

First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN

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July 4, 2010

Introduction¹

Today in this country it is Independence Day, or as it is more commonly known, the Fourth of July. This is the day that the United States of America celebrates the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. And to this day, every time you look at our flag, you can see thirteen red and white stripes that stand for the 13 colonies who adopted that Declaration of Independence and rebelled against King George.

A few days ago I took a walk late at night and sat for a few minutes on my favorite bench at the memorial garden outside the courthouse. There, right in front of me, was a tall flagpole. A bright spotlight lit up the top of that flagpole, where the flag of the United States of America was flying. For a moment, I was struck by the splendor of it all. All around me there were sculptures of men and women who have served in the armed forces, and marble slabs with the names of all of our men and women who have served and even died defending this country. And I fixed my eye upon that flag and thought, How grand!

But then, suddenly, I realized that I had been looking right at something even more grand, but I hadn't noticed it. I was looking at the sky. It was a clear night, not a cloud in the sky, and the stars were shining brilliantly. And as my eye shifted to those stars, the flag suddenly seemed very, very small. As high as we hoist that flag, the stars that God has created are always higher. Even the biggest flagpole is just a toothpick compared to that vast, starry firmament. Let me tell you, if that flag caught my eye, those stars took my breath away. It was a powerful reminder that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col 1:15-17)

We need that reminder. We need to remember that the United States of America is just a flash in the pan. It is here today, but it will be gone tomorrow. But God endures. One day you and I will come before him, and when we do, there will be no thoughts of the flag nor of the Declaration of Independence nor of the Fourth of July. Those thoughts will have fled from our minds the moment we pass into eternity. The true reality of eternal things will chase those thoughts away like the rising sun chases away the nighttime.

I suspect that is exactly what happened for two famous men on another Fourth of July, 184 years ago. It was the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, and coincidentally, it was also the day that both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died. Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence, and John Adams was on the drafting committee. Both of them wound up being presidents of the United States. Famous men. Influential men. But by all accounts, lost men.

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You see, both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had heard the gospel, but both denied it. Both of them were Unitarians – they denied the deity of Christ and the reality of hell. Thomas Jefferson even cut up his Bible, cutting out all the things he didn't believe, like the miracles of Jesus, and put together his own version that he could agree with. They thought Jesus was a wise man. They even called themselves Christians. But their hearts were hard. They did not believe that they needed salvation from God's wrath, and they certainly did not believe that Jesus died so that they could be saved from God's wrath. The Declaration of Independence and the beautiful flag of the United States of America are distant memories for those men. Unless they came to faith in their final hour, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams passed into eternity as enemies of God, and they will spend an eternity in hell.

My friends, do not be deceived. The things of this world are passing away. That is why we are here this morning. We are here to worship God. We are here to open his word and believe. That is what matters more than anything else, more than country, more than family, and more than friends. And nowhere is that more obvious than in our passage this morning.

For the last two Sundays we have delved into a passage in the letter to the Hebrews that goes from 3:7-4:13. In this passage, the writer of Hebrews gives us a solemn warning not to harden our hearts, lest we fail to enter God's rest. This morning I am going to read that passage in its entirety, and preach the first of two sermons on what remains. I will begin reading in 3:5:

Hebrews 3:5-4:13 5 Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, 6 but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. 7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' 11 As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" 12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 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. 14 For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. 15 As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." 16 For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. 4:1 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. 2 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. 3 For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,'" although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." 5 And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest." 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. 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. 11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. 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.

This morning, I want to look at two things in this passage that will drive us to cling to Jesus Christ in faith:

- The promise: God’s rest for the people of God
- The warning: Hard hearts will not enter God’s rest

I. The Promise: God’s Rest for the People of God

First, let’s look at the promise summed up in 4:9: “there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.” Over and over in this passage the writer of Hebrews repeats this word “rest.” We need to understand what this rest is.

A. The promise of rest

The writer of Hebrews begins with this quote from Psalm 95. It is about the people of Israel who rebelled against God when he led them to the promised land. They should have had faith. They should have trusted God to fulfill his promise to them and drive out their enemies from before them as they went into the land of Canaan, but they were afraid that their women and children would get hurt. They refused to trust God. They hardened their hearts. And so God swore in his wrath that he would not allow them to enter. He told them that he would wait until they all died, all of them who were 20 years old or older, so that only their children would be allowed to enter. That’s what the writer of Hebrews is talking about in 3:15-18, and he sums up their failure in 3:19, “So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”

Then in 4:1 he applies this lesson to us:

Hebrews 4:1-2 1 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. 2 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.

Those Israelites heard God’s promise of rest, but they did not have faith, and so they failed to receive what God promised. So it will be with us – we also have heard God’s promise of rest, but if we do not have faith, then we will fail to receive what God has promised.

But when you get to 4:1, and you read those words, “while the promise of entering his rest still stands,” you might ask, What promise? Is he still talking about the rest in the promised land that God promised those Israelites? Surely not! After all, when all those rebellious Israelites had died, Joshua ended up leading their children into the promised land. So where is the writer of Hebrews coming up with this idea that there is still some promise of entering his rest? That’s the very question that he answers in 4:3-10.

The answer is simple: David wouldn’t have said what he did in Psalm 95 if there wasn’t still some promise of entering God’s rest. David, four centuries after Joshua led those people into the promised land, was still looking for God’s rest. He wrote Psalm 95 exhorting his fellow Israelites not to harden their hearts lest they too fail to enter God’s rest like their rebellious fathers. That tells the writer of Hebrews:

Heb 4:1a, 8-9 the promise of entering his rest still stands 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.

David was looking for that rest, and a thousand years later the writer of Hebrews was looking for it, too. So today, you and I are looking for that same rest. But just what *is* it? What is this promised rest?

B. What this promised rest is

Obviously, the basic idea of rest is to stop working. When you’re working, you’re not resting. When you’re resting, you aren’t working. The whole idea of a “Sabbath rest” comes from Genesis 2:2, when God rested after creating all things. “And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.” This basic idea of resting from work is the idea here in our passage this morning, “for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.” (4:10)

But now we have some big questions. If you enter God’s rest, just what *are* the works that you rest *from*? And *when* do we rest from them? Frankly, these are pretty hard questions. A lot of men disagree on the answers – men who are smarter than I am and more spiritual than I am have debated this for longer than I’ve been alive. So before I try to give you some answers, I have to tell you that I might be wrong. Let us beseech God for help in understanding this better and better in the days to come, and for patience with one another when we disagree.

Some say that this rest is eternal rest – if you go to heaven, then you will cease from all your work here on earth. Some say that this rest is just a rest that you can enjoy here on earth, when you cease from dead works and enjoy peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Others say that it is both – you enjoy this rest here on earth, but it will culminate in eternal rest in heaven. There are huge differences between these different interpretations, because the really big question is, What happens if you *don’t* enter this rest?

If this rest is ultimately eternal rest in heaven, then obviously if you don't enter it you will go to hell. If this rest is just a rest that you enjoy here on this earth, then the warning doesn't have anything to do with heaven or hell – all it means is that you will miss out on peace with God in this lifetime if you fail to enter his rest, and instead you will face his discipline. I want to spend just a few minutes considering each of these possibilities.

First, let's consider the possibility that this rest is just a rest that you enjoy here on earth, and it really doesn't have anything to do with heaven or hell. The biggest reason for believing that this doesn't have anything to do with heaven or hell is that the writer of Hebrews is clearly addressing his readers as Christians. Over and over he uses the word "we," including the readers along with himself. He calls them "holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling," in 3:1. And this we know – true Christians cannot lose their salvation. Paul wrote:

Romans 8:38-39 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Whatever the warning in our passage this morning means, it cannot mean true believers will ever lose their salvation. Therefore, this argument goes, since the writer of Hebrews is calling them believers, there is no doubt that they will enter *eternal* rest – he must just be talking about some kind of rest *here on earth*. This is a powerful argument, and it might be right. After all, in 4:3 the writer of Hebrews talks about this rest as if believers do enjoy it right here, right now: "For we who have believed enter that rest." Maybe all they are resting from are the "dead works" that we read about twice more in this letter, in 6:1 and 9:14, and the more we rest from dead works and simply rest in faith, we enjoy "God's rest," peace with God, in this lifetime.

But there are several reasons I have come to doubt this answer. First, the writer of Hebrews seems to be looking to the future. As we saw last week in 3:13, there is real urgency in the command to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Why this urgency? Because tomorrow is coming. The writer of Hebrews urges us in 4:11, "Let us strive to enter that rest," as if we have not yet entered it. It is still future. How then is it that 4:3 makes this rest look like it is a present reality? We who have believed stand at the threshold – we "are entering" that rest, to read 4:3 literally – but it is still future.

I think the writer of Hebrews might really be talking about eternal rest, here – and if you fail to enter this rest, you really will go to hell. After all, the writer of Hebrews has been focusing upon eternal salvation. He finishes chapter 1 by talking about "those who are to inherit salvation." In chapter 2 he writes about "the world to come," and "bringing many sons to glory." And in chapter 12 he writes, "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." (Heb 12:14) All of this is in the future, indeed, in eternity.

And if this “rest” that we are reading about in our passage this morning is simply rest from “dead works” to rest in faith, it doesn’t fit very well with 4:10. God didn’t cease from fruitless works. He ceased from fruitful works. But until he rested, he strove to enter that rest. Even so does the Christian strive to enter God’s rest. We will see this picture of the Christian life later in this letter when we will read, “let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Heb 12:1)

So I have begun to lean toward the understanding that the “Sabbath rest” for the people of God really is a future, eternal rest. And the warning is clear: hard, evil, unbelieving hearts will not enter God’s rest.

II. The Warning: Hard Hearts Will Not Enter God’s Rest

What makes this warning so powerful for you and I is that it is not directed at the people out there who have never heard of Jesus. It is directed at you and I. This warning is for us, we who have heard the gospel. And the warning is clear – not everybody who hears the gospel will enter God’s rest.

A. Not everybody who hears the gospel will enter God’s rest

Simply hearing the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is not enough. Simply understanding it is not enough. You must actually have faith in Jesus Christ! If you do not have faith in Christ, then it doesn’t matter how much you go to church, nor how nice you are to other people, nor how much you pray. If you don’t have faith in Jesus Christ, then you are lost. The gospel will not benefit you if you do not have faith.

The writer of Hebrews helps us understand this. Look at 4:2. “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.” Those Israelites who fell in the wilderness, they heard good news from God. They heard God’s promise, but it did them absolutely no good. Why not? Because they were not united by faith with those who listened. There were only a few who listened. Caleb did. Joshua did. They tried to convince the rest of the people to have faith, but the people wanted to kill them. Forty years later, those people were dead. But Caleb and Joshua lived, and they entered the promised land. They benefited from the good news, because they had faith. But the good news did no good for those who were not united by faith with Caleb and Joshua.

So it is with us. The good news, literally, the gospel, has come to us. Some who hear it have faith, and some do not. “We who have believed,” Hebrews 4:3 says, “are entering that rest.” Believers benefit from the gospel. But unbelievers do not. Those who do not believe are not united by faith with those who listen, really listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ and have faith in him. Are you united by faith with those who listen to the gospel? Or are you a stranger in a strange land as you sit here among the people of God this morning? Oh, I hope you have believed. I

hope you are united by faith with those who have listened. Because if you are not, if you only hear the gospel but do not have faith, then the gospel will do you no good. You will not enter God's rest.

This unity by faith with the people of God is something that the writer of Hebrews brings up three times, each time saying it more strongly than he did before:

Hebrews 3:6b . . . Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house [united by faith with those who listen] if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

Hebrews 3:14 For we have come to share in Christ [united by faith with those who listen], if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Hebrews 4:2 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.

United in God's house, united to share in Christ, united by faith with those who listen – this is how the writer of Hebrews describes all those who benefit from the good news and enter God's rest. But those who are not united by faith are those who are not in God's house, do not share in Christ, do not benefit from the good news, and do not enter God's rest.

This is serious business. It is supposed to get our attention. We are even supposed to “fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach [God's rest].” (Heb 4:1) The warning is clear. But now I must point out something so obvious that you might miss it – but you must not miss it! It is the key to this whole passage: this is a matter of the heart.

B. This is a matter of the heart

This is a matter of faith! The way to respond to this warning is not simply by “turning over a new leaf” and trying to do everything just right. The way to respond to this warning is to have faith! What is it that makes you a member of God's house? Faith! What is it that brings you to share in Christ? Faith! What is it that unites you with those who have listened? Faith! What is it that ensures that you will enter God's rest? Faith!

Coming to church does not make you a member of God's house. Putting money in the plate does not bring you to share in Christ. Being the child of Christian parents does not unite you with those who have listened. None of these things will bring you into God's rest. Nothing you can *do* will ever do that.

Children, you can obey your parents. Parents, you can rear your children and make sure they brush their teeth and grow up to get good jobs. You can give all your money to the poor. You can care for the sick. But as nice as all those things are, none of those things will make you a Christian. None of those things will

bring you into God's rest. Only faith will. If you do not have faith in Jesus Christ, then you are lost. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!" (Act 16:31b)

One question remains. Why would the writer of Hebrews warn his readers so sternly about this if he has already called them "holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling?" I believe the answer is that he treats those who profess faith in Christ as true Christians unless and until they prove otherwise. But because he cannot see their hearts, he exhorts them, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." (Heb 3:12)

If you hold fast your confidence and your boasting in your hope of Jesus, if you hold your original confidence firm to the end, then you prove that you truly are members of God's house, and you have come to share in Christ. Persevering in the faith proves that you *are* these things, and that you *are* entering God's rest. It is evidence that you "have come to share in Christ."

This is very important to understand, because if you aren't careful as you read the letter to the Hebrews, then you may start to wonder if you can actually lose your salvation. But the way the writer of Hebrews says these things makes clear that this is not at all what will happen if you do not persevere in the faith. He does not say, "You *will become* God's house if indeed you hold fast." He does not say, "You *will come to share* in Christ if indeed you hold your original confidence firm to the end." No, he says, "You *are* God's house if indeed you hold fast," and, "You *have come to share* in Christ if indeed you hold your original confidence firm to the end." If you persevere in the faith you prove what you already are. If you do not persevere in the faith, you prove that you never truly had faith to begin with.

Do you realize how loving God is to warn us like this? Our gracious and merciful Heavenly Father cares for us. He does not turn away and leave us to ourselves. He gives us priceless promises and he give us wise warnings. And because God is so good to lead us in this way, we can have immense confidence in him! How horrible it would be if we were left just with our own confidence in ourselves to keep believing! If our only hope is in our own ability to persevere, our own willpower, then our faith in the end would just be in ourselves. But our hope is in God. Our faith is in Christ.

Our assurance is in the power of his promise. Our confidence is in God's merciful and gracious work within us to keep us in the faith. If you have truly believed, then God surely has begun something in you that he will finish. God always finishes what he starts. That's why Paul said, in his letter to the Philippians, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Php 1:6)

And that's why the writer of this letter to the Hebrews closes this letter the way that he does:

Hebrews 13:20-21 20 Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of

the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

For we who have faith in Christ, God is “working in us that which is pleasing in his sight.” Paul said the same thing:

Philippians 2:12-13 12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

This is our great hope! As you hear the promise of God’s rest and the warning that hard, unbelieving hearts will not enter God’s rest, cling to this hope! And rejoice that where you could never succeed, God will *never* fail!

Conclusion

Next week I will pick up with part 2 of this sermon, and look at the conclusion of this passage in 4:11-13, with its exhortation to strive to enter God’s rest and its piercing reminder that you cannot hide what is in your heart from God, to whom you must give account.

For now, I will simply repeat what we have heard for the last two Sundays:

Hebrews 3:12-13 12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 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.

This is what truly matters! The greatest things of this world, like our country, and our flag, and the Fourth of July, are nothing but dust in the wind compared to this.

If you have never put your faith in Jesus, do not wait for tomorrow! Believe! If you have put your faith in Jesus, believe – and *marvel* that you should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood!