gift of Christ's righteousness and a dependence upon His works not ours, but we do not always hear a lot about persevering faith, the faith of the saved which works by enduring. We hear a lot about not fearing God because we are His children, He is not longer our judge, and we should feel bold to go into the very Holy of Holies; but we do not hear a lot about the holy fear by which we take the warnings of God's words seriously, that fear and trembling by which we work out the salvation we already have. We hear a lot about works which cannot save, works that are filthy rags, and the dead works of sin, but we also need to hear more about the works to which we are saved, the works that make our saving faith evident, works that can involve blood, sweat and tears as part of our sanctification and perseverance. It is understandable that we often stress the faith by which we are saved over the faith of the saved; works as something that cannot save, rather than works being the natural outworking of our salvation; and fear as something that the saved have put away and not as something that is changed but still present in the life of the believer, because salvation is so important. However, the bible deals with a number of different situations. There are places where justification not sanctification is in the foreground because of the threat of legalism; but in the book of Hebrews the problem is not a saint struggling with legalism but apostasy, and so in the foreground of Hebrews is persevering faith not justifying faith, the appropriate fear to the warnings against apostasy; and an emphasis on striving and works as the outworking of our faith.

We are in the middle of a sober section of exhortation where the author is using Psalm 95 and its sad story of the unbelief of Israel in the wilderness and their failure to enter into the rest of Canaan due to unbelief. Our author is using them as a parallel to our own situation to urge us onto persevering faith; godly fear and striving works. Having just spoken about failing to enter into rest/Canaan because of unbelief, 3:19; the author now turns to the topic of our rest and our need for a persevering faith to enter it. I am looking at the section before us under three headings, faith; rest; works. Faith—persevering not justifying; Rest—final not present; Works—striving not saving. I have used these as my headings because these are three familiar words, faith, rest, works; but they are used in a different way to the ordinary way we are used to given the dominant problem of apostasy the letter is concerned to address.

First a word about interpretive choices before we begin. The rest being spoken of in this passage has been taken in three different ways. Rest always speaks of salvation, but with three different emphases. Does rest refer primarily to the present rest of justification and resting from works righteousness, with some of our final rest in the background? Or, does the author perceive rest as an already but not yet reality with more of a 50-50 split between the rest of present salvation and the rest of future salvation? Or, option 3 does rest primarily talk about future rest with God in the new creation? Each have their supporters and

no major doctrine is impacted by your choice, I take option three. The only verse that seems to be a problem with this interpretation is v3, 'For we who have believed enter that rest.' That sounds like we have already entered into rest in some way. Now it is true that in other places in scripture salvation as present rest is presented, Matt. 11:28-30. But in this context a clearer translation is 'For we who have believed *are entering* that rest,' in other words it is more ambiguous. On top of that a present tense verb with a future orientation is common in Greek. An English equivalent of a present tense verb speaking of a future action would be 'I am going to study tomorrow', 'am going' is in a present tense form, but describing future action. [The English expression 'going to' is technically a present but is clearly used for the future, e.g., 'I am going to study tomorrow.' 'Going to' is interestingly a parallel to the Greek verb translated as 'enter', εἰσέρχομαι. This is more mechanically translated as 'I go to/into'.]¹ The reason this is important is because we see the sustained parallel of the text between that unbelieving generation and our own are both living after a great deliverance, the cross and Egypt; both are in the wilderness headed to our homeland; both are suffering severe trials but are amply provided for by God—granted we need to be careful to say we are being tested according to the conditional elements of the Mosaic Covenant; both have to heed God's word, cling to Him in trust, and push on in obedience to the hope that lies before us. Both have to exercise persevering faith; both have to live looking in faith to future rest; both have to strive and work on this part of the journey. This parallel is clear on the part of the author, but of course we cannot overdraw on the parallel.

Secondly, this is a key text in the sabbath debate. Some see 4:9 as saying that there still remains a sabbath day commandment for the NC people of God to obey, 'So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.' I do believe that the 4th commandment continues to apply to Christians as our Lord's Day observance, I do not take this text as a prooftext for this view.

Faith—persevering not justifying

V1-2, '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.' The last chapter ended with the scary notion that those who were unbelieving did not enter God's rest. This leads the author to press the point with us, 'let us fear.' A lot of people struggle with the idea that we are to be motivated by fear. Doesn't perfect love cast out all fear? Surely there is no condemnation for the justified believer? Many assume that because we are justified by faith, we are dressed in Christ's righteousness, our judgement day verdict is brought forward, we are adopted, we are given the Spirit as a seal of our inheritance, that this must mean there cannot be fear in the Christian life. Others would follow this up and say that fear is not of faith but unbelief, that it is a base motive for our obedience because fear will make God look like He does not love us, or have saved us, and fear driven obedience is not pleasing to God, because your only obeying because you don't want to go to hell not because it is the right thing to do, or because He is worthy, or because the truths of the gospel are not enough to melt your heart to make you willing. Thankfully the bible is written to address different occasions

¹ Robert J. Cara, [Hebrews: A Mentor Commentary](#), Mentor Commentaries (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2024).

and is not a bunch of abstract truths. When addressing hurting souls or those afflicted with legalistic fears, a deep reminder of how much Jesus has done, that it relies upon his doing not ours, that faith is receiving a free gift not an act of giving to God, these settle the tender fears of a hurting conscience. But the bible also addresses those who say they are Christians and continue to persist in chasing sin, or in this instance those who are flirting with apostasy. And here the other truths come to the fore, that those who fall away never had saving faith, that true saving faith manifests itself as persevering faith, that although we are not saved by works, God works out the salvation He began in us through the means of warnings that are heeded and applied. That those who walk away cannot have a false sense of assurance, that they should expect to be judged, and those inside flirting with the idea should have a healthy respect of a holy God who punishes sin. This call to an appropriate fear does not imply that we are saved by grace but finish our own salvation ourselves; nor does it imply that true salvation is a temporary thing that comes and goes. No, for those who are truly born again, it is the knowledge that God is holy and does punish those who despise the truth and pursue sin, that acts as a goad to stimulate perseverance. This call to be fearful is not a call to be consumed with a panicky anxiety but to reckon with the truth of God's holiness and the seriousness of sin.

As in the previous section the author highlights it was those who were part of God's people who heard the truth, that were unbelieving and did not enter the land. Do not think that because once you prayed a sinners prayer, that once you were part of a church if you walk away, you have our fire insurance and you can cheat judgement. No, true saving faith by which we are justified is enabled by the same Spirit who regenerates us and moves us to heed these warnings and produce perseverance. Notice how he highlights how the good news came to them, they were hearers, but they did not have faith, it is this faith which is essential. As opposed to the unbelief which was in the wilderness generation. Now the word faith here is not as we might expect talking about justifying faith but persevering faith. It is true that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. If any sinner hears the good news that God loves sinners and has sent Jesus to die to pay for their sins, and that if they believe in Him they can be saved, if they hear and believe they will be saved. The author is not denying this but is talking about the ongoing faith of the Christian life not conversion. He is saying that hearing is not enough but faith united with hearing and action. This is the faith that proves itself to be faith because it works. Some content themselves with hearing and not doing. James has strong warnings against this intellectual and barren faith, James 1:22-25, 'But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.'

Please note that persevering faith operates the same way saving faith does. This is important. Your faith can grow weak. The shield of faith is that which we use in spiritual warfare to quench the fiery darts of the devil. When his lies try to make sin better than it is, obedience more impossible than it is, God less willing to save than He is; God not as good as He is, etc., you meet his lies by believing God's word over his lies. But what if our shield arm is weak, how do we strengthen our faith? Faith comes by hearing. Regular intake of God's word, meditating upon it, renewing our minds, thinking on those things that are good

clean and pure. The Spirit uses His sword the word to build up our faith. This is one of the reasons why we go to church.

V3a, 'For we who have believed [are entering] that rest, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" Here the author is using argument from the opposite. Those who did not believe did not enter, those who continue in persevering faith are those who enter. Once again, the faith in view is not justifying faith, but saving faith manifesting itself as persevering faith, and those who have this faith persevere until the end and enter God's final rest. Here are two basic applications, take the warnings seriously, if you are a believer, your Spirit taught heart will hear God speaking to you in those warnings and you will heed them. Secondly, strengthen your faith by hearing. In these ways we do the work of persevering faith.

Rest—future not present

We have seen the exhortation to fear and to practice persevering faith, the next section is the author having spoken of entering God's rest in the words 'my rest' now proving from the OT that despite Israel entering the land, and even living in the land when David wrote Ps. 95, there is still a rest, a final rest for God's people. V3b-9 are a series of proofs that a final rest still awaits therefore we must still press on, holding fast to Christ in persevering faith.

V3-9, '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. ⁴For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." ⁵And again in this passage he said,

"They shall not enter my rest."

⁶Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷again 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."

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.'

So follow the logic. The author quotes Ps 95 in v3 talking about 'my rest' God's rest, it is this rest not the land of Canaan that we are persevering in faith for. How does he prove this. Firstly in v3b-4 he goes back to Gen. 2:2. Now the original Sabbath when God rested was not for God's sake but Adam's. It was a creation ordinance intended to regulate his life around work and worship. Like the tree of life it was sign of the covenant. Adam was in a unique covenant, the CoW, if he passed his probation he would enter into God's rest. By working he would enter into rest. This is the only day that is not described as ending with evening, so that even grammatically it is left open for Adam to enter. The original sabbath was a picture of eschatological rest. Entering the land was intended as another picture of eschatological rest. We even see in the book of Hebrews how Abraham longed for the heavenly Jerusalem, 11:10 and a better country 11:16 than the earthly one that was promised in the land of Israel. Secondly, in v5 he uses Psalm 95 as a proof that there is another rest beyond the land. After all David was in the land when he wrote about his generation not being unbelieving but believing that they might enter God's rest. This cannot be

the land for they are already in it. He underlines the today part in v6-7 to show that God was still calling for David's generation and now these first century believers, and ourselves to believe and enter. Thirdly, he reinforces his point mentioning Joshua in v8. They failed to enter the promised land under Moses, wandered around in the wilderness for 40 years, then Joshua led them into the land. But this could not have been the Sabbath rest of God we are invited into because David speaks of another rest even after Joshua led them into the land. Now there would have been something arresting to these original readers, because in the Greek the name Joshua is Jesus, same name in Hebrew and Greek. This would have caught their attention and raised the issue that the first Joshua was only a type of Jesus as our Joshua who leads us into the promised land of the new creation. All of that brings him to his conclusion in v9, 'So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.' As mentioned before this is not the weekly sabbath but the final sabbath rest.

What about the Sabbath day? Well like marriage which speak of the final consummation of Christ and His bride, even though we taste some of the truth of our present salvation because we do not experience completely the Sabbath as well as marriage is still part of this age. The day has changed because it is not looking back to the first creation but to a new creation. It is not structured according to the original CoW that Adam was in where he would work to enter rest, but because Christ has fulfilled the CoW by His life and death the day has changed to the first day of the week so that the pattern is not work to enter rest; but now we rest and work from rest. The 1st day of the week is now an opportunity for us to set aside our regular work and worship as God's people, to taste the powers of the age to come through the appointed means of grace, and be the community we will one day be in the NHNE; where we can in part worship like we will worship in that day. This genuinely restores us as equips us to continue in our persevering faith and our walk in this wilderness.

Works—striving not saving

V10, 'for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.' This verse is saying to us that one day, we who are believers, who are evidencing our saving faith by persevering faith, that those who endure to the end will enter into God's final rest. That same rest that the original sabbath pointed to, that the land of Israel pointed to, that rest that we know in part through our faith in Christ will be consummated and we will come into the NHNE, Rev. 21:3-4, 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'" Now I do not think that rest here means an absolute cessation of all activity. I have no idea about what sorts of things we will do in the new creation, but it will be so much better than what we experience here and now.

We want to think about how the author characterizes our time here as one of works. Some have thought that the author is referring to works righteousness or the dead works of sin, and these are probably included, but I think that the works he is talking about are the works of faith, the works of perseverance, and if you look down at the next verse you will see what he means, 'let us strive to enter that rest.' This striving is of course not striving by our own strength or for our own righteousness, but by His power that He supplies; and as the justified

children of God. The author is calling us to this work of persevering so that we do not prove to be those false confessors.

Now let me put this work into perspective. Some might feel fatigued or discouraged or insecure because of this call to strive, to work, to heed and obey to the end. Here are some important perspectives on the work we are to do. Firstly, this is not the works for salvation for our own righteousness. Secondly, it is not the dead works of sin which promise life and joy and prosperity but cannot finally deliver. Thirdly, we are working from rest; not working alone, as He is yoked with us Matt. 11:28-30, 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' And we have the Holy Spirit within strengthening us according to the power of Christ's resurrection. Fourthly, we are not working without instruction but have the clear guidance of God's word. Fifthly, we are not working without support for we are called to pray knowing that He is willing to hear, that we pray in Christ's name and those things in accordance with His will, will happen. Sixthly, we are well supplied as God will provide for our every need, and we even have the spiritual armor sufficient for the fight. We are put in a team called the church where the giftings of the leaders and other members can strengthen and aid us. Seventhly, our labour is not in vain, God blesses our efforts beyond their strength, and even rewards us. And finally we get regular pit stops, weekly rests along the way when we come together as the church in worship and He comes to tend to us personally, speak to us, commune with us, cleanse us, minister to us, hear and answer us. In other words we have every reason to persevere, to press on in faithfulness to the rest that lies before us.