

The Hope of Rest
Hebrews 4:1–11
November 5, 2023

Daniel Nayeri's book, *Everything Sad is Untrue*, is a story about a boy born in Iran to a wealthy Muslim family. About a hundred pages in, while Daniel's family is visiting England, his sister becomes a follower of Christ. Soon thereafter, Daniel's mom believes in Christ too. So, as the story goes on, they join a secret church in Iran led by a missionary from the US, a missionary that was soon martyred. Eventually, when Daniel's mother started sharing her faith openly, the government of Iran threatened to kill her children. That government certainly had the reputation to follow through. They had the muscle. Their threats weren't empty ones. So, though Daniel's Muslim father ends up staying behind, his mother saves her children's lives by fleeing. The book is largely about this mother and her two children's journey in exile, having lost their wealth, their status, father, grandparents, and many other things for something they considered more valuable.

Their life as exiles wasn't comfortable. The chapters detail the deplorable conditions they lived in while on the run, in camps and elsewhere. Years later, as an adult, Daniel reflects on that season and writes, "Here is something that only makes sense now that you know what you know. In a refugee camp, it's the waiting that will kill you. The whole point of a refugee camp is that there are *actual* people trying to kill you. But really, it's the slow numbing death of hopelessness that does it."¹

What he means is that many of his fellow exiles—those he lived around, those that waited with him—eventually succumbed to the notion that there was no trajectory to their days, *nothing* to look forward to.

The author of Hebrews writes a community of exiles enduring persecution from those that lived around them.² In that sense, their *place*—where they laid their head, the people they lived among—that *place* reinforced that they were a pilgrim people, walking through a wilderness, longing for a land. In fact, later on the author encourages endurance by describing those that had walked a similar path by faith *before*. They **confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. . . they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one** (Heb. 11:14–16).

We're not in Hebrews 11 yet. But Hebrews 3 and 4 help set the stage for that imagery to come. So, we might ask: what is it that strangers and exiles—those who've *not yet* arrived—what do those plodding through days of seeming wilderness need to be reminded of? Precisely that which Hebrews 4 declares. First, a warning. And then, a promise.

1. A Warning: They Shall Not Enter My Rest (vv. 1–5)

Again, we keep saying it, but warnings can be loving. And they can be heeded. Our dear friend Dan—our former elder that we've been praying for this week—he, myself, and Owen hiked together a few weeks back in the Smokies. A few times he and I would cease our conversation for a minute so that Dan could say something along these lines, "Owen, if you're going to hike these trails, make sure you think about this, make sure you pack this, etc." One time he said, "Owen, when you're out in the middle of nowhere—even if you think you're lost—*never* leave the trail." That's a warning, yes, but it's not unloving.

Verse 1 continues to warn: **Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it.** As the passage unfolds, little by

¹ Daniel Nayeri, *Everything Sad is Untrue*, 303.

² Richard Gaffin, "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God," 38.

little we'll discover what this promised rest *is* precisely, but here we merely note that *some* come short of it. Some do not enter this rest.

It's certain that some *in the past* had not. The "therefore" in verse 1 connects chapter 4 to what chapter 3 detailed. Last week we heard the first point of a sermon on Psalm 95, where the author reflects on the wilderness generation's rebellion (Numbers 14). They'd hardened their hearts (3:8). They'd tested the Lord (3:9). And God swore that they would not enter His rest (3:11).

After reflecting on that generation's falling short, the author applies that history to his present audience. Verse 2: **For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also.** Again, it's not a stretch to say that those reading this letter are in an analogous situation to those in the Old Testament.³ For something of a parallel, those in the book of Numbers had been delivered during the Exodus. And yet, they'd *not yet* arrived in the land promised. In other words, they'd been saved *from*, but not yet *into*.⁴

While it's not an *exact* parallel, similar language could be used to describe those that believed in the first-century. They'd been saved *from*, but not yet *into*. Salvation had come to them in the present, but more awaited them. Aspects of that salvation remained in their future.⁵

The parallel verse 2 notes, however, is that *both* groups had good news preached to them: **we have had good news preached to us, just as they also.** However, *after* that phrase, the author pens a strong conjunction. In one sense he hopes the parallels cease. Verse 2 goes on: **but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.** I think the ESV is a bit clearer on this phrase, **because they were not united by faith with those who listened.**⁶ The point is that though both groups had good news preached to them, that good news didn't profit those in the wilderness because they didn't believe it. Simply *hearing* the gospel does not guarantee anything.⁷ Hearing must be united to faith. That's what verse 3 makes plain: **For we who have believed enter that rest.**

Faith comes by hearing. However, to truly hear is to also believe. And if I might add one more nuance, to truly believe is to obey. In verse 6 of our passage, the author is once again talking about *why* the wilderness generation didn't enter. Verse 3 contended that it's because they were not united *by faith* with those who listened. Verse 6 says that in another way: **those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience.** So, while our day might cheapen the words "faith," or "belief," to hear rightly is to believe. And to believe is to obey—to live as if what you've heard is true. That's the nature of saving faith.

On that same trip to East Tennessee, I was riding in my father-in-law's Tesla. My brother-in-law owns one as well. They're both fervent in their enthusiasm. In fact, whenever we go somewhere, they say, "Matt, get in the driver's seat." So, I'm driving this fancy machine around the curves of the Smoky Mountains. While I'm doing so, being as careful as I can possibly be with my in-laws car, eventually my father-in-law reaches over from the passenger seat, presses the self-driving button, and instructs me, "Matt, let go of the wheel." Keep in mind that I married his eldest daughter and promptly moved her 5 hours away from him. When he tells me to do something, I'm generally pretty compliant. But, in this case, we're on curvy roads, cars are everywhere, and he's telling me to "let go" of the wheel. I'm hesitant. But then my brother-in-law from the back seat says, "Believe."

³ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 94.

⁴ This is Don Carson's language in "How the Book of Hebrews Makes Use of Old Testament Passages," Plenary 2, found here: <https://www.uu.edu/audio/detail.cfm?ID=395>

⁵ The use of Psalm 110 in Hebrews 1 made that clear.

⁶ See Harris, 94.

⁷ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 135.

That was an apt word for that particular moment. Because if I believe—or trust—Tesla’s engineers, I’ll let go. If I don’t, I won’t.

To believe is to live as if what you’ve heard is true. In *Everything Sad is Untrue*, eventually Daniel talks about all the questions others ask when they hear that his mom willingly gave up “all the villages my grandfather owned, all the gold, my mom’s own medical practice—all the amazing things she had that we don’t have anymore because she became a Christian.” He says when his mom is asked that question—why?—“She looks them in the eye with the begging hope that they’ll hear her and she says, ‘Because it’s true.’”⁸

Throughout this section, the author’s repeatedly referred to the grumbling and rebellious community in the book of Numbers. Maybe we wonder *why* that past event is brought up here. Because history instructs us. Those that fail to learn from it often end up repeating it. He’s warning the readers of this letter *not* to do what they did, saying, “You’ve heard good news. So did *they*. But they didn’t believe it. So, they didn’t enter.”

Why will those that *fail* to believe fail to enter? Simply, because God said as much. In fact, He swore.⁹ Hebrews 4:3 applies Psalm 95 to the present day: **just as He said, “As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest.”**

From here, we might *begin* to answer the question, “What is this rest?” In verse 1 it’s called **His rest**. In verse 3, God calls it **my rest**. So, the rest referred to—the rest entered into—is God’s. That brings *more* clarity to the question. But there’s more to be uncovered. To define God’s rest, we need to be clear on what His works are. Has God rested from *all* His works? That’s not the case. In fact, the Psalms instruct us to praise Him for His works. So, what “works” does the author refer to? The end of verse 3 brings clarity: **For we who have believed enter that rest, just 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.**

For an author that’s repeatedly taken us to the Old Testament, in this verse he’s rewound the tape as close to the beginning as he can. The works of God’s that were finished—and the rest that *began*—occurred at the foundation of the world. And in case we’re not convinced by verse 3 that he’s referring to the works at creation,¹⁰ verse 4 makes it nearly impossible to miss: **For He has said somewhere concerning the seventh day, “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works.”** Verse 4—the only citation of Genesis 2:2 in the entire New Testament¹¹—makes clear: when God says **my rest**, He means the rest that He enjoyed in the creation account.

If we’re to follow the logic of the argument, it seems that one of the primary reasons the author takes us all the way back to the first page of the Bible is the juxtaposition of verses 4 and 5. How long has God’s rest been around for the good of humanity? Since the foundation of the earth. So, if it began *then*, was this rest *unavailable* to the Israelites in the wilderness? Absolutely not. Genesis 2 is *long* before Numbers 14.

We could read that account in Numbers again to see all that God did to make Himself clear to them. Or we could read the explanation here in Hebrews 4. In both texts it’s evident that what God offered was *both* available to them and declared as such. Yet, though they had good news preached to them (4:2), their unbelief kept them from the mercy offered (3:19). We’re to consider their example and be warned. Verse 1 captures it: **Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it.**

Because, as that verse states, the offer stands.

⁸ Nayeri, 196.

⁹ Schreiner, 137.

¹⁰ Harris, 907

¹¹ Gaffin, 39

2. A Promise: They Shall Enter My Rest (vv. 1, 4, 6-11)

So, on the one hand we're to note the example of the wilderness generation missing the rest God offered. We've been warned. But that's not the *only* way the author applies Psalm 95. He preaches it also as a text of opportunity. In other words, there's a yesterday—a past example. But there's *also* a today.

Verse 6: **Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it.** He's restating what verse 1 called a promise—a **promise remains of entering His rest.** But in verse 6 he's also continuing an argument, clarifying that nothing the wilderness generation did annulled what God offers.

Yes, the wilderness generation was faithless. Yet, verse 6: **since it remains.** Verse 1: **a promise remains.** His word has not been altered. It can't be. He's never misspoken. In fact, the flow of verses 6 and 7 could be read like this, **Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it . . .** (v. 7) **He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."** Even though that generation didn't enter the promised land, God is still saying, "Today."

A few times in this study we've noted the intentional ambiguity when the author introduces an Old Testament passage. Back in chapter 2, when introducing Psalm 8, the text was vague, **But one has testified somewhere** (2:6). It sounded almost as if the author of Hebrews knew less about the Old Testament than *we* do. But of course, that's not *close* to the case. The language is on purpose; it's intentional ambiguity. Likewise, a few moments ago when introducing Genesis 2, the text was again non-specific, **For He has said somewhere** (4:4). Our children know in what book of the Bible God rested on the seventh day.

However, here, there's no intentional ambiguity. He's specific, for a reason, for further proof that the promise remains. **He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time.** Why make sure we know that David wrote Psalm 95? Because David and Psalm 95 came along *a long time* after Numbers 14. The interval between the wilderness generation and David writing Psalm 95 is crucial to the argument.¹² Nothing the wilderness generation did annulled what God promised. God continued saying, "Today."

Speaking of, today is one of the few days of the year where your internal clock might be sort of, "off." For a day or two, your body will be adjusting to a new "time." Maybe you'll ask, "What time is it?" and look at some device to get you back on track. But, for our purposes today, "what time is it?" is also a good theological question, in particular concerning God's redemptive history.¹³ Where are we on His timeline? Knowing the "time" helps me understand *why* things are the way they are in the present. In 2023, we're post-fall, post-resurrection, but we're still pre-restoration. The "time" reminds me that, like the Hebrews, aspects of salvation remain in the future.

To connect that idea even more closely to our text, it's also important when we're read the Scriptures to know where we are on God's timeline, in particular where a text is in the arc of redemptive history. Why? So that we might see how themes develop. What's the significance of that truth for this text? Because it's not *only* that God continues speaking of His promises *after* the wilderness generation failed to enter the promised land, it's that He continued offering rest *after* they did enter it. Look at verse 8: **For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that.**

Earlier we mentioned that the author of Hebrews was writing a community enduring persecution from those that lived around them. In that sense, their *place* reinforced that they were exiles, pilgrim people walking through a wilderness, longing for a land. You likely recognize aspects

¹² Schreiner, 142.

¹³ See Trevin Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*.

of that story—or that longing—from the Old Testament Scriptures. God promised His people a place. Those people—like us—longed to live among those that honored God, in a place where Yahweh was worshipped, where He sat on the throne.

The wilderness generation was headed to a land with that kind of promise. However, instead of entering, they wandered and eventually died. Their leader Moses died as well. But the leader that followed Moses—Joshua—continued to live. And toward the end of the book of Joshua, we read, **So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it.** Joshua led the Lord’s people into the land God promised Abraham. And the next verse in Joshua reads, **And the Lord gave them rest on every side** (Josh. 21:43–44).

With all that in mind, we read Hebrews 4:8 again: **For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that.** So, again, it’s not *only* the interval between the wilderness and David that’s crucial to the argument, it’s the interval between Joshua entering the land and David writing Psalm 95.¹⁴ Those that read Psalm 95 were *already* living in Canaan, as God’s people had for generations. God’s people *were* in God’s place under God’s rule.¹⁵ Yet, *in the land*, they were *still* being exhorted to enter God’s rest.¹⁶

Children, this is one of the reasons we teach the stories of the Old Testament, often in sequential order. It helps you place events on God’s timeline and understand what He has done, as well as what He is *still* to do. There was—and is—a trajectory for God’s people. And what Hebrews 4 makes clear is that the Promised Land was a stop *along* that trajectory. It wasn’t the end. The land pointed forward to a place to come. The rest they enjoyed pointed forward too.

Joshua did as well. His name means, “The Lord saves.” If that sounds familiar, it’s because it’s the same name given in Matthew 1. The Greek word for Joshua is the same word we use to translate Jesus.¹⁷ So, there’s a land promised. There’s rest in that land. The people of God are led there by Joshua. Each aspect pointed forward to something *better*.

Chapter 3 of Hebrews called us **holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling** (3:1). How is that possible? The true and better Joshua came *from* the place we long to go to. In a couple weeks we’ll read, **we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens** (4:14). He, who was **faithful as a Son** (3:6), is the heir of all things (1:2). Further, that faithful Son—the heir—is not ashamed to call *us* His brothers and sisters (2:11). In fact, He came from heaven, was faithful as a Son, passed through the heavens on our behalf, in order to bring us to glory too (2:10).

That’s some of the argument Hebrews has made thus far. Verse 9 draws the conclusion: **So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.** It’s entirely possible the author coined the term translated “Sabbath Rest.”¹⁸ It seems to point, not *merely* to a synonym for rest, but to the way God’s people participated in that rest, pointing to the joy that marked it.¹⁹ Consider Genesis 2. Yahweh didn’t rest because He was weary. He rested because the work—a good work—was completed. And, because He wasn’t weary, His rest didn’t mean He took a nap. In fact, the next verse in Genesis 2 says this: **Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made** (2:3). What is this rest that remains offered to us? It’s the peace of Genesis 2, God dwelling with His people in a world unbroken. It’s a day—and then another day—an unending day blessed and made holy by God

¹⁴ Schreiner, 142.

¹⁵ See Vaughan Roberts, *God’s Big Picture*.

¹⁶ Peter O’Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 117.

¹⁷ Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous)

¹⁸ Harris, 100.

¹⁹ Schreiner, 143.

Himself. What Christ came and accomplished is nothing less than the fulfillment of the original purpose of God in creation.²⁰

That's what verse 10 elaborates upon: **For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.** What “works” would these be? They seem to be the labor of persevering in a land that persecutes, the “desert works” of believers journeying through a wilderness.²¹ When this letter was written, the church *was* a pilgrim people. *Now*, the church is as well. But it will *not* be so forever. One day we'll rest from our labors. The seasons of strife and suffering will cease.

The good news of this text is that this resting place truly exists.²² That which God Himself enjoys—*His* rest—will be shared.

So, verse 11: **Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.** In this verse the warning and the promise are brought together.²³ Today, if we hear His voice, we don't harden our hearts. Instead, we're diligent *not* to be like those that disobeyed, but to hear, believe, and enter.

Conclusion

As an exile fleeing religious persecution, Daniel wrote that it's “the slow numbing death of hopelessness that does it.”²⁴ But he writes of his mom, “When we got to (a refugee camp) and she saw the dead eyes of the people, she told us, “No. No we won't do that.” Much of the book is Daniel talking about how extraordinary his mother was, how she didn't succumb to the hopelessness, all while leading her two children in and out of danger and squalor and despair. At the end of the book Daniel explains *how* she did it, “Imagine you're in a refugee camp and you know it'll be a year or more before anything happens. It's going to be a tough year. But for the person who thinks, ‘At the end of this year, I'm going somewhere to be free, a place without secret police, free to believe whatever I want and teach my kids.’ You believe it'll be hard, but eventually, you'll build a life. . . But if you're thinking every place is the same, and there will always be people who abuse you, the sadness overtakes you. . . Here's the thing, you'll *both* have the same year at the camp. But one of you will be looking around with joy and anticipation, wondering what you can do to prepare your kids for the new world. And the other will be slumped in the courtyard. . . what you believe about the future will change how you live in the present.” Then, of his mom Daniel writes, “That's how she did it.”

What is it that strangers and exiles—those who've *not yet* arrived—those plodding through days of wilderness need to be reminded of? That the Son—the heir of all things—came and promised, **Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest** (Matt. 11:28).

²⁰ Gaffin, 40.

²¹ Gaffin, 45.

²² O'Brien, 33.

²³ Carson, “How the Book of Hebrews . . .”

²⁴ Nayeri, 303.