

When “Striving” is All About God’s Gift

22nd Sun. after Pent. – 10/20/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Hebrews 4:1-16 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 9-11 [Literal translation from Greek,] “⁹ **So then, a Sabbath celebration is left for the people of God.** ¹⁰ **For the one who has entered into His rest, he rests from his works just as God does from His own (works).** ¹¹ **Therefore let us eagerly go into that rest, in order that no one may fall by the same example of disobedience.”**

Introduction

- ⊗ As I read through and studied today’s text from holy Scripture this week, two famous quotes kept popping into my mind. The first one has been credited both to Winston Churchill and to the Spanish American philosopher George Santayana who both lived in the same time period; the early 1900s. They said, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”
 - ➔ However, when it came to their own religious convictions neither one of these self-proclaimed agnostic/atheists was apparently willing to follow their own advice.
 - ➔ In fact, they seemed to fall into what another famous quote that has been around since the 1800s labels as the definition of insanity. I first heard this one from my oral surgeon as we contemplated my mouth’s inability to accept any bone transplants. It says, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”
- ⊗ The author, or the preacher, to the New Testament Hebrews in our text today, refers his readers/listeners – which includes you and me, back to the historical actions of Israelites, warning and encouraging us numerous times to take seriously their actions of rebellion against God and their unwillingness to believe and trust in His promises.
 - ➔ You see, it’s one thing to adamantly proclaim yourself to be a part of the faithful people of God, but quite another to then ignore or repeatedly disobey His clear commands and His loving guidance for how you are to live as a true believer and then not expect Him to finally follow through with the consequences that He has promised over and over for those who turn away from Him.

I. What is the History God wants us to Heed?

- ⊗ Verse 11 makes a big point of saying that God does not want anyone to “fall (from faith) by the same example of disobedience.” He’s telling you and me to pay attention to what has happened back in history with His people and learn “today” from their mistakes.
 - ➔ Friends, this is a matter of eternal life and death, because those who disobeyed in the past actually “fell” away to the point that they were His people no longer; no longer saved. So, I think we better make sure we take a look at what happened in the past.
- ⊗ If we go back a half a chapter, into Hebrews chapter three, we find out that he’s telling us to remember the Israelites at the time soon after God had saved them from slavery to Pharaoh by dividing the Red Sea and bringing them safely through it to escape Pharaoh’s army, and thereby making them into what He called His “household”.
 - ➔ The people didn’t deserve His saving grace. They constantly complained about God. They were blind to His loving care and believed that they knew better than God what He should do. Yet, as God reminds them in Exodus 20:2, “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”
- ⊗ Now, a couple years later God is ready to bring them all, as His household of believers, into The Promised Land. God even directs Moses to send spies ahead to see the land and come back

with a report. When they did, they said it was a land that “flows with milk and honey” (Num. 14:8), which was shorthand for “this is a very rich and prosperous land” folks.

→ But the people were afraid of the report that the inhabitants there looked strong and mighty. They didn’t trust that God could do, and would do what He promised and they refused to follow Moses, Caleb and Joshua in to the land that God promised to give them. This would have meant no more wandering; a rest from fear and suffering under the oppression of others. But they repeatedly said “no” to God’s promises of grace.

→ So Yahweh declared in Numbers 14:22-23, 34, “...none of the men who have seen My glory and My signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed My voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. ... 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.” In fact, we hear of the full magnitude of their disobedience in Numbers 14:43 when Yahweh says, “Because you have turned back from following Yahweh, Yahweh will not be with you.”

⊗ This is what the preacher here in today’s text is urging us and all of God’s people to remember and seriously apply into their own lives when he quotes Psalm 95:8 and says, “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”

→ These were not people who had never heard of God’s saving grace and work. As Hebrews 3:16 asks, “For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?” Sadly, we all know people in this category today, don’t we? Those who were raised in the church – baptized, confirmed, solid believers in Christ. But those who have now been influenced by, enticed by, overwhelmed and overtaken by the fears, attractions, lies and ignorance of this world so that they are falling, or have now fallen away from their Lord; no longer trusting in His promise of eternal rest more than the temporary, false rest of this world and its temptations.

→ In the verse before our text today, the sad reality of those souls is told to us, “So we see that they were unable to enter (God’s rest) because of unbelief” (Heb. 3:19).

II. God’s Promised Rest still remains.

⊗ That’s the history; that’s the repetition of rebellion that we all do well to keep in mind, why? So that we do not “fear” like they did when the evidence and circumstances of this world try to lead us to doubt, disbelieve or just lazily fall away from our almighty, always loving and perfectly faithful Lord and God.

→ In fact, verse one tell us what we truly ought to take seriously and fear. It says, “...let us fear lest any of you (any of us) should seem to have failed to reach [God’s promised rest].”

⊗ Because if there’s anything the entire history of creation has to teach us, it is that when God makes a promise it is always, always fulfilled. He has never failed yet throughout the 6000+ years of history to this point.

→ And now in verse one we’re told this, “...the promise of entering [God’s] rest still stands.” In fact, verse two, “For good news came to us just as to them” so that we have this guarantee, verse three, “For we who have believed enter that rest.”

⊗ That’s who this text is intended to be preached to; to those who have heard the “good news” of God’s promised eternal rest and “who have believed.”

→ That’s crucial to helping us understand some of the parts of this text that seem to be more difficult when we first hear them. It means that the preacher is speaking to those who have

already been saved by God's grace worked out and earned through His Son, Jesus on the cross; people like you and me, here today.

→ We know then that not only did He complete His creative work in six days before He first instituted the seventh, Sabbath Day as a time to rest in praise and worship; to bask in His presence and glory here within His holy household of faith – the One Holy Christian Church, but through His Son, Jesus He has entirely completed the work required for you and me and the rest of mankind to have the guilt of our repeated rebellion and sin entirely paid for, once and for all.

→ You can't make that payment, no matter how hard you try; neither can I. The time for us to let go of that foolhardy lie of "I hope I'm good enough to make it into heaven" is now.

✘ In fact, verse seven takes us back to King David's words in Psalm 95:7 and assures you and me today, that "Today, if you hear [God's] voice" in holy Scripture, "do not harden your hearts." There are two important things there.

→ First, this a word of warning, as we already talked about, not to be swayed by any of the millions of lies in the world that want to pull you even slightly away from God and His love and truth in Scripture. This includes your so-called friends; your co-workers; your professors; your neighbors; maybe even your family who want to plant things from the internet, the media and countless rumors that they've just plain concocted in their own heads into your thinking; to cause you to doubt and maybe even fall away from the "Good News" that already came to you through the Holy Spirit when you were in Sunday School, Confirmation, Worship and perhaps at home with your parents growing up.

→ Second, it is a word of great encouragement if perhaps you have already been swayed and might be "falling" away from the Lord, because "today" it says, is the day to turn that path around. In other words, God wants us all to know without a doubt – now is the time to enter God's rest for eternity.

III. "Striving" is all about God's Gift

✘ When we hear the later part of today's text, the temptation is to forget what we've already covered and miss the fact that attaining, entering into and remaining in God's eternal rest is 0% about our work and power, and 100% about God's undeserved gift of grace.

→ This "rest" is not the rest that the people of old thought it was – gaining new land or achieving rest from our earthly troubles and tribulations. No, as verses 9-10 tell us, "...a Sabbath celebration is left for the people of God. For the one who has entered into [God's] rest, he rests from his works just as God does from His own (works)."

→ You see, this rest is the promise that God's gift of faith in our baptism grants freely to all who "have believed" (v.3). It's the promise that, because of Jesus, there is no longer any work for us to do to try and justify ourselves before God; to try and earn our own salvation. As Paul says in Romans 3:20, "...by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight...".

✘ With that foundation in place, we are now able to properly understand verse 11 that tempts unbelievers to turn the rest of eternal salvation into something that we must "strive" to gain.

→ That can never be, for the preacher here is talking to those already saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The word that is misunderstood, in the Greek is "σπουδάσωμεν" (spoudasōmen) which literally means "to hasten" or "be eager" or "diligent". So instead of an action, the word is talking more about the attitude of the faith that God has given us in baptism.

→ This too is God's gift. And the preacher is urging you and me not to put God's treasure of eternal rest and salvation in Jesus aside. But as I translated it at the beginning, "Therefore let

us eagerly go into that rest, in order that no one may fall by the same example of disobedience” as the Israelites did when they hardened their hearts and fell away from God in unbelief.

Conclusion

✘ Later on in Hebrews 12:1-2, the preacher urges us, to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross” on our behalf.

➔ You don’t have to be a runner to understand that image. God has given you the gift of eternal rest in His presence. But that “rest” is not a state of just passively sitting still and keeping your faith to yourselves. No, he is encouraging you and me to use the power and strength He’s given us in His Spirit and in His Word, to eagerly run flat-out in our faith, knowing that we are already resting secure in His eternal presence and grace. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.