

The Rest of God

“Since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (Hebrews 4:1).

The author of the Book of Hebrews refers to a “rest” that’s in the Hebrew Scriptures. It must be very important because he goes on to warn his readers to **“make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following their example [the Israelites who rebelled at Kadesh Barnea] of disobedience”** (verse 11). What, then, is this “rest?” I will say right now that it is not being in heaven when we die, nor is it celebrating the Sabbath, nor is it being at peace and comfortable in this life, nor is it synonymous with salvation. So, what is it? The answer is complicated. Let’s discuss it.

My reading is that the “rest” passage in Hebrews begins at 3:7 and ends at 4:13. It is exposition of Psalm 95:7c to the end of that Psalm. And the Psalm text refers back to the rebellion in Numbers 14. The short paragraph on the Word (4:12-13) serves to climax the rest passage on unbelief and faithlessness by warning the potentially apostate Jewish readers of hard-hearted unbelief. (The Great High Priest paragraph that concludes Chapter 4 is really an introduction to the priest passage in 5:1-10, so the chapter break should properly have been at 4:13 and not at 4:16.)

We need first to understand the Hebrews passage. And to do that we must understand that in Hebrews 4:8 all English translations (except the Wycliffe, Geneva, Darby, and KJV Bibles) mis-translate “Jesus” as “Joshua.” The name Jesus is the same as Joshua in Hebrew (*Yehoshua*) and in Greek (*Iesous*). The name *Iesous* occurs over 900 times in the N.T., but only in Acts 7:45 does it obviously refer to Joshua. Jesus was named after Joshua because Joshua was a conqueror, and Jesus is the greater Conqueror. The author of Hebrews is certainly NOT referring to Joshua in this verse because the 2nd generation after the Exodus did enter the promised Land (the “rest”). Hebrews 4:8 instead refers to Psalm 95:7ff, which has Christ speaking, saying that the 1st generation because of unbelief and faithlessness did not enter but provoked Him to anger. That wilderness generation had a “heart” problem. The writer of Hebrews doesn’t want us to have a similar heart problem.

Something else: In 4:8, the word “God” is supplied by the translator; it’s not in the Greek text. What’s in the Greek text is a “he.” And that “he” in the Greek refers to Jesus again, who is speaking in Psalm 95:7ff. The 4:8 verse therefore should read, **“For if Jesus had given them rest, he [Jesus] would not have spoken later about another day.”** The author of Hebrews is arguing here that Christians must not be like that 1st generation—which evidently they can be! In Hebrews 4, Jesus is the “rest.”

One more (I think significant) detail here is the author’s use at the end of verse 11 of the Greek word, *apeitheia*, which means “obstinately unbelieving” and/or “disobedient.” English Bibles vary in their translation of this infrequently used but ambiguous word, some using “unbelief,” others “disobedient.” Evidently, the authors of Scripture understood that our response to God always must be a belief that obeys Him. This word is just right for that situation in Numbers 14 because that 1st generation both refused to believe God and they knowingly, willfully disobeyed Him. So they were not allowed to enter the Land that had been promised to them, that is, the “rest.” Let’s now discuss “rest.”

* * *

What exactly is the rest? Here’s my answer. On the 6th day of creation, God created humans. On the next day, He “rested.” That can’t mean physical relaxation. We should assume that the “rest” was for fellowship (*koinonia*) between God and His human creature, Adam, His image. God’s creation work, in other words, was to get to this point of intimate fellowship with one who, in love, would reflect God, serve Him and would in turn be blessed by His presence. The Fall nullified that. The Exodus was so that the Israelites could go to the Land of promise where God would dwell with them, in their midst, so that they could be blessed by His presence. The Nation of Israel would, by living out the Law, serve God by revealing Him to the world and also intercede as priests to God for the Gentile nations of the world. The Nation would enjoy peace, security, joy and prosperity. Entering the Land thus recapitulated but did not completely fulfill that initial 7th day “rest.” The Sabbath day “rest” also recapitulated what was originally intended, that Israelites would cease from their weekly work to enjoy a day of fellowship with

their God. Because of repeated failure (and worse), in the above-mentioned Psalm, which occurs in the context of the 2nd Advent, Jesus reveals that a fully realized, complete rest would be in the future, in a coming Kingdom.

The New Testament “rest” is both the Messianic Kingdom and the Messiah himself. (a) It’s the future millennial Kingdom because that’s when Jesus, the exalted Son, will be physically present on earth for fellowship with a redeemed humanity in a restored physical creation. And (b) it’s Jesus himself, because He invites us thru the Gospel to be *in Christ*, indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, that is, to be blessed by the presence of God Himself. As God rested from His creation labor to enjoy fellowship with His son, Adam, we rest from our service to Christ and enjoy being with God in intimate *koinonia* in a restored Davidic kingdom. Belief in Jesus fulfills the original, creation intent of *koinonia*, intimate fellowship between God and His beloved human creatures. The *koinonia* will be transcendent when we’re glorified.

* * *

Going deeper into this subtheme of all Scripture, God’s “rest,” is thrilling to contemplate. God made great promises in the early Hebrew Scriptures, to Eve, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And subsequently to the Nation of Israel: **“I will be your God and you will be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you.”** God said to Israel, **“I will take you for my people.”** Adam was referred to as God’s son, and so was Israel. Israel was also referred to as the Lord’s “bride.” God chose Israel to be a blessing for all humanity. The “rest” He promised to Israel was God’s own rest and He could share it with whom He pleased; and what He gave to Israel, His possession, as “rest” was the Land, a Kingdom, and salvation. The Nation was commanded to love the Lord, and to prove that they were doing that, they had to obey the Law (Deuteronomy 30). On this basis, they would enjoy God’s rest. (Individuals were expected to believe God’s promises. They could, by their lack of love, lack of belief, or disobedience to God, void for themselves the terms of the Covenant God had made with the Nation, but the promises in the Covenant for the Nation are eternal and certain of fulfillment. God’s promises are immutable.)

So that 1st generation to leave Egypt could have participated in God’s rest if they had trusted and obeyed God and, under Joshua’s leadership, entered, conquered and settled the Land. They instead rebelled and wanted to go back to Egypt! So they failed to participate in God’s rest. The 2nd generation of Israelites did enter the Land, but merely occupying the Land didn’t fulfill the promise of rest. It was only an earnest or deposit on the complete realization of the promise that would be in the future. The rest was still on offer for the future when Psalm 95 was penned. The rest was still on offer when Hebrews was written. God’s “rest” is a program that was inaugurated at Creation, partially experienced in history (the Conquest), and will finally be realized in the future when Messiah returns, the Millennium.

The author of Hebrews argues for his original readers that the promise of “rest” is vastly superior to what was on offer in the Sinaitic covenant. It’s a promise of an eternal inheritance, still on offer, still waiting its complete realization, open to all who receive the promise (**“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs, according to the promise”** [Galatians 3:29, also 4:28]). The author of Hebrews refers to believing the promise of rest as the gospel (4:2). We who are *in Christ* enter God’s rest after our resurrection (or after the Rapture), with Christ at His Return in glory. Unbelief/disobedience (*apeitheia*) means forfeiting participation in the “rest,” the Messianic, millennial Kingdom. *That* is why understanding the “rest” is so exceedingly important.

* * *

God’s “rest” is the creation blessing for humanity that had to be postponed due to our Fall into sin. The Son’s Incarnation work effected the necessary reconciliation and justification so that God’s blessing can finally be experienced. It is Jesus who brings the promised blessing. So “rest” is a theme that unifies all Scripture from beginning to end, with the promise of it recurring all thru history involving the Patriarchs, the Nation of Israel, the Church, and the dreadful, future Tribulation period. The “rest” is for all of God’s beloved humanity, that is, for all who desire it and respond to the offer appropriately.

This study should trigger questions in the minds of my readers as to whether our modern pop Christianity is biblical. In grace, God warns us in our Hebrews passage (as well as elsewhere) that it’s possible to forfeit the blessing. May we be assiduous in knowing what the demands of faith are and then live them to the glory of God, so that we experience God’s rich blessings—indeed, so that we experience God Himself.