

Hebrews 4:1-5:10

4:1-13: THE PROMISED REST

1. List the things referred to by “rest” in Hebrews 4:1-13. What is being rested from in each case, and when?
2. Read Numbers 13:32-33; 14:1-11, 20-25. Why were the Israelites doomed to forty more years in the desert? Was this punishment, plain and simple? Was it mercy? Were they simply unsuitable for the task God had in mind in Canaan?¹
3. Rest is often thought of as the opposite of work. Isaiah 65:20-25 is part of a passage describing the world to come. What place does work have in Isaiah’s prophecy?
4. Rest in the OT is much more than simple cessation of labor:

While there is the sense that rest is a cessation of labor, the notion of rest is much richer than that. God’s rest expresses the completion and goal of his purposes [as when God rested after creation] and the enjoyment of the perfection and harmony of creation... There is no strife, enmity or sin and the creation, hence there is rest..²

As DeLashmutt points out, the Sabbath rest of the ten commandments (Ex 20:11) also represented, for the work-intensive agrarian Israelite society, a step of faith that God would provide for them. Rest is further associated with God’s presence, as when Yahweh promised Moses, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Ex 33:14; see also Num 10:33, 36).

In contrast, the effect of sin is *restlessness*, as in Cain’s curse in Gen 4:10-12, where “a fugitive and a wanderer” means more literally “a restless wanderer”, and the blessings and woes of Deut 28:58, 65, where the Israelites are warned that if they break the covenant they will “find no ease, no resting-place for the sole of your foot.”

These may help us understand Jesus’ offer,

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Mt 11:28-30)

- a. What rest were the readers in danger of missing out on—the rest from legalistic pursuit of their own righteousness, or something more?
- b. The readers of Hebrews were saved, but needed to be reminded to enter into Jesus’ rest. When have you most felt the rest Jesus offered, and why? Do you find you need to periodically enter again into this rest? How and when does that happen? [*Extra credit*: How in the world does it make sense to “make every *effort* to enter into that *rest*” (4:11)?!]

1 Note that those who *did* enter included Joshua—which happens to be Jesus’ Hebrew name—and Caleb, which means literally “dog”, a term used at various times for Gentiles. Make of that what you will.

2 *Dictionary of the OT: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Alexander and David Baker, p. 688.

5. This chapter contains the famously poetic verse,

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (4:12)

How have you seen this verse used in the past? In the context of Hebrews 4, is it a warning or a promise? If a warning, what is it warning of?

6. Exposing ourselves to the word of God which is able to “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12) can help us not to “fall through such disobedience as [the Israelites in the desert]” (4:11); immersion in the word of God cuts through our self-deception, convicts us of sin, and encourages us with the truth.

However, reading Scripture is not an easy task. In many cases we reread passages we have seen so many times that our eyes simply glide over the surface without seeing them anew. Even finding the time for regular reading, much less serious study, can be a feat.

Is this something you struggle with? What methods have you found most useful for nurturing the habit of regular serious Bible reading?

4:14-5:10: OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

7. Because Jesus has been “in every respect tested as we are,” we have a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses. He is our Lord who tirelessly healed the sick, fulfilling the word of Isaiah, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Mt 12:20), who told the paralytic and the woman with the hemorrhage to “take heart” and Peter to “take courage... don’t be afraid” and step out of the boat (Mt 14:27)—he is “gentle and humble in heart” (Mt 11:29).

Playing devil’s advocate, Jesus is also the one who tells the Canaanite woman that it is not right to give the children’s bread “to their dogs” (Mt 15:26), who asks how long he will have to “put up with” his “unbelieving and perverse generation” (Mt 17:17), who railed against the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23), and who calls his companions on the way to Emmaus “foolish” and “slow of heart” (Lk 24:25), and his own disciples “little-faiths” (Mt 8:26). Jesus withered a fig tree simply to prove a point (Mk 11:12-25), liked to tell people stories he knew they wouldn’t understand (Mt 13:10-11), and tell them not to sin (Jn 5:14) knowing that was impossible, told a grieving would-be disciple to “let the dead bury their own dead” (Mt 8:18-22), and even sent his family away when they came to see him (Mt 12:46-50).

Does any of these passages trouble you? How approachable do you find Jesus? If you experience Jesus as sympathetic to your needs and fears, what in your spiritual life has brought you to that point?



Fun quote: Hebrews 4:12 speaks of God’s word as “living and active.” “The Jews always had a very special idea about words. Once a word was spoken, it had an independent existence. It was not only a sound with a certain meaning; it was a power which went forth and did things. Isaiah heard God say that the word which went out of his mouth would never be ineffective; it would also do what he was designed to do.” (Barclay, 38-39)