

Striving to Enter God's Rest

Hebrews 4

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From one of our Lutheran Brethren missionaries: "It started subtly with me: a headache, stomachache, diarrhea all night, just when we started an intense Chadian Arabic class. I was able to get through class Thursday and Friday, but then my two-year-old got a fever, wasn't eating well, became very crabby... Is it teething?... Or malaria?"

Monday night my husband Dave's lymph nodes started to swell. He had a fever. The rapid malaria test was negative. Tuesday the entire left side of his face was swollen. I consulted friends via internet: Allergic reaction to his anti-malarial medication? Benadryl given. Salivary gland infected? Antibiotics started. An abscess? Warm packs applied. If nothing works, could it be mumps? (Which it was!)

The anxiety increases and God reminds me that even if we don't figure out what's wrong, he knows and is in control. I ultimately cry out to him to give me wisdom to know what advice to follow and what action to take. On top of these sicknesses, a friend back in the States was abducted at gunpoint from her home. I was shaken, rattled, and questioning why God allows evil and suffering in this world. I felt discouraged because I was physically sick, mentally anxious regarding illness in my family, emotionally hurting for my friends back home, and spiritually questioning the goodness of God. It was hard to put forth effort to learn a language. I couldn't just make these things go away, I couldn't just tell myself to stop being anxious. How could I cope?"

The nation of Israel was anxious. They were nomads, moving from one place to another. Homeless. Always on the go. Like refugees, without a home of their own. Living in a desert. But God promised Israel a land of their own. A home of their own. A place of rest. **Joshua 1** *After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore **arise**, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I **am giving** to them ...*

*... And Joshua commanded the officers of the people, "Pass through the midst of the camp and command the people, 'Prepare your provisions, for within three days you are to pass over this Jordan to go in to **take possession** of the land that the Lord your God **is giving you** to possess.'" In other words, trust God. Believe in Him. Look to Him. Step out in faith and possess, receive, what God is giving you.*

*And to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said, "Remember the word that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, saying, 'The Lord your God is providing you a place of **rest** and will give you this land.' Your wives, your little ones, and your livestock shall remain in the land that Moses gave you beyond the Jordan, but all the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brothers and shall help them, **until the Lord gives rest** to your brothers as he has to you"*

And to those who crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, the Lord did give them rest. All two of them. Joshua and Caleb. The rest of their generation never made it. They never made it to the Promised Land. They never found a place they could call home. They never found the rest God had promised them. What happened? Why didn't they make it? Did God go back on His promise? What happened?

We're given a clue in the previous text. **Hebrews 3:7** *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, [through King David in Psalm 95] "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart ...'"* Going astray. It's always a problem, isn't it? For the Israelites back then. For us today.

*As I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest." When did God swear such an oath, that the Israelites He promised rest to, would never enter His rest? **Numbers 14:2** *And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? ... Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" 4 And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt."**

... 26 And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 27 "How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? ... 28 Say to them, 'As I live, declares the Lord, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: 29 your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, 30 **not one** shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

31 But your **little ones**, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. 32 But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. 33 And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness **forty years** and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. 34 According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.'

God promised the Israelites rest in the Promised Land. Why did only two, Joshua and Caleb, from that generation enter God's rest? **Hebrews 3:18** *And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of **unbelief**.* The same unbelief that keeps us out of the Heavenly Promised Land today. The same unbelief that brings so much anxiety and unrest to our hearts.

Joshua and Caleb and the children of their unbelieving, disobedient parents eventually enter the Promised land, just as God had promised. They *do* find rest. But the rest they enjoy is only temporary. It doesn't last. Why not? What happens that they lose their rest; lose the Promised Land? Read the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 1:15 *For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. 16 And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me.*

As their parents had done in the wilderness, their children eventually did in the Promised Land. What you and I are in danger of doing today. Neglect God's great salvation. Drift away. Turn away from the Lord. Harden our hearts toward Him. Follow after other gods. And so, even the rest that God did give Israel in the Promised Land was only temporary. It didn't last. Unbelief always keeps us out of God's Promised Land; away from God's rest.

And so, the rest Joshua gave them was only temporary. But there's *another* rest. A permanent rest. **Hebrews 4:4** *Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest **still stands** ...* It's not over. There's still hope. How can God's Promise of entering His rest still stand? The Israelites forfeited their rest found in the Promised Land. Hebrews is speaking of another rest; a deeper rest; a fuller rest, a permanent rest.

*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.* A good start doesn't guarantee a good ending. *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.*

6 *Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, 7 again 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."* 8 *For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.*

For Israel, who strayed from the Lord, it was too late. They missed out on God's rest. For you and me, it's not too late. We still have opportunity to enter into God's rest. 3 *For we who have **believed** enter that rest ...* The temporary, earthly rest, given to Joshua and Israel's children, was symbolic of another rest. An eternal spiritual rest. This deeper rest, this fuller rest, this heavenly rest, is not found in a land, but in a Person; the person of Jesus Christ.

In Him, we find rest from what? Rest from the anxieties of life; the anxieties of our unbelieving hearts. Rest from sin and its consequences. Rest from God's punishment. Rest from trying, and failing, to please God; to do right. Rest from trying to love God and love people – above ourselves. So hard to do! So impossible to do? So hopeless. A never-ending task. Rest from the constant battle within. The battle the Apostle Paul describes in Romans 7.

"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Who will give me rest from my constant inner battle? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. 9 So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, 10 for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

John 19:30 When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Resting in the work of Christ - who lived for you; died for you; rose for you; intercedes for you, is coming for you - to bring eternal rest, a permanent Promised Land.

11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. "Strive to enter that rest." Interesting phrase. How do you "strive, work hard" to "rest"? 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Henry Halley, in his Bible Handbook, puts it this way, "We ourselves scarcely know our own motives and desires. But God's Word, living and active, has the power to penetrate into the innermost depths of the human heart and to distinguish, separate, and view every motive and desire and purpose, and assess them at their true value."

We strive to enter the rest of Christ, by staying in God's Word; feeding on it regularly, daily - letting it do its work in our hearts. Humbling us. Bringing us to our knees. Confessing our sin. Bringing us to the cross, over and over again. *Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the CROSS.* (Heb 12:2)

What if we don't strive in God's Word? What if we're lazy instead and don't feed on "every word that comes from the mouth of God"? What if God's word doesn't have its way *with* us; its way *in* us? What if we ignore such a great salvation? Lose our focus? **Hebrews 2:1** We drift away from Jesus, and we're left to stand all alone before the judgment seat of God!

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Remember the missionary with a headache, stomachache, diarrhea all night, a two-year-old with a fever, a husband with a fever and swollen face and lymph nodes, just starting an intense Chadian Arabic class, anxious, discouraged, wondering how she would cope?

"It was hard to put forth effort to learn a language. I couldn't just make these things go away, I couldn't just tell myself to stop being anxious. How could I cope?"

I have found over the years, that when I am anxious, it helps to dwell on who God is, what he's done, what he's doing and what he promises to do. God led me to read Isaiah. Throughout this book he tells us:

'I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand; I have redeemed you and summoned you by name, you are mine; I will be with you; I am making a way in the wilderness and I provide water in the wilderness to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself; I will not forget you; I have swept away your offenses; I am he who will sustain you; I will carry you; I will rescue you; I direct you in the way you should go; my word will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.'

As I was reading God's Word and focusing on who he is, what he's done, is doing and promises to do, he showed me where I was putting my trust: myself ... a weak, imperfect me. Thanks be to God! In spite of our rebellion, idolatry, and lack of trust in him, he longs to be gracious."

14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, [on our behalf] Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Don't stay away. Draw near, by the blood of Christ. Draw near, in faith, and receive mercy and grace. In place of all your working, come rest. Rest in Jesus, and all His doing on your behalf.

Israel was led by God out of slavery in Egypt; led by God through the desert. And what happened? They began well, but ended poorly. Initially, they rejoiced in God's deliverance. But soon, they grew restless. They grew tired of God's leading. Tired of the sand. Tired of the heat. Tired of packing up and moving, again and again. Tired of

things not going their way. Tired of not getting what they wanted. Restless, for a land of their own; a place to call home. But underneath it all, they were restless **of heart**. Anxious and uneasy, not able to rest, to be still and rest in God.

Ever happen to you? You have a good start. You're excited about Jesus - who He is and what He's done for you. But at some point, what happens? You grow restless. Worried. Anxious. Restless *of heart*. Unable to relax and rest in God's care. Just because you've had a good start, doesn't guarantee things will end well.

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. What would bring about such a poor ending? What would keep us from reaching God's rest? Laziness? Unwillingness to repent? Neglecting God's Word? Losing our focus? Getting caught up in million other things, and turning away from God; neglecting His great salvation in Jesus? Let us fear, lest any of us hear those dreadful words spoken to us, "And I will declare my judgment against you, for all your evil in forsaking Me."

11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit ... The Word of God, this powerful, living, active, penetrating presence of God, is what keeps our faith in Christ alive, penetrating all the way to the center of our being. Where sin dwells. Where unbelief lives. Where doubt lingers. Where God works. Where God pierces, where God exposes, where God convicts, and pardons, forgives, cleanses, grows trust, grows faith, turning our heart back to Him, bringing rest to restless hearts. As St. Augustine put it, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

As Jesus Himself said, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ... for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* (Mt. 11:28-29)