

The Rest

“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by . . . disobedience” (Hebrews 4:11).

The “rest” referred to in Hebrews is an important theme of Scripture. It essentially means being with God in intimate and personal fellowship. It was on offer to God’s human creatures as a Creation blessing in Genesis 2 but forfeited due to the entrance of sin. Later, Moses, in Deuteronomy 3 and 12, referred to the Land as the “inheritance” of the Israelites where they would experience “rest.” So “rest” would be the experience of being with God Himself in the promised Land, their “inheritance.” It was on offer at the Exodus, but forfeited again due to sin at Kadesh Barnea. Although a second generation went into and took the Land, Psalm 95 indicates that the offer of “rest” wasn’t fulfilled then but is still open. So “rest” still includes that Creation blessing for whoever wants it. It’s what every human should want to participate in.

The experience of rest is *always* future. It is the Messianic millennial Kingdom, and possibly as well the eternal state. It’s enjoying being in the presence of God, being at peace (i.e., all that *shalom* means) and experiencing His love. The “rest” may also include rewards for faithfully serving God. The message of Hebrews (indeed, of the whole N.T.) is this, Jesus – and *only* Jesus – takes us into the promised rest. This is inherent in the Gospel: We deserve condemnation but instead Jesus takes us into the Father’s rest for fellowship and blessing.

In Hebrews, those Jews who considered returning to Pharisaism to avoid persecution would have forfeited that rest—and maybe worse; thus the warnings. For today: I suggest that professing Christians who deliberately remain arrested in immaturity to pursue a self-indulgent life may likewise forfeit the promised rest. But exactly *what* is being forfeited? The options are these: (1) participation in the coming millennial, Messianic Kingdom; (2) being in heaven as our ultimate eternal destiny; (3) possibly both. Very capable theologians for centuries have argued this matter, but there’s no explicit Bible-revealed solution. It seems Scripture deliberately leaves it open for us to reflect on and decide how to live, while holding us responsible for our choice.

The gentilization of the church has sadly resulted in the near total loss of understanding of and hope for the Messianic Kingdom.* That Kingdom is what was on offer in the Gospels. The Messianic Kingdom is God’s great desire for His creation, for His people. It’s the great burden of the writing prophets. Paul’s mission to the Gentiles came out of those prophecies that the Gentiles would participate in the future Kingdom. The Book of Acts invites people into the Kingdom (see for example 28:23 and 31). Participation in the promised Messianic Kingdom was the great hope and desire of the early Church. Yet, to us today, all we expect or care about is being in heaven as opposed to being in hell. The Messianic Kingdom is absent from almost all Gospel preaching today; it’s absent from our minds and our worldview. All that matters to us is “being saved,” which we understand as having sins forgiven and being in heaven when we die. Thus we have no concept of the “Rest” in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The immediate readers of this Epistle were not merely professing Christians; the author evidently knew them and knew that they were true believers. It seems to me, therefore [and I can’t be dogmatic about this], that the warning about not participating in the Rest would be losing out on being in the Messianic Kingdom, which would be horrible, though they wouldn’t necessarily fail ultimately to be in heaven.**

* Those of an amillennial/postmillennial persuasion wrongly suppose that the kingdom is spiritual and is being fulfilled in the church. They thus *cannot* understand the Rest in the Epistle to Hebrews. The Kingdom that’s in Scripture is literally going to be fulfilled on earth when Christ returns and rules all Earth from Jerusalem.

** The author of Hebrews may be drawing upon the parable Jesus told (Matthew 22:1-14) of the wedding banquet, a biblical metaphor for the Messianic Kingdom. In that parable, a certain man responded to the invitation, but was denied participation in the banquet. Where else will rewards be experienced?

Let's continue thinking about "Rest." The "rest" is God's. It's *His* rest He invites us into. Rest includes the idea of "completion." His work or His mission is over, done, successfully completed. When Creation was completed, God rested. (The author of Hebrews refers to that initial Creation rest.) Yet in a theological (or canonical) sense, the entrance of sin necessitated God going back to work, redeeming His beloved humanity, defeating evil and whatever other purposes He's fulfilling in this present creation.

When God's present work is completed, He will (again) rest. The Book of Revelation is Scripture's vision of how God finally completes His work, His mission, that is, all His purposes and enters fully into His rest along with all those who respond to Him as they should. Respond how? We respond with love, trust, and faithful, uncompromising loyalty. We respond with perseverance in spite of terrible circumstances, as well as with obedience, righteous deeds, and being Christ-like in character. God is demanding, yes, but in grace He enables us to do as He wills.

God is good. That means He shares of Himself. He not only shares His rest with us, He shares His abode, His rule, His love and joy, His very life with us, His finite creatures. He makes us partakers of His nature and glorifies us so that we can fellowship with the Persons of the Godhead. We're invited, by means of the Gospel, to join God in that "rest." If we know, believe and love God, we'll respond to the invitation.

Two small details before concluding: In Hebrews 4:3c the text says that God's work is finished. That's in the immediate context of arguing that the promise of a rest is always available for "Today." And in 4:10 the author says that we also rest from *our* work. I suggest that that "work" we do that we rest from refers to our perseverance, our obedience to the Word, the deeds and works of righteousness we do to demonstrate our love for God. We need to make our lives complete. It doesn't refer to "works salvation."

Dear Reader: The author of Hebrews wants his probably persecuted Jewish readers to go on to maturity in Christ. To fail to do that would be disastrous for them, for they would at least miss out on being in the Messianic Kingdom. Yet, in this passage in Chapter 4 the author's burden is – don't miss this! – *obedience* and *belief*. The connection between maturity and obedience and belief, I fear, is too subtle for us today. There can be no maturity without obedience! And there's no belief without obedience. Once again: To be mature in Christ demands our trusting in and obedience to God's Word, to Christ's teachings and commands. Hey, it's not just the author of Hebrews who's arguing this. It's all through Scripture, both Old and New.* The notion that all we need to do is believe in Jesus [whatever that may mean to us] and our future is assured is deeply flawed, if not a delusion. That's why our verse begins, "**Let us make every effort . . .**" Salvation isn't a contract, but a relationship. And relationships only occur and are maintained with effort. The author of Hebrews may have sensed that his audience was being smug about their salvation, thus he penned this. Let *us* not also be smug.

* For example, see the following: Romans 1:5, "the obedience that comes from faith;" Romans 16:26, "so that all nations might believe and obey Him;" Acts 26:20, "I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds." Also, see James 2:14ff and the repeated need for "deeds" in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3. Obedience to the instruction and commands of Scripture is never merely an option, but a necessary result of biblical faith. Grace does not obviate obedience; it enables it.