



DIVINE REST

Hebrews—Chapter 4

Study 5

Divine Phobia

As we continue our study in Hebrews, we find a transition from the home God has built for us in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3) to the rest He longs for us to experience in that home (Hebrews 4).

“Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it” (Hebrews 4:1).

Fear is “fob eh o.” One of the definitions for it in the English language is a very powerful fear or dislike of something. If you have a “fob eh o” about spiders or confined spaces, you usually stay away from them. Therefore, if we possess a powerful dislike or a “fob eh o” about falling short of His salvation rest, it will direct us to lay hold of His promise so that we don’t fall short of it. Realistically, many of us probably have phobias about all kinds of things, but not about missing salvation. This is why Paul urges us on, in this chapter, to enter by faith into the salvation rest found in Jesus Christ.

Salvation by Grace

“For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it” (Hebrews 4:2).

This verse is a real eye-opener for anyone who thinks that the Old Testament teaches salvation by works. Speaking of the nation of Israel, Paul says that “the gospel was preached...to them.” He then affirms that they lacked faith, not works. The idea presented here parallels the clearest teaching in the New Testament about salvation:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Hebrews 4 is not the only time Paul affirms the gospel as the basis of salvation for the Old Testament believers. He makes the same point in his ardent warning to the church in Galatia, which was bewitched by legalism (Galatians 3). Abraham understood the gospel and was saved by grace through faith (Galatians 3:6-9). Paul affirms this truth again in Hebrews 11 where he convincingly argues that all the Old Testament believers, including Abraham, were saved through faith.

Salvation Rest

“For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: ‘So I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest,’ although the works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Hebrews 4:3).

The gospel was the basis of salvation in the Old Testament, but the Hebrews as a nation repeatedly failed to embrace it. New Testament believers did better, partly due to these ardent directives from the apostle Paul who was barely saved from a works based religious experience himself (Philippians 3:1-9). This letter to the Hebrews is one of those directives, especially focused on transitioning believers from salvation by works to salvation by grace. This is why Paul makes this striking contrast between salvation rest and Sabbath rest. The mindset of the Jews who crucified Christ was so law focused that they insisted on taking the body of Jesus off the cross before sundown so that they could keep the seventh-day Sabbath, the fourth Commandment (John 19:31). Think about the irony of this situation—they have just crucified the Son of God, and now they insist on removing His body from the cross so that they can worship God. To them salvation was all about keeping the law, when in reality their salvation was wrapped in

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“God having provided something better for us.” —Hebrews 11:40

All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

burial clothes and placed in a new tomb. They focused on keeping the commandments of God but not on having faith in Jesus (Revelation 14:6).

“For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works,’ and again in this place: ‘They shall not enter My rest’” (Hebrews 4:4-5).

Understanding the history of the Jewish leaders’ choice for the law over Christ, Paul draws a contrast between the Sabbath rest of the seventh-day and salvation rest in Christ. Paul makes the seventh-day rest of the Sabbath distinct from salvation rest and then proceeds to focus on our need to enter into it:

“Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, again He designates a certain day, saying in David, ‘Today,’ after such a long time, as it has been said: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts’” (Hebrews 4:6-7).

God’s designated or determined day is brought to us by grace. Everyone has a day, a time, an opportunity that is determined by a merciful God, to accept the gift of salvation. I don’t know when your time of opportunity is and you don’t know mine, but everyone has an opportunity to respond to God’s voice. It was the same in the Old Testament and it is the same today. It doesn’t matter where we are, who we are or where we have come from. What matters is what direction we are going. Today, if you will hear His voice, respond. Open your heart to the goodness of God that leads to repentance. Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27).

“For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day” (Hebrews 4:8, KJV).

Some versions of the Bible render verse 8 for Joshua (“... if Joshua had given them rest. . .,” NIV). This is because Joshua is the Hebrew equivalent of Jesus in the Greek. Ultimately it is Jesus who is being spoken of here because He was the Rock that followed the Hebrews in the desert (1 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus, not man, is the One that can give the salvation rest offered in these verses. Yes, the gospel was preached in the Old Testament, but the Hebrews repeatedly refused to enter into salvation rest. Generation after generation continued to place their trust in their own obedience for salvation, and God continued to designate probationary opportunities (like the 40 years of wandering) for them to enter into His salvation rest. Over and over again, God gave each succeeding generation another day of opportunity.

Sabbath Rest

“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9).

Now some Bible translations clearly indicate that this verse is speaking about the seventh-day Sabbath.

“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9, NIV).

So far in this chapter, Paul has drawn a distinction between salvation rest and Sabbath rest. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus and not by keeping the Sabbath or the works of the law. As long as we are clear about that distinction, we will be able to rightly understand that there is a connection between salvation and the Sabbath. Paul first distinguishes the two, and then shows how they complement each other in verse 10:

“For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His” (Hebrews 4:10).

The word “ceased” means to take a rest, to cease from our labor. It could very well be translated as “Sabbath” in the text. The seventh-day Sabbath calls us to rest in God for salvation. We do not gain salvation by keeping either the Sabbath or God’s law. Yet, as we enter salvation rest, we are called to cease from our labors as God did from His. God ceased from His work of creation on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3). We are to do likewise.

When rightly understood, keeping the Sabbath does not save us, but rather it directs us to salvation in Jesus Christ. The Jews were so focused on salvation by works that they missed the connection, but Paul saw it and points it out in Hebrews

4. Yes, our salvation is in Jesus Christ. He is our spiritual rest. We enter into this spiritual rest through relationship with Christ, connecting with Him by faith. We do this after responding to His unconditional love for us. When we enter into His spiritual rest, we cease from our labor just like He did during the Creation week. From this perspective, the Sabbath is a longed-for rest from our weekly labors that brings our hearts and minds into full fellowship with our Savior. It invites us to come boldly to the throne of God. The weekly Sabbath revives our spiritual walk and makes time in our lives for help, grace and faith in fellowship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Rather than becoming the means of our salvation, the Sabbath directs us to salvation in Jesus Christ alone. It connects us with the Savior.

A Sign of Salvation in Christ

The Sabbath is a sign of the gift of salvation rest. It points to salvation by directing us to remember all that God has done for us without any of our help whatsoever. We learned in Hebrews 1 that God purged our sins “by Himself.” In the same way, God created this world by Himself. We didn’t help God save us, and we didn’t help God create us. In the biblical account of Creation week, mankind was created last, on the sixth day (Genesis 1:1-29). God finished His work of creation by forming mankind in His image and then bid us rest in all He had done by Himself. The first full day after their creation, Adam and Eve entered into the Sabbath rest instituted first in Eden (Genesis 2:1-3). This world was a gift from God—something He made for us without any help from us. In this way, the Sabbath points us to salvation—which is another gift from God—something He alone has accomplished for us.

A second reason the Sabbath becomes a sign of salvation is found in 2 Corinthians 5:17 where the apostle Paul parallels salvation with creation. He declares that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Salvation is God’s work of creation, re-creating mankind in His image. This re-creative work culminated on the cross when just before His death Jesus said, “It is finished.” This was the sixth day of the week, Friday. After the body of Jesus was taken from the cross, it rested in the tomb on the Sabbath day, Saturday (Luke 23:52-56). This salvation work of re-creation parallels the Creation week. As soon as God’s work of re-creation was finished on the sixth day, Jesus entered into rest as man and God. God, in Jesus, after dying for our sins on the cross, rested on the Sabbath and did not come forth from the grave until Sunday morning. In this way, creation and salvation culminate in the Sabbath, directing us to cease from our own works and rest in the works of God. The Sabbath points us to all that God has done for us without any of our help—the gift of creation and life eternal.

“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:11, NIV).

Entering rest is the reason for labor. We do not labor to earn the rest, but we labor so that we can rest. The rest is not earned by our labor, but rather it is fully enjoyed because we have labored. Our labors help us to appreciate the rest. The Sabbath day connects us to this rest, because on it we rest from our labors by the command of God and allow ourselves to be fully submerged into the spiritual rest of salvation.

The Love of God

“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” (Hebrews 4:12-13, NIV).

There are two significant insights that will help us recognize and accept the truth of salvation rest in Christ. The first is the power of the Word of God. It stands alone of all the books ever written as the most reliable, enduring and life-changing book in the history of mankind (Jeremiah 23:29; 1 Peter 1:23-25). The second insight is the fact that nothing is hidden from God. Any and all charades are laid bare before Him. He sees our hearts. He knows the sin and darkness hid-

den there. He sees the deepest motives, the entire history of our lives. And yet, He still loves us. God's love is a relentless love that is like no other in the world. Not even a mother's love can come close to how God loves you and me:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15).

"Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:34-35).

Our Great High Priest

Christ is our salvation. He died, is risen and now intercedes in heaven for us. Nothing and no one can separate us from His love. This was Paul's message to the Romans, and it is the emphasis of these last few verses in Hebrews 4:

"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" (Hebrews 4:14-15, NIV).

In the Jewish economy, the Sabbath was the time to place complete focus on the work of the priest. In Hebrews 4, we move directly from the Sabbath to the work of our High Priest in heaven, Jesus Christ. Paul insists that Jesus was tempted in all points like we are. But how can Jesus be tempted as we are if He never sinned? How can He sympathize with the urge to do drugs? How can He understand our sexual weaknesses if He remained celibate? How can Jesus empathize fully with us if He did not experience the weaknesses of our sinful bents and propensities? Jesus hated sin with an intense hatred, so how can He sympathize with us? How can He come down to our level?

To answer these questions, we first need to define "our level." We all have inclinations and propensities to sin that are both inherited from our gene pool and cultivated by our own choices. But none of us are identical in this matter. You and I may have some weaknesses in common, but we also have our own unique struggles. And certainly no one possesses all the bents to evil. So how does Jesus relate to all of us? Must He have all the bents to sin of the entire human race? If so, did He receive them all from His mother, Mary?

That reality is impossible and unnecessary. Jesus does not need to possess all of our propensities to sin in order to be tempted in all points as we are. What it all boils down to is the will of man—the governing power of the human mind. Jesus partook of our fallen nature by taking upon Himself the fallen human will that has been weakened by rebellion against God. In Eden, Adam's will was created in the image of God. His will was then naturally in harmony with the will of God. However, after sinning, a change took place in the human will. Adam chose to sin against God, and because of this he needed divine help to make choices that were in harmony with God for the rest of his life. When Jesus became a man, He took on Himself that same fallen human will. Therefore, like Adam, He would for the rest of His life need divine help to live a sinless life because His will was not naturally in harmony with the will of God. In this way, Christ took our fallen human nature.

Christ's Human Nature

When Jesus came to this earth, He said, "Not My will be done, but Thy will" or "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44, KJV). Time after time, Christ had to yield His human will to God. This is because the human will of Christ would not have taken Him to the wilderness to fast for 40 days; it would not have taken Him to Gethsamane to sweat great drops of blood; it would not have taken Him to the cross to be forsaken of God and to suffer incomprehensible agony for our sins. His human nature shrank from all these difficult experiences just as decidedly as any human being would. And friends, this is where our real

battle lies; this is where the victory is won. Whether it's alcohol, sexual addiction or pride, when the will is surrendered to God, we have the victory. Jesus met mankind at this level, the level of the human will. He took our fallen human will. He fully surrendered His will to God and continually obeyed the Father's will. Praise Him! What a wonderful Redeemer! He can sympathize with each one of us. He knows by experience the battle of the human heart. He understands the nature of our fallen will and the temptations we face and, because of His own experience, knows just how to help us. He has grace to help in time of need.

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16, NIV).

Do you have confidence that when you approach God's throne you will receive mercy and find grace? God came to this earth as a man, taking our fallen nature, so He could conquer it for us and fully sympathize with us. Jesus longs to give you help in your time of need. He has proven His great love for you, dear friend. He has loved you more than He loved His own life.

Summary

The book of Hebrews is all about a relationship with Jesus. Chapter 4 focuses on resting in Christ, the Author, the Captain and Finisher of our faith. God gives us salvation as a gift. He encourages us to find true rest in His finished re-creation/salvation work. Hebrews 4 shows how the Sabbath rest at creation points to the salvation rest of Christ. Both share the same principles of rest in God and faith in His complete and finished work. Both point to our accepting His gift of creation by faith. Both the Sabbath and salvation point us away from what we can do to earn God's gift, and point us to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We cannot make ourselves right with God, but we don't have to. It is God who has accomplished our salvation through Jesus Christ. Now He calls us to respond to His love and to accept His grace and rest in it by faith.

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