

Jesus is Greater
Hebrews 4:1-13

1. Listen

2. Participate in the mission of God

3. Live with an unhardened heart

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Hebrews: Jesus is Greater

Chapter Four

Psalm 95:

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
³ For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
⁷ For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
Today, if you hear his voice,
⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
⁹ when your fathers put me to the test
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart,
and they have not known my ways."
¹¹ Therefore I swore in my wrath,
"They shall not enter my rest."

Have any of you ever had a rude awakening before? A bucket of water dumped on your head, or an over excited child waking you up at 4am wanting to open their Christmas presents, or a charley horse in a foot or calf, or a hamster put on your back? Don't try that

one. My sister did wake up, but she flung my hamster off her back and scared the poor thing. It was a rude awakening for both my hamster and my sister.

Psalm 95 is the same. The last 4 verses are a rude awakening for the people the author of Psalm 95 had in mind who did not listen to the Lord and had hardened hearts.

Interestingly, as I searched for videos on Psalm 95, I kept getting videos that only included the first seven verses of the Psalm, the “Let us sing to the Lord; Let us make a joyful noise to the Lord; we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” The rude awakening of the last 4 verses were excluded, but I think those first seven make the last four richer, for the first verses give us reason to listen to the Lord’s voice and not to harden our hearts, because we have such a majestic and awesome Lord. In this Psalm we are taught to praise the Lord Jesus, who is called a great God, a great king, our maker, our shepherd.¹ We have a Lord named Jesus Christ who is Greater. And that’s what this Psalm proclaims: Jesus is Greater.

Now, if you can, and if you were here, think back to last week. Do you remember what Pastor Casey preached on? Did any of Psalm 95 sound familiar to you?

Well, since our chapter this week, chapter 4, begins with the word, “Therefore,” that means we have to go back to the last chapter, Chapter 3, and find out what? “What’s it there for?” If we look back, we see that unlike the popular Psalm 95 videos I found, the Hebrews author focuses on the last four verses of Psalm 95, in chapter 3, starting at verse 7, and gives the Jews, those who were facing or were about to be facing persecution, a warning about turning away from God and having a hardened heart. Chapter 4, verses 1-13, continues the mini sermon, and the “therefore” of verse 1 refers back to the warning of chapter 3, verses 12-19, especially verses 16-19, that warns the Jews of what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness when they disobeyed and did not believe, which consisted of not entering God’s rest.

Picking up from there, let’s now dig into the remainder of the author’s mini sermon on Psalm 95 continued in chapter 4, verses 1-13. If you have a Bible, the Bible App, or one of the ESV journal Bibles, I would invite you to turn to Hebrews chapter 4 and follow along as I read the living Word of God.

¹ Matthew Henry, *Mathew Henry’s Commentary: Volume III Job to Song of Solomon* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1900), 601.

¹Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ²For 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. ³For 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. ⁴For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.” ⁶Since 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.” ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. ¹¹Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹²For 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. ¹³And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

As mentioned, chapter 4, verses 1-13, is a continuation of the author's mini sermon on Psalm 95. The first half of the author's sermon focused on the faithlessness of the Israelite wilderness generation and the last half of the sermon, which we'll look at this morning, focuses on the **consequences** of that generations' disobedience and unbelief, which the Hebrews author gave to the Jews as a warning and gives to us today as a warning.² Yet, in the warning, there is hope, and that hope is found in verse one.

The hope this passage brings is that God's rest is still open. God's rest is not something we cannot enter. The only way we won't enter God's rest, and the only way God's rest will be closed off from us, is if we fail as the Israelites failed. In verse 2, it says:

“For indeed the 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.”

The “them” refers to those who were disobedient, those who rebelled, those listed in 3:16-18, those who left Egypt by Moses, those who sinned and whose bodies fell in the

² Kevin Anderson, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2013), 128.

wilderness. Because they were disobedient, because they turned their hearts away from God, because they *heard* and did not *listen*, as those who believed and had faith listened, they did not enter God's rest.

In the Greek, the word "hear" and "listen" are similar. The Greek word for *hear* is ἀκοῆ (aw-co-ay), and the Greek word for *listen* is ἀκούω (aw-coo-o). ἀκοῆ (aw-co-ay) means "hearing, ability to hear," but it can also mean "slow to understand."³ awcoo-o means "hear, obey, understand."⁴ Awcoo-o, translated as "listen" in our text, involves an action, a response of obedience. The obedience required is a response to the message; faith to believe in what has been talked about up to this point, such that Jesus is greater and in Him we find our confidence and are able to stand firm. When we listen to the message, the gospel, we don't ignore it; we *listen* to it and internalize it so that our actions and how we live are defined by our faith. And when we *listen* to the message, verse 3 says:

"We who have believed enter that rest."

As we move through the remainder of this chapter, the topic of rest and God's rest will keep surfacing. Verses 1-13 are really focused on the consequence of disbelief, but at the same time, the consequence of disbelief provides a way to understand the consequence of belief. And in this chapter, the consequence of belief is entering God's rest. So, what this section is really concerned with is "Finding Rest in God."

To find rest in God, we must **listen**.

Moving right along, we come to verses 4-7, and the hope of entering God's rest surfaces again. The author reiterates that God's rest remains open, but this time explains why we can hope in the promise that God's rest remains open.

First of all, the author points out in verse 4 that even though God finished his work and rested on the seventh day, referring to the Genesis creation account, God didn't close off to the world. God remained open to the world. God rested, but God welcomed the Israelites into his rest. At this point, the author is referring to the rest the Israelites were to find in the Land of Canaan, which was a land described as "flowing with milk and honey," which sounds pretty peaceful and restful to me; and to the Israelites, who were mainly pastoral nomads, it meant good grazing land; a land that would be agriculturally productive. If God wasn't leaving room for others to enter his rest after God finished creating the world, God wouldn't have said, as verse 5 indicates, "they will not enter my rest."

I just want to pause right now and take a moment for us to really let this sink into our hearts and minds. God rested, and God's rest remained open, but the Israelites who received the good news failed to enter, in this case, enter the land of Canaan, because of disobedience. SO AGAIN, verse 7 says, "he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through

³ Logos Bible Software, Bible Word Study, ἀκοῆ.

⁴ Ibid., ἀκούω.

David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” At this point, the rest the author now refers to is not the rest found in the land of Canaan, as verse 8 continues, “For if Joshua had given them rest [meaning, if rest was fulfilled when they entered the land of Canaan] God would not have spoken of another day later on.” Therefore, God’s rest remains open.

And just to be clear, although we may interpret “rest” as going away to retire, to sleep, or as the Merriam Dictionary defines it as “a bodily state characterized by minimal functional and metabolic activities,”⁵ the rest of God does not mean God retired. These verses beautifully proclaim the transcendence of God, not a distant and far-removed God, but a God who is always present, always inviting us to enter into his rest. Even though people rebelled and were disobedient, it says, “AGAIN God set a certain day called “today”. No matter what, no matter how undeserving you think you are, God is always inviting us back to God’s self.

After Genesis 3, when the first humans disobeyed God, after the Israelites rebelled in the wilderness, after the Israelites rebelled in the Promised Land, God still left his rest open. Why? Because we read in John 3:16-17 and Romans 5:8 that God is love. John 3:16-17 says:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Romans 5:8 proclaims:

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Thus, the only answer we humans can fathom as to why God leaves his rest open for us is because God is love. Jesus is love and Jesus is Greater.

Although God’s rest remains open, that doesn’t mean we automatically enter. It means we still strive to enter God’s rest, as there is still another rest to enter, and our author in verse 9 calls it “Sabbath rest.” Sabbath rest is the rest we have to look forward to at the eschaton, the age to come, when all creation will be restored, but as we wait for that final Sabbath rest, it is important for us to participate in a weekly sabbath rest, as doing so helps us remember the resurrection of the age to come and hope toward that final Sabbath rest.⁶

To review, so far this morning we have come to understand that finding rest in God requires us to listen and that there are different types of “rests” mentioned by our author, but the rest the author is hoping towards is that of Sabbath rest.

One question I wrestled with as I spent time reading this passage was the question, “Doesn’t God still create? Doesn’t God continually bring things into being?” My answers were “Yes and yes,” so I started to think about what it means when the author writes “God rested.” As we have noted, God is actively calling us to enter his rest through the gospel

⁵ Merriam Webster Dictionary, “Rest,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rest>.

⁶ Anderson, 130.

message; God continually calls things into being, making us new, making creation new each day, but this is all a part of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. Therefore, our second point is this:

Finding rest in God requires us to **Participate in the mission of God.**

If obedience to God means we get to enter God's rest, then we must participate in God's mission. Those who were disobedient, those who had hardened hearts didn't enter God's rest. They weren't contributing to the mission of God. They weren't co-laborers with God. They were co-laborers with themselves, turning away from God. How were they participating in the mission of God to bring creation to fruition? To restoration?

Participating in bringing creation to fruition is a participation in the mission of God, a participation that leads to God's rest. Doesn't a land flowing with milk and honey sound like rest? How church are we participating in that kind of rest? How are we participating in the mission of God? How am I participating in the mission of God?

I asked myself that question sitting on our couch in our living room. As I did, I looked straight at our little plant Dan and I recently bought from Cowiche Creek Nursery. It's a snake plant, and we still haven't named it, although we were thinking of naming it after a famous snake, like Kaa from the Jungle Book or Sir Hiss from Robin Hood. The first name that actually popped into my head was "Monty," but I remembered that's not a snake, that's the name of a band. Anyways, when we got this plant, Sydney helped us pot it. We got a pot that was a bit bigger so it could grow and flourish, but when I looked at it, I noticed we now have more little snakes popping up through the soil! I asked Dan if we needed a bigger pot; he said no, but I said I wanted to let it grow to it's fullest potential and bring it to fruition, and that's the kind of fruition God wants all of creation and for us to have. God wants us to live into our fullest potential as God's people, and this is another reason why God's rest still remains open, so that we can continue to strive towards that Sabbath rest, participating in the mission of God with our fullest potential and looking for ways to bring creation to restoration and fruition.

The rest that is talked about is one that we strive for each day; one that we can't afford not to strive for, which is why I think Psalm 95 functions as a rude awakening in the last four verses and the author of Hebrews preaches on it in chapters 3 and 4 and constantly reminds the Jews facing or about to be facing persecution not to harden their hearts and not to only hear but to listen and obey. Verse eleven encourages the Jews to, "Let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs." Not only is this a rest we, individually strive for, but it's a rest we encourage others to strive for. It's a community effort, as it says, "Let us make every effort...so that no one may fall."

To be sure, make every effort does not mean "work your way to eternal salvation." Yes, we should pray without ceasing, read the Word, fast, give, tithe, spend time in fellowship, help the poor and afflicted, but we shouldn't do those things to check things off a list. We do those things to hold firm to our confidence, so we don't drift as Pastor Jason mentioned two

weeks ago. We do those things to stay grounded in our faith and to help others stay grounded in their faith so that when the time comes, we all may enter into God's rest.

Making every effort answers the question of **how to enter God's rest**, and what this passage and the last chapter have been hitting us over the head with is this: we enter God's rest by listening to the message, such as having an obedient faith, and we enter by not having a hardened heart, as those who didn't enter did not enter because their hearts were hardened. Those who entered were those who had unhardened hearts.

Hardened Heart = No Rest

Unhardened Heart = Rest

Therefore, because this is a matter of the heart, it is fitting for the last two verses to mention the Word of God judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart. We cannot fake living with an unhardened heart. We may fake others, but we can't fake God. This brings us to our last and final point:

Finding rest in God requires us to **Live** with an **unhardened heart**.

"Long ago, in the early 7th century, on the island of Iona, located just off the western coast of Scotland, a meeting had been called. An angry brother spoke about his failure, telling of the hardness of heart in the kingdom of Northumbria – a land of darkness refusing the life-giving light, inhabited by a stubborn, unreachable people. One man, named Aidan (who would become known as the Irish monk who restored Christianity to Northumbria), heard what this angry brother was saying, and his heart was stirred with compassion for that land and its people. To open his heart to this could cost him everything: leaving the island he loved, the companionship of his brothers, their prayer and work. If he stayed seated among his brothers no one would notice him, no one would know what he had heard in his heart: the cry of the desert, "Come over to Northumbria and help us."

'O Lord,' he prayed, 'give me springs and I will water this land. I will go, Lord. I will hold this people in my heart.' A moment later, his own voice broke the silence in the room. 'Perhaps, he said to his angry brother, if you had spoken with more gentleness, and of the love of Christ, giving them the gospel to nourish them like milk is given to a tiny baby, then you would have won them and remained among them.'"⁷

As this story reveals, living with an unhardened heart means we live with a heart that is open to God, listens to God, lives into the mission of God, speaks with gentleness, speaks

⁷ "Aidan—in the power of the Spirit," *Celtic Daily Prayer: Book One – The Journey Begins* (London: William Collins, 2015), 282.

the love of Christ and speaks the gospel message so others can hear and be built up. When we live with an unhardened heart, when we participate in the mission of God, and when we listen to God, we will find our rest in God, but we must continue to persevere in that rest as we await the final Sabbath rest, and as our Hebrews author makes clear, don't wait any longer to respond to the message. Don't live any longer with a hardened heart. Today is the day, and as long as it is called, "today," do not harden your hearts, but rejoice as the Psalmist writes:

"Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to ^(B)the rock of our salvation! ² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! ³ For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. ⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. ⁵ The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. ⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! ⁷ For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.