



Your Sabbath Destination

A message from the
ORTHODOX
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CHURCH

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Zachary's alarm clock went off at 7:30 a.m. on Sunday, and he sleepily wondered again if this was the best way to start the day of rest. *After all, he reasoned, the pastor explained in last Sunday's sermon that sabbath means "rest"! And rest right now should mean nodding off again for half an hour—maybe longer.* He pressed the snooze alarm button on his clock and drifted off to sleep again, only to be awakened fifteen minutes later. This time he couldn't rationalize another excursion into slumberland, so he rolled out of bed and got ready for church.

Before you find fault with Zachary's understanding of the Sabbath day, give him a little slack. He's right that *sabbath* means "rest," and that could include some well-earned z's. But he probably needs to reconsider the ABCs of the Sabbath. Here they are.

Adam

Zachary sat down with his cup of coffee in his church's sermon-response class. On the previous Sunday, Pastor Restor had promised to answer questions about the Sabbath in this week's class. Ever the polite antagonist, Zachary immediately thrust his hand into the air to pose a question.

"*Sabbath* sounds like Old Testament teaching," he suggested. "We're new covenant people." (He hoped his reference to the new covenant would establish his biblical credentials.)

"Zach, you need to read a good commentary," the pastor suggested.

“I don’t read commentaries; the Bible is good enough for me.”

“You’re not off the hook, Zach,” his pastor responded. “The commentary I’m thinking of is in the Bible; it’s Hebrews 3 and 4.”

Pastor Restor asked the class to open their Bibles, and, in keeping with his advice to Zachary, asked him to read Hebrews 3:7–4:11 aloud to the class. (See the text on pages 14–15.)

The class members listened as the pastor then pointed out that this New Testament book comments on Genesis 2 and Psalm 95 in the Old Testament in order to explain the significance of the Sabbath. The class was less familiar with Psalm 95, but they recognized Genesis 2:2, which says that God “rested on the seventh day from all his work.” The writer to the Hebrews quotes that verse (see 4:4) and connects the Sabbath to God’s day of rest.

In the Genesis account, Moses reports that God had just completed his work of creation in six days, crowning it with the formation of Adam and Eve. He then rested on the seventh day and made it holy. But, as the pastor pointed out, God’s rest on the seventh day wasn’t simply the cessation of creative activity. “The writer of Hebrews is saying that God established his ‘rest’ in order that Adam and his descendants could enter into it. That’s why the writer can say that “it remains for some to enter it” (4:6). “As image-bearers of God, Adam and Eve were to be the first persons to work for their Creator-Lord to bring the creation to its intended consummation, into God’s rest,” he explained. The class knew the biblical account well enough to understand that Adam failed in that task, and they sensed that the pastor was preparing them for the work of the last Adam, Jesus.

But Zachary was quick with his upraised arm. “How can Hebrews connect Sabbath observance to God’s rest at creation? There’s no commandment about Sabbath keeping until God gave the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.”

“Nor is there a scriptural prohibition against wrongful divorce until after Israel’s deliverance from Egypt,” Pastor Restor pointed out. “But when dealing with improper divorce, Jesus referred to

Genesis 2:24 and said that ‘from the beginning it was not so’ (Matt. 19:8). So even Adam knew that divorce could be sinful, although we don’t have a written record of God telling him that. Similarly, the Lord says that ‘Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws’ (Gen. 26:5)—long before we have a written record of such requirements. So the writer to the Hebrews is in good company when he sees the Sabbath beginning with God inviting the first man, Adam, into his rest, even though we don’t have an explicit record of that in the Old Testament.”

The pastor glanced nervously at his watch and realized that he didn’t have time to explain the Hebrews text more fully. “Tell you what. Let’s continue this discussion next Sunday after the worship service. But let me summarize things to this point. The author of Hebrews says that the Sabbath is founded on the rest that God entered into on the seventh day of creation. Furthermore, God invited Adam and Eve to enter into his rest that he had begun. The Sabbath would point to the goal of creation, which God intended it to experience. Come back next week for the rest of the story.” Pastor Restor was determined to cover more territory next week.

Belief

The following Sunday, Zachary was more eager to crawl out of bed than the week before. He still had questions about the Sabbath, and he was going to listen carefully to—and be prepared to ask questions about—Pastor Restor’s presentation in the sermon-response class. In addition, he had invited a coworker to attend church with him that Sunday and needed to give him a ride.

“Recall that last Sunday I explained that the Sabbath began with Adam, or more accurately, with the rest that God entered into and which he invited Adam and Eve to enter,” the pastor began. “That’s the inspired commentary of the writer to the Hebrews in chapters 3 and 4 of his epistle, when he refers to Genesis 2:2. But that author

also sees the Sabbath theme in the entire history of God's people.

"Notice how in 3:7–11 the writer quotes extensively from Psalm 95 to describe the attitude of the Israelites in their wilderness trek from Egypt to Canaan."

Shouldn't we be looking at the Ten Commandments at this point, especially the fourth commandment? Zachary thought.

Pastor Restor continued. "Even before the Ten Commandments were given by God at Mount Sinai, his people were rebelling and expressing unbelief." (At this point, Zachary briefly entertained the possibility that Pastor Restor was a mind reader.) "In these five verses, the psalmist charges the Israelites with rebellion, testing God, and putting him to the test. For instance, at Rephidim, even after experiencing God's deliverance of them from the Egyptians and seeing him provide water, manna, and quail, the people panicked. They didn't believe that God could continue to provide water for them. And later ten of the twelve men who spied out the land of Canaan for conquest reported back that the Canaanites were strong and had fortified cities. God's people didn't believe that he could deliver Canaan into their hands, so they sat on them. They refused to mount a conquest of Canaan. God was so angry with their unbelief that he said, 'As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.'"

"His *rest*? You just said that God wouldn't allow them into *the land of Canaan!*" (Zachary was so certain that he had caught the pastor in a contradiction that he forgot to raise his hand to pose this question.)

"You're tracking better than you think, Zach," Pastor Restor replied. "For Canaan was the land of rest. Forty years later, when Joshua was ready to lead Israel into Canaan, he reiterated God's promise, 'The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land' (Josh. 1:13). But at this point in Israel's history, God would not let them 'enter my rest.' Canaan was to be a foretaste of God's rest. But the author of Hebrews says that the people 'were unable to enter because of unbelief' (3:9). Entering into God's rest depended on one thing: belief.

"If the Israelites had believed God, they would have entered the

land of rest. Lack of belief kept that generation out of Canaan. They wandered in the wilderness until their death.

“The writer of Hebrews wasn’t simply engaging in a history lesson here. He understood that his readers were sojourners, just as the Israelites had been in the wilderness centuries before. These believers were experiencing hardship, temptation, and persecution for their faith. The writer expresses his concern for them very clearly: ‘Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God’ (3:12). He was concerned that none of them ‘be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin’ (3:13). Positively, he urged them to hold on to their ‘original confidence firm to the end’ (3:14). He was referring to faith in Jesus as the ‘faithful high priest’ who made ‘propitiation for the sins of the people’ (2:17).”

Zachary’s friend now wanted to join the discussion. He was convinced that any expression of faith and grace in the Old Testament had to be different from what the author of Hebrews was encouraging his listeners to continue to embrace. “Aren’t we talking about two different experiences here? Belief that God could enable the Israelites to take possession of Canaan appears to be on a different level than belief that Jesus can save from sin,” he suggested.

“Fair question,” the pastor acknowledged. “But listen again to what the text says:

We have come to share in Christ. (3:14)

For 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. (4:2)

Those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience. (4:6)

“You can’t fault some Bible versions for translating ‘good news’ in these verses as ‘gospel,’ for that’s the basic idea here. The writer is saying that the Israelites in the wilderness heard the same message that his readers have received. God had mercifully delivered his

people from slavery in Egypt, and he reminded them of that in the introduction to the Ten Commandments: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). In a similar way, the readers of the Hebrews epistle had experienced the redeeming power of God.”

Zachary had been waiting for some reference to the fourth commandment, so he was all ears.

“In Exodus 20,” Pastor Restor continued, “the fourth commandment, ‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,’ was based on the fact that after his creative activity for six days, God rested on the seventh. But when Moses reiterated the fourth commandment just before the Israelites were to enter the land of Canaan, he explained that that commandment has a redemptive focus also: ‘The LORD your God brought you out from [Egypt] with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day’ (Deut. 5:15). Just as the fourth commandment reminded the Israelites that they were invited to enter God’s rest, so also that commandment had a redemptive focus. Because of God’s grace, the people were ready to enter the land of rest, Canaan.”

Clang! Clang! The Sunday school superintendent with her obnoxious bell signaled that class time was up. The pastor had a hard time controlling his disappointment.

“I had intended to reach the climax of the text today, but I guess I got carried away. Can you handle one last class next week for the conclusion?” The pastor closed the class in prayer before anyone could respond. *No sense giving them an excuse to be absent*, he thought.

Consummation

The following Sunday the classroom was full; in fact, there were some people attending who hadn’t taken in the first two classes. Evidently the word was out that Pastor Restor was dealing with

biblical material that the congregation hadn't understood clearly before.

"It's great to see all of you here this morning! Let's review quickly what we have been studying and discussing in the past two classes. When did the Sabbath day begin?"

"At creation," several people chimed in.

"What was the significance of God resting on the seventh day?"

The room was quiet this time. Class members knew they had been taught the answer, but it hadn't sunk in yet.

"Okay, this may still be rather new to you, but it's at the heart of the Sabbath. Not only did God rest from six days of creation, but he invited Adam and Eve to join him in that rest. The fourth commandment, in fact, says that Israel was to observe the Sabbath every seven days because God rested on the seventh day. So Sabbath observance was an acknowledgement that God had invited Israel to join him in his rest.

"When Moses restated the Sabbath commandment, he explained that God, after creating the world, 'on the seventh day rested and was refreshed' (Ex. 31:17). God enjoyed his creative work and invited Adam and Eve to work for him to bring creation to its intended consummation. You see, God had further plans for the world. His image-bearers were to develop and populate it in ways that would demonstrate the glory of God in new ways. One day they would be able to rest from their work and experience God's rest, the consummation of creation. The Sabbath reminded them of that destination.

"Can you think of another symbol that pointed to God's rest?" the pastor asked.

"Sure. Canaan is depicted in the Bible as the land of rest," Zachary quickly responded. Coffee picked up at the break time after worship had a way of keeping him on track.

"You're right. Lack of belief kept the first generation from entering that land. But the second generation did enter it. So you might conclude that the whole point of the Sabbath day was fulfilled

when the Israelites made it into the land of rest. But not so.”

The pastor then read Hebrews 4:1, “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.” After reading the passage, the pastor thought he detected some light bulbs going on among class members. Others, though, appeared to be still in the dark.

“This verse boldly proclaims that the promise of entering into God’s rest still stands. So these first-century readers of the book of Hebrews had the same reason for observing the Sabbath as Old Testament believers did! These readers were looking forward to entering into the same rest that God had promised to Israel and into which he himself entered on the seventh day of creation.

“But take note: the writer is concerned that his readers believe the good news, so that they won’t fail to enter that rest. Five times in this section of Hebrews 3 and 4, the writer quotes the warning from Psalm 95 about missing out on entering into God’s divine rest because of unbelief. In fact, he encourages his readers to ‘exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin’ (3:13). He anticipates that this encouragement will come about as they gather for worship, no doubt on the Sabbath day (Heb. 10:24–25).”

Unbelief about what? Zachary wondered.

“The writer brackets this section of his epistle with powerful descriptions of Jesus as the great high priest of his people. He has sacrificed himself upon the cross for the sins of his people and now intercedes for them before his Father. This is the ‘good news’ that the writer urges his readers to believe and to hold on to. Because of the redemptive work of Jesus, God’s people can look forward to entering his rest. To put it another way, Jesus has not only saved his people from their sins, but also ‘has secured the realization of God’s original purposes for the entire creation,’ as one of my seminary professors used to say. We’re reading about the consummation of history here, when we will live with God in the new heaven and earth.

“You see, the writer understood that his original readers were

pilgrims headed to their eternal rest, just as the Israelites were sojourners in the wilderness, headed for Canaan. Some Israelites failed to enter that land of rest because of unbelief, and the writer is concerned that unbelief would keep some of his readers from God's rest. Furthermore, when Israel occupied Canaan, they still hadn't arrived at God's rest. Likewise, the readers of Hebrews hadn't arrived there yet either."

"How does the writer of Hebrews know this?" Zachary mumbled under his breath.

"Note that Psalm 95 was written *after* the Israelites entered Canaan," the pastor continued. "And yet the psalm cautions the people not to miss out on God's rest because of unbelief. And here's the clincher: the writer says that 'if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on' (4:8). Yes, Joshua led them into the land of temporal rest, but the people continued to observe the Sabbath. Evidently the people hadn't entered into what the Sabbath pointed to—God's rest.

"It would take a leader greater than Moses or Joshua to usher God's people into his eternal rest. That person is the Lord Jesus Christ, so it is he that the writer urges his readers to continue believing and following: 'For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end' (3:14).

"Okay, heads up! Here's the conclusion of the matter. The writer sees us, too, as pilgrims on the way to God's rest. Here's his declaration: 'So then, there remains a Sabbath rest [*or* keeping] for the people of God' (4:9). Now you understand why we continue to observe the Sabbath today. We look forward to entering God's rest just as much as God's people did in times past. One day a week we cease our legitimate activities of the previous six days to make a positive statement to our watching world that we aren't trapped in an endless, meaningless circle of activity. Rather, we are headed to what the Sabbath day points, the consummation of history in the presence of God. We are expressing a Christian philosophy of life. On the other hand, not to observe the Sabbath would, in effect, be to deny that we

look forward to entering the rest that God promises for his people—the new heaven and earth.”

“So we should gather for worship on *Saturday*, I suppose,” Zachary challenged. He liked to stir up the pot.

Pastor Restor was anticipating this question. “Jesus proved his conquest of sin and death by his resurrection. The early church understood this clearly and began to worship on the first day of the week, his day of resurrection. That’s why the apostle John refers to ‘the Lord’s day’ (Rev. 1:10). Just as ‘the Lord’s supper’ is called that because the Greek term translated as ‘Lord’s’ means that Jesus did something to claim and control that supper (1 Cor. 11:20), so also John can refer to Sunday as ‘the Lord’s day,’ using the same Greek term to portray Jesus as having done something to claim and control that day. Clearly, that’s Jesus’ resurrection day, the first day of the week. The early believers began worshipping on the Lord’s day, understanding that it is the Christian Sabbath. The designation ‘Lord’s day’ makes it clear that Jesus is the One who will usher his people into the rest that God has promised.”

The Sunday school superintendent rang her bell, calling for, if not the consummation, at least the end of the class. The lights began to come on in the heads and hearts of class members even as the classroom lights went off:

- **Adam** and Eve were invited by God to enter into his rest, which he established after creation, but they failed to do so because of their disobedience. God established Sabbath observance to point his people toward his eternal rest and later codified Sabbath observance in the Ten Commandments.
- **Belief** that God would take his people into the land of rest spurred them to push on to Canaan. However, they pulled back in unbelief at the border, not trusting God to enable them to take over the country. The first generation died in the wilderness and thus didn’t reach the land that signified God’s rest.

• **Consummation** has always been in view with the Sabbath. The ultimate goal God intends for his people hasn't been to occupy a piece of planet Earth. It's more than that; it's living in the new heaven and earth. Our Sabbath observance today points us to the eternal rest that God promises for his people.

Class members began to see more clearly that the Sabbath points back to God's invitation to enter his rest and looks forward to the rest that we will enter by faith.



The following Sunday morning found Zachary rolling out of bed as he always had—slowly. Six days of work do produce some weariness. But now he had some understanding of his great privilege to celebrate with other worshippers God's promise to provide, not only a day of physical rest and worship, but also entrance into his eternal rest. That destination is a great Sabbath to look forward to.

Hebrews 3:7–4:11

(All words in italics are quotations from Psalm 95.)

Chapter 3

⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ *do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,*

⁹ *where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.*

¹⁰ *Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;
they have not known my ways.’*

¹¹ *As I swore in my wrath,
‘They shall not enter my rest.’”*

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

¹⁵ As it is said,

“Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not

enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Chapter 4

¹ Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For 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. ³ For 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.

⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵ And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

⁶ Since 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.”

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

