

entering into God's rest: an exposition of hebrews 4:9-13

Ken Sanner, April 2, 2005

(All Scripture passages from the NIV unless otherwise noted.)

Hebrews 4:9-13

There remains, then, a Sabbathrest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

It is difficult to begin an exposition on this subject without first looking back on the previous verses to understand the context. Chapter 3, verse 7 through this passage contrasts aspects and results of unbelief and belief. The writer of Hebrews first mentions rest in this section at 3:11 quoting God's oath to the disobedient Israelites in the desert: "They shall never enter my rest." He carries the rest theme into chapter 4 with "Therefore, 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." He explains this more in verse 11 which we'll look at later.

So what is this "Sabbathrest" that he talks about in verse 9?

First, let's look at some previously known uses of the term rest.

1. God worked six days and then enjoyed his Sabbath rest. Genesis 2:1: "By the seventh day God had *finished* the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested." Rest here is the result of completing the work. Adam began living his life on the Sabbath. (He was created on the sixth day). God worked before he rested. *Man must first enter into God's rest, only then he can begin doing God's work.*
2. Deuteronomy 25:19 tells about "When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance . . ." This refers to rest in their own land with no wars with their enemies.
3. Jesus told the crowds at Galilee about rest for their souls, recorded in Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find

rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." This clearly shows Jesus as the source of this rest.

This term "Sabbathrest" in verse 9 is a newly coined word by the author of Hebrews. It is different than just absence from work or war. It is more than the seventh day rest or the land that Joshua led the Israelites into. It is a rest of grace and comfort and holiness in the gospel state—the new covenant—a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

This rest is both present and future—in Christ on earth—"to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21), and with Christ in heaven—"to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Here and now, Christian believers enjoy God's finished work of salvation—not by our works, but by faith in his grace. In Christ, we can experience the absence of fear, anxiety, and stress. The presence of God gives us peace, love, hope, and joy in the middle of trouble and temptation in this life. At some future moment, we will enjoy our eternal heavenly rest—the end of our faith and the object of all our desires—God himself. John recorded a voice from heaven in Revelation 14:13 "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." Christ rested when he finished his work of preaching, miracles, and obtaining our redemption, and ascended to heaven to "prepare a place for you" (John 14:2).

Verse 9 tells us this rest is "for the people of God"—those whom Christ has saved from their sin—obedient believers. We believers "rest from our own work" (verse 10) when we *accept our salvation from God, cease from our own work and rest securely on what Christ has done for us*. I clearly remember a learning experience when I was doing my own work trying to impress a high ranking corporate manager who was interviewing me. My throat got very dry and closed up so I could barely talk. I asked for a glass of water and during the breather, God graciously reminded me of his rest in the words of Paul written to the Philippians (4:6-7): Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." I followed Paul's direction and God's peace and rest transcended my own inadequacy. He has reinforced that lesson many more times when I start out doing my own work to solve my own problems. Some of us need to have lessons reinforced many times!

This rest is not a state of ease, apathy, or absence of work. Verse 11 directs us to "make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience." "Make every effort" refers to spurring to action. It requires ambition and diligence. "Every effort" also supposes difficulties and discouragement brought by corruption and temptation. We must guard against falling into the sins of unbelief and disobedience and come short of the rest and peace of the gospel state.

How do we enter this rest? Only by placing our full assurance and faith in God through Jesus Christ and daily relying on his promises and surrendering to his will (obedience). God has promised it—and provided it. This rest cannot be earned—we can never work hard enough or be good enough—it is a free gift from God that we just need to accept. As our relationship with God progresses, our rest in him also progresses. We can progress faster if we spur ourselves to labor in prayer and his word, and fellowship with same-goal believers. The writer of Hebrews continues to describe the word of God as "living and active". God's word is dynamic. Any

experienced student of the word will witness to its' unique features of never growing obsolete, never being fully fathomed, and being thoroughly penetrating. God constantly surprises us with new light (sometimes exposing the very innermost parts of our being) every time we commit ourselves to study. We cannot bluff God or hide anything from him. We are constantly and ultimately accountable to him. We should heed his exhortation and enter into his rest by faith and obedience.

It is difficult to stop this exposition here because verses 14-16 clarify our hope beyond ourselves: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." I am so thankful that Christ walked perfectly before us to show us the way and now acts as our advocate. These facts justify our faith in his mercy and grace. He walked before us and walks with us as we enter into his rest.