

October 18, 2015
21st Sunday after Pentecost

Let Us Strive to Enter God's Rest!

Hebrews 4:1-13

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The key word used in our epistle lesson for this morning is the word “rest.” In thirteen verses you will find it used eight times. The word points to the eternal destination that God has in mind for us as his people. The Bible tells us that no one has ever seen God face to face, as he is (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). In this created world, we know him through what has been made, and in his divine revelation that we call the Bible. At the end of the age, these ways will no longer be how we know God. Our eternal destination is clearly indicated in Revelation 22:4-5, “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” There is nothing more important than the eternal rest that is awaiting all believers in Christ.

That is why the writer to the Hebrews begins this section (4:1) with an urgent warning to his readers: “while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.” Our English translations do not quite capture the urgency. In the Greek, the verse actually begins by flatly saying “let us fear.” The word is placed first to emphasize the urgency. Now, the fear that is being talked about here is not to be understood as a terror over sin. Rather it is the proper fear of God that results from knowing the Gospel of Christ. It is what Job talks about when he says (Job 28:28): “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.”

Jesus is wisdom. Jesus is our salvation. Jesus is our everything. He is righteousness, our righteousness, and in him is every righteous thing that can ever be. In him alone do we have the Father and the Holy Spirit. Shudder the thought that we would ever do anything that would separate us from the love of Lord! Paul writes, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it (Romans 6:1-2)?” Those who properly fear would rather die to all unrighteousness and live in Jesus forever, for in him is pure love and true existence. Whoever wishes to enter into rest must die with Christ - to everything that would present itself as an obstacle to the final destination of seeing God face to face. **Let Us Strive To Enter God’s Rest!**

Indeed, verse eleven of our epistle lesson says: “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” The “same sort of disobedience” in which the writer to the Hebrews is talking about here is stated in the previous chapter (chapter three); namely, the rebellion of the Israelites after Moses had led them out of Egypt. Unbelieving Israel in the wilderness stood as an example of how the promised final destination of rest could be lost. We must learn from their example, and not lose the rest that God has so graciously given us through faith in Jesus. Faith is gift from God. Don’t destroy it.

How did Israel and how might we as readers of this epistle lose heavenly rest? In the case of Israel, it was not as if they had not heard the good news. They knew of the deliverance through their Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus was a picture of how the Messiah would come and save them from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus of Nazareth has fulfilled the picture of the Exodus on the cross and has delivered us. Since we have such a great Exodus, shall we then rebel and fall away, and consequently fail to reach the rest that comes from the Lord’s face?

The writer to the Hebrews says that “we also have had the good news preached to us, just as they did.” Entrance into God’s eternal rest through the promised Savior was no mystery to the Israelites. It had not been concealed, nor has it been concealed to us. The question is, what shall we do with this good news that has been so graciously given? The Israelites heard the promise of God’s rest, as well as the astounding truths associated with this forever rest, but they became calloused in their hearts because they loved sin. They refused to believe, and thus lost the promise of rest. Are we going to repeat their folly and harden our hearts because we love sin? Or, do we fear the Lord and turn away from evil?

Forty years of rejection and rebellion in the wilderness was what characterized the Israelites, even as they payed a certain “lip service” to God in the tabernacle! This was how they treated God’s deliverance. And, it is written in Hebrews 3:17 that their bodies “fell in the desert.” It also says that they were not able to enter the rest of God because of their unbelief. Those who hear and rebel, who consciously, willfully, maliciously, and unrepentantly allow sin to have dominion in their lives are classified as unbelievers, regardless if they pay “lip service” to God, even if they go to church regularly. Wherever we examine ourselves this morning and find that we might be like the Israelites, may we heed the warning of the writer to the Hebrews:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” (Hebrews 3:12-15)

Faith is a great gift from God. It is to be preserved by remaining in the Scripture, by dying and rising with Christ in Baptism and living that death and resurrection daily in confession and forgiveness, and it is strengthened by the true love that miraculously reaches us in the body and blood of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar - where we see through the eyes of faith the money that was used to purchase us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. The last thing that any of us would want to do is destroy that faith by allowing evil to take hold and hardening our hearts so that we no longer feel sin and hear the word of the living God. Richard E. Lauersdorf writes in his commentary on *Hebrews*:

So much seems to be demanded of those first readers and of us today. The race of faith is to be all-out all the time; the course on which it is run is hazardous and obstacle-filled, and it never lets up! How can we do it? How can we hold out? “Fix your thoughts on Jesus,” the author urges, “the apostle and high priest whom we confess” (3:1). Let that superior Jesus and his Word be the sure basis of our confidence. [God, rest our faith not on what we are but on what Jesus is, not on what we do but on what Jesus has done. Then our journey in life’s wilderness, unlike Israel’s will have both a good beginning and a good end].

We have so much in Jesus Christ who died for all of our sins, and so much waiting for us in his presence (his face) forever. God’s grace alone brings us into that glorious rest, but it does so by the objective means of his Word which we must diligently hear and receive by the gift of faith. As we consider

the rest of God in this life, the *Small Catechism* reminds us, “we should fear and love God that we might not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” We must be very careful that we do not allow our faith to become cold, slack, or give way to doubt. The Christian clings to God’s grace and the sharp double edged sword of his Word. This is what it means to fix our thoughts on Jesus, for as we fix our thoughts on him, as we suffer with him, we also follow him into glory. We enter into the promised rest where God says in 2 Corinthians 6, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” **Let Us Strive To Enter God’s Rest.** Or, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 7:1, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” And, it is Jesus who says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matthew 5:8).” Finally, John writes in Revelation 21:1-7,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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. 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.”

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son [child].

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott