

In stark contrast to Vacation Bible Camp two weeks ago, this last week was pretty quiet around here. Pastor Adams and our wonderful administrative assistant Cory were on vacation. The teachers were filtering in and out, preparing for the school year, but for the most part it was dead quiet around here.

Reveling in all the uninterrupted contemplation time I had this last week, I decided to take on a challenge. I took a look at the three Bible readings that our worship focuses on today and one of the three jumped out from the others – the lesson from Hebrews. My first thought when I read it was, “How in the world would I preach a sermon on that?” So that’s the one I chose...

Full disclosure: this was a tough sermon to prepare... hopefully it is not overly tough to listen too... ☺

Why do I think Hebrews 4 is so challenging? Well... were you listening when I read it just a minute ago?

I’m gonna read that lesson again and I want you to really pay attention because afterward I’m gonna test your reading comprehension...

Did you get all that?

We don’t know for sure who wrote this letter we call Hebrews (some argue that it was Paul and some a guy named Apollos, but we don’t know for sure), so I’ll just refer to him as “the Writer to the Hebrews”. The writer to the Hebrews is clearly talking about *rest* – that much is clear. He writes the word *rest* nine times in these eleven verses. And his general purpose is clear enough in verse 1: God has promised to give us rest, and the writer to the Hebrews doesn’t want us to miss out on that rest – maybe you are with me so far, but do you understand the rest of Hebrews 4?

Honest, show of hands, how many of you feel confident in your understanding of what in the world is being talked about in Hebrews 4?

We have some work to do...

Let’s dig in to this challenging text that is going to teach us a vitally important truth about rest. I’m betting I don’t have to convince any of you that *rest* is an important topic. We 21st century Americans understand that restfulness, peace of mind and body is a hot commodity, not something easily or regularly attained. So, bear with me as we do the tough work of understanding Hebrews 4 because God through the writer to the Hebrews wants to give you rest, peace of mind and body today.

As I mentioned, we don’t know who wrote Hebrews, but we are able to glean from the letter itself to whom he was writing. This letter was written to second generation, ethnically Jewish Christians (take a second to wrap your mind around that audience – they are not the first ones to believe in Jesus, but they are close, Christianity is still very fresh and new, and they are Jewish, *Hebrews* who understood the Old Testament and Judaism very well).

Jewish Christians living in the Roman Empire a handful of decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, that is the audience. Maybe you know from Church history, maybe you don’t – being a Christian in the Roman Empire shortly after Jesus’ death was not very advantageous – at least not as far as your physical safety and well-being went.

You see, Rome had an official list of acceptable religions for its citizens and if your particular faith was not on that list it was illegal and therefore punishable.

Christianity didn’t make the list, and just a handful of decades after Jesus a guy named Nero came to power and started the first big Christian persecution. If these early Christians practiced their faith, they could lose their jobs, their money, their homes, their freedom, even their lives. And for these Jewish Christians, this persecution presented them with a unique choice: cling to Jesus and be persecuted for it, *or* go back to Judaism and all the persecution would go away (because Judaism was still a legal religion in the Roman Empire).

Try to put yourself in their shoes... this Christianity, this Jesus, is so new and fresh and it’s great, they’ve heard some pretty awesome things about Jesus, but it is also proving to be dangerous. They weren’t necessarily feeling the rest that Jesus promised to give to weary and burdened people – far from it, life was proving to be less restful following Jesus. On the other hand, they had the deeply-rooted faith of their ancestors, in the God of the Old Testament, in the writings of that guy named Moses – a God who too had promised rest, and had delivered rest on many different occasions throughout their people’s history.

Jesus and persecution vs. Moses and immediate rest from persecution.

These were normal people just like you and I with careers and ambitions and dreams and families. They were in a tough spot, facing a tough temptation. And so the writer to the Hebrews penned this letter to strengthen their resolve in the face of persecution and temptation. He wrote a letter whose overriding theme is: Jesus is better. Jesus is better than angels or demons or any other power on this earth because he’s the one who created them. He’s better than that guy named Moses because he is Moses’ God. Jesus is better than Old Testament Judaism because all those Old Testament words and practices and promises were pointing forward to Jesus who is the fulfillment of all of them. Jesus is better.

Hebrews 4 fits right into this theme of *Jesus is better*: The rest that Jesus offers is better than the rest you would find by going back to your Jewish roots. Reverting to Judaism may stop your current persecution, but it cannot bring you meaningful and lasting rest. It cannot bring you the true rest that God wants you to have.

And he makes this point by quoting three Old Testament passages and this is where things kind of get muddled and confusing in the English translation we have (although, to be fair, it is pretty difficult in the Greek too).

He quotes from Psalm 95:11, “**So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’**”; From Genesis 2:2 where God rests on the seventh day; and again from Psalm 95:7-8, “**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.**”

How do these three verses prove that the rest Jesus offers is better than the rest they would find by reverting to Judaism? This is where things get a little complicated, but not overly so.

His reason for quoting from Genesis 2:2 is simple: God has always wanted his people to enjoy rest. Even before sin entered this world and made life so complicated,

busy, hard, and restless, from the creation of the world God has wanted his people to know that they can and should find rest in him – that is why he rested on the seventh day.

He then quotes from Psalm 95 to remind those Jewish Christians where that rest can't be found and where it can be found.

It can't be found by going back to the way things were before Jesus – back to Old Testament Judaism. Why? Because before Jesus came, our sins and the sins of their Jewish ancestors had made it impossible for us to have access to the rest God wanted to give us. In fact the stubborn sins of their ancestors brought a promise of wrath from God instead of rest.

He was saying: You may have nostalgic memories of all the times God blessed your ancestors with a temporary, earthly rest (like under that guy named Joshua), and you may be hoping that by going back to how things used to be before Jesus you can find some temporary, earthly rest from persecution, but the rest would be just that, temporary and earthly. Because if you go back to the way things were before Jesus, God is still holding you accountable for all your sins. And because of his anger over your sins, you could never enter the rest he has wanted you to have from the very beginning – a rest that is meaningful and lasting.

The rest God wants for you *cannot* be found by going back to the way things were before Jesus, but it *can* be found today. Right here, right now, no matter what your earthly circumstances you can find the meaningful and lasting rest God wants you to have.

400 years after Joshua brought temporary, earthly rest to the people of Israel by bringing them into the Promised Land, David was still reminding God's people in Psalm 95 that they needed a greater rest – a rest that relies on the grace and forgiveness of God.

You *are not* going to find rest by going back to the way things used to be, you *are* going to find rest by today, right here and right now listening to your God, trusting in him and his love; listening to the good news that had been proclaimed to them – the good news that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us... while we were still stiff-necked and stubborn sinners, Jesus lived the perfect life we could not, and died on the cross to take away all the anger God swore he would bring down on sinners; the good news that Jesus died so that we could have full and free access to seventh day of creation kind of rest – eternal, perfect rest with God.

Jesus and the rest he offers is better and it is available “Today.” As long as you still draw breath on this earth Jesus is still calling to you, **“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”**

In other words, the writer to the Hebrews argument is this: I know you are facing this persecution, I know you are facing this temptation to turn your back on Jesus, and maybe you even have already begun to do that, but it is not too late. Jesus still wants to give you rest. Jesus is still calling you through the good news to believe in him and find true and lasting and better rest in him forever in heaven.

That's what Hebrews 4 is all about. (I put a little outline of this better rest in the bulletin). The rest that Jesus offers is better and it is given through the gospel, received by faith, forfeited by unbelief, and available as long as it is “today”. Now you understand what the writer to the Hebrews was saying and why he was saying it... but that still leaves a question: what in the world does this have to do with me and my life today?

I'm not aware of any of you here today who are ethnically Jewish. I'm also not aware of any of you considering a switch to Judaism because you are facing too much persecution for your Christianity.

We are not in an identical predicament as that original audience, but that does not mean we have nothing in common.

Paul wrote once that **“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind.”** The list of temptations you face on a daily basis is not unique to you. In fact, I'm willing to bet that a lot of the temptations you face have at their root the same temptation these Hebrews faced: trying to find rest in something other than Jesus. We may not be thinking about abandoning Jesus for Judaism, but we are tempted to think that Jesus doesn't provide us everything we need. Instead of renouncing our Christianity to find rest, we take more of the route of Christianity + ____ .

Jesus + The bottom of a bottle is what I need to relax.

Jesus + Netflix binging and “me time” is what I need to unwind.

Jesus + A really nice and comfortable home is what I need to cope with the stress of life.

Jesus + A good and steady job is what I need to feel peace of mind in this scary economy.

Ironically, sometimes we get busier in our quest for restfulness. We are not worried about rest for our bodies, we want rest for our minds and the pressures of having to measure up as a parents, spouses, teenagers, employees.

So, Jesus + a crazy busy schedule bring peace of mind, because at least we are trying our hardest.

And the list could go on and on with the things we rely on other than Jesus to bring us peace of mind and restfulness in this world that threatens to rob us of rest. And none of those things are bad things in and of themselves, but none of those things can deliver the kind of seventh day of creation rest that God wants us to have, none of them can deliver real and lasting rest. And too often and too easily we trust those things to deliver more than they are capable of.

Today we need that reminder from the writer to the Hebrews that Jesus is better. Jesus is better at delivering peace of mind and restfulness than anyone or anything in this world. In fact, Jesus is the only one who can bring us the true and lasting rest that God wants us to have – rest that comes from knowing that you have a right relationship with the almighty God and that he is planning and guiding all of your life to bring you to the permanent, perfect rest he has wanted for you from the creation of the world.

We need to remember Genesis 2:2 – your God loves you and wants you to find rest in him. He always has. He always will. His heart cries out to you – **come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest!**

We need to remember Psalm 95 – we are not going to find real and lasting rest in anything in this sinful world because it is just that: sinful. Everything and everyone in this world is sinful and therefore incapable of delivering real and lasting rest. To top it all off, *we* are sinful, which means we deserve God’s wrath not rest.

But because of the good news, even though we don’t deserve it, our God is still calling out to us today, calling us to trust that Jesus can deliver the rest we crave.

So if you are like most people living in this sinful world, if you are stressed out, tired, restless, start finding rest here. Start with Jesus. Start with the good news. And God promises you that when your rest is founded on Jesus, no matter what happens to you in this world, this rest can never be taken away from you.

Jesus is better. Find your rest in him.

Amen.