

Hebrews 4:1-11 [NIV]

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

"So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴ For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "On the seventh day God rested from all his works."

⁵ And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

⁶ Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage 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 later about another day. ⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

We're in Hebrews, Chapter 4, this morning. I invite you to turn there with me.

You know, just one small annoyance that I've felt during this last year, throughout the whole covid thing, is the unpredictability of the "open-ness." By that I mean the hours of operation of stores and offices, restaurants, service companies, barber shops – all those places. Now, I realize this is a small thing in the larger scheme, but let me just complain about it for a minute.

On top of everything else that has been strange this past year, unlike any other time of my life anyway, you just never knew whether a place would be open or closed. At times, schedules were changing nearly with the day, so you never knew what to expect.

I'd try to go to an office to do this or that business – closed.

Renew your drivers' license? Closed.

We'd want to go early to this or that store – opens at 11:00!

What!?

Closes at 6:00!

What!?

And then there was Christmas, which threw in some more complications.

Years ago, I used to be one of those who went out late on Christmas Eve to do all my Christmas shopping.

I haven't done that for years – 22 years to be exact; marriage sort of cured me of that. Marriage has a way of curing lots of things, if you know what I mean.

But man, this last year? Good luck to you if you were one of those last-minute shoppers. Everything was closed.

[Hold up a "Closed"/"Open" sign appropriately in the following.]

I know the virus put most of us in tailspins in one way or another, and that's just the nature of life sometimes. But at times, one of the most frustrating things you can find is a **Closed** sign when you *expect* something – or when you *really need* something – to be **Open**.

You know, for centuries scholars have wondered and studied and debated and often disagreed about all that the writer of Hebrews was saying here in this passage. And there is certainly a lot of detailed stuff here – worth a couple of months of sermons.

But I think the essence of the writer's message here can actually be boiled down to one word, and the word is **Open**.

I think we should read this part of Hebrews as one big **Open** sign.

It's an invitation to, "Come in; we're **Open**!"

And the name of the business – the office, the company – that the writer is declaring open here is simply, **Rest**.

Rest is open.

Rest is available.

Rest is up and running.

The possibility of buying it, getting it, experiencing it, signing up for it...

Rest is ready to go.

I believe that's the over-arching message of this text.

And really, is there anything that we need, that our world needs, any more than that – any more than rest – today?

Rest from anxiety.

Rest from sickness.

Rest from misunderstanding.

Rest from chaos.

Rest from untruths.

Rest from hostility.

Rest from confusion.

Rest from complaining, from pressure, from worry and fear and insecurity.

There's nothing we need more than to experience rest from all that ails us.

After the year we've had, it is as though we need a sabbatical from life as we have just experienced it.

There's a joke that says that long ago, there was once a pastor – it's always a pastor – who was fond of riding his horse. He was too fond of riding, actually, and was often out riding when he should have been working.

So, he secretly named his horse “Sabbatical.” Then, when people asked where he was, his wife could truthfully tell them, “Well, right now, he’s on Sabbatical.”

Our world needs a *sabbatical*—a *rest* from all that weighs upon us. And right here, Hebrews is telling us that there is rest available to us.

[Open Sign] *Rest* is open to us.

What sort of rest?

Well, the writer here brings together in this passage at least three concepts, three illustrations, of rest: He talks about Israel and the rest of entering into her promised land; he talks about the resting of God after the act of Creation; and he talks about the eternal rest that comes with being with God after death. The writer refers to all three sorts of rest.

But instead of keeping them distinctly separate, the writer really rather intentionally combines them—conflates them. He moves from one to the other, in order to, I think, communicate to us a fuller flavor of what God’s rest really means. You can’t grasp the depth of it with just one illustration. It’s bigger than that.

But I think we can think of it as a rest that is available to God’s *people*, who will go to God’s *place*, so that they can experience God’s *peace*.

The message here, then, is that there *is* a rest for God’s *people*, who will go to His *place* where they can experience His *peace*.

The key example here is the nation of Israel. They were God’s people, and they were called to God’s place: Canaan, the promised land. But they refused to go, and so, initially, they missed their opportunity for peace, and they had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years longer than God intended them to.

God had a place of rest for them where they could experience His peace, but they wouldn’t go where God asked them to go.

Why? Because they lacked faith in Him, or to say it another way, they wouldn’t trust Him.

Of all the people who went to check out the land, only two men, Joshua and Caleb, had the faith—the trust—to believe that they really could occupy the land. No one else did.

And so, because of that, the nation refused God’s place and so forfeited her peace—her rest.

And you see, that principle still applies today.

To have rest—to be at peace as a people, or as a person of God—means to trust God enough to go to God’s place—the place God wants us to go; because it is in going there that we will experience God’s peace.

And, of course, that “place” where He sends us may not be a physical place. In fact, often it isn’t.

It may be a state of mind.

It may be a point of realization.

It may be a commitment we need to make.

It may be a decision to do this or that His way and not our way.

It may have to do with the way we see a friendship, a marriage, a possession, a person, our future...

Often, it’s not simply going to a physical place, as it was with Israel. What it’s about is trusting God with

our perspectives and decisions and values and priorities, you see?

If we’re going to be God’s people, we have to give in and go to God’s place, or we’ll never experience His peace—which is what true rest really is. That’s the deal.

It was God’s deal for Israel, and it is God’s deal for you and me today.

And what the writer of Hebrews wants us to know is that, even though Israel blew it and didn’t go initially, God’s offer of rest still existed. God didn’t rescind the possibility of rest just because of what Israel did.

And this passage also wants us to know that even though Israel did eventually go and experience that rest, they didn’t use up all of God’s rest in the process. The very same offer of rest still exists.

God’s offer of rest is still available to anyone who will be a person of God. The offer of rest is still open. [Open Sign]

God’s people—who will go to God’s place—can still experience God’s peace.

And we go in the same way that God’s people have always gone—by faith.

We enter in by choosing to believe God.

This is not just about believing “in” Jesus—giving our nod of assent to His existence. This is more than that. Faith is more than that.

We get to peace by believing Jesus in an ongoing, moment-by-moment, day-by-day, week-by-week, year-by-year way: trusting Him for this and this and this, today and tomorrow and the next day.

It’s relationship in real life.

It’s choosing to believe what He says, believe what He offers, and believe what He promises. That’s where we can find this all-encompassing sort of rest—the setting of our lives and souls at peace.

It takes the kind of ongoing faith that Israel did not have, initially, in the desert—the sort of trust that says, “When what God says and what I experience with my senses come into conflict in my life, I will trust in God’s word and promise. I choose to make God’s word to me my objective reality.”

That is faith, and that is what is needed to experience God’s rest: to be the *people* of God who will go to His *place* and so experience His *peace*.

It’s more than what we do on one day of the week.

It’s more than a physical place.

And, it’s more than what happens to us after we die.

Although there is a part of it that is fulfilled in a more complete way when we enter fully into God’s Kingdom when it comes in its wholeness; even still, His *rest*—this *peace of soul*, this *peace with God*—is available *now*.

God’s rest is open now.

It didn’t end with Israel, and it doesn’t start in a coming experience in Heaven.

God offers His rest—His *peace*—to us right now, today, if we will be His *people*, who will go to His *place*. And, this all happens in our day through His *person*, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is God's *storehouse of rest*—and He's open for business. [Open Sign] He's open today!

Friends, if these days in which we live have stolen your peace; if the craziness of our world, of the virus, of politics, of how those things have affected relationships; if the craziness of our world has allowed things like anxiety, fear, hostility, confusion, worry and insecurity to rise up within you; please hear this: God's store of rest is open! [Open Sign]

There are many things happening in our world that we can do nothing about ourselves. But what we *can* do is *trust* that *God can* do something, *not just about all those things, but about how we live and feel and respond* to the nuttiness of our world.

Will you trust Him to lead you?

Will you shop at the Jesus store of rest? [Open Sign] Will you align yourself with Him and go to that place that He's trying to lead you, so that He can give you His peace?

This is a totally optimistic and hopeful passage—a passage full of good news and hope, but I wouldn't be faithful to it if I didn't point out that it all begins with a warning, and it is a grave one. My translation opens with "*Let us be careful,*" but that doesn't really get it. The word for fear is in there: "*Let us, therefore, fear missing this promise...*"

In other words, this is an invitation that we'd better not ignore. Ignoring the invitation will destroy us, both here and eternally, you see? To go our own way, to do our own thing, to ignore God's voice and reject His place will lead us to the exact opposite of peace.

That's not what God wants for us, but it is what we will choose for ourselves if we insist upon hardening

our hearts to God as so much of the world is doing. And you see the chaos it's reaping.

God doesn't want that. God's trying to take every one of us here to a place where we might find rest.

Will you go?

Will you not harden your heart, as Israel did, against God's leadership, but instead, will you trust Him and go to that place and find peace?

That's what Jesus wants to know.

The great church father, Augustine, recognized this and declared in prayer, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

The restlessness is deadly.

Will you be God's person, and go with Jesus to God's place so you can find God's peace—His rest?

The store is open.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Be Still My Soul*

Benediction:

The challenge is to trust God in spite of what we see or don't see—in spite of what we feel or don't feel. Later on, in Hebrews, Chapter 11, we find a list of saints of old who trusted God in spite of what they saw or what they felt—in spite of impossible odds. These are the ones who found rest.

We can be among them today, if we will. We can live above life's circumstances.