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Hebrews 4:1-11

## ENTER GOD'S REST WHILE IT'S STILL TODAY

She was always on the defensive. Having endured a lot of teasing when she was a child, now she was always ready to lash out at anyone who she felt was questioning her integrity, always grappling to justify herself, striving to feel validated. Life to her was a ceaseless struggle.

For him it felt like an addiction. In fact, it was. It was on his mind every waking moment, a constantly ardent ache in his body. He was so alone. More than once he looked up to heaven and complained, "You wired me this way and then will you condemn me for it?" Life for him was a ceaseless struggle.

She was always on the verge of tears. The slightest thing could make her lower lip start to quiver. Was she suffering PTSD? She wasn't sure. Maybe. It was just the accumulation of all the things that had blindsided her in recent years. Where was God? Would she ever feel secure again? Life for her was a ceaseless struggle.

He had never seen a real husband or a real dad in action. And now he was supposed to be both? When they married they were so sure they'd do it the right way. They'd be different from their parents. But when life took over he found himself instinctively reverting to the only way he'd ever known. With teeth clenched he had made a fist, but caught himself when he realized friends were present. Ashamed, he stormed out and now curled up in a ball on the garage floor he pleaded to God for help. Life for him would be a ceaseless struggle.

In the Gospel Lesson today Jesus said, *Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.* Rest is also the invitation held out to us in the reading from Hebrews chapter 4. So today let's be encouraged by this invitation: Enter God's rest while it's still Today.

This New Testament book is called Hebrews because whoever wrote it intended it for Jewish people – people who had a rich background in Jewish culture, religious practices and history. Chapter 4 of Hebrews highlights that part of Jewish history we heard from the first Scripture lesson today – how Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land of Canaan, and after God helped them conquer all the inhabitants, He gave them rest there. This true historical account is what you are to keep in mind as we contemplate Hebrews 4.

Israel entering the Promised Land makes for a beautiful reminder of how God will one day give us rest in the Promised Land of heaven. But Hebrews 4 encourages us that we don't need to wait until we die to enter God's rest. Let us enter God's rest while it's still today.

For forty years the people of Israel had wandered through the desert wilderness before they entered the Promised Land. In that time a whole generation had died off because of God's judgment on them. At the beginning of those forty years, when they first came out of Egypt, they had had the opportunity to enter the Promised Land immediately. They could have avoided the forty years of aimless wandering and their carcasses littering the landscape. But they refused to go in because they feared the inhabitants were too powerful and they did not trust God's promise to give it to them. Because of their unbelief they never got to enjoy God's promise of rest. So Hebrews 4 says, *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be fearful that any one of you may be judged to have fallen behind. In fact, we have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did. But the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united in faith with those who did listen.*

You see, it was only by faith that they could enter the Promised Land and it is by faith that you and I enter God's rest today. That means believing that what God says is true. Hebrews 4 adds, *Indeed, we who believe are going to enter his rest.*

Yet it was not only the physical Promised Land that those unbelieving Israelites missed out on. They also missed out on God's eternal rest. The writer of Hebrews connects two Bible passages at two times of history. One is a quote of Psalm 95 pertaining to the Israelites and the Promised Land. The other is a quote from the beginning of time in Genesis. He writes: *It happened just as God vowed when he said (in Psalm 95): So I swore an oath in my wrath, "They will never enter my rest." And yet God's works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in this way (in Genesis): And God rested on the seventh day from all his works. And again this statement (back to Psalm 95): They will never enter my rest.* The point is that from the very beginning God established a type of rest and that rest still exists and is available to this day and it is a rest above and apart from any kind of earthly rest.

In other words, God isn't merely offering you a spa night as a break from your crazy schedule. Nor is God's rest a fluffy cloud on which you curl up in your angel-wing jammies.

Then what is God's rest? It is an existence, a relationship of total harmony and peace and friendship with God. Adam and Eve could have enjoyed and lived in the framework of that rest indefinitely had they not fallen into sin. Sadly, their fall into sin ruined it for all of us. Even so, God has not destroyed His rest. He has not removed His rest. God has not discontinued His rest. God's rest remains and is offered to you even today. Hebrews 4 tells us: *Therefore, since it is still the case that some do enter this rest, and yet those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not enter because of disobedience, God again set a certain day, namely, "today," when he later said through David, as quoted before (in Psalm 95): Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. For if Joshua had given them rest, then God would not have spoken later about another day. So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.*

But how do we enter God's rest? It not by any effort you put forth or any work you perform or anything you do. Rather, God's rest – a restored relationship of harmony and peace with God – is yours by trusting in the work of Jesus Christ. His sinless life, His atoning death on the cross, His physical coming back to life again – these belong to you through faith. By Christ's work your sins are forgiven. For Jesus' sake, God is no longer at odds with you so you no longer need to be at odds with Him. You no longer need to feel as though you are striving against Him. You no longer need to lug around the baggage of guilt. You no longer need to go through life hampered and nagged by "what if?" God is at peace with you. Trusting Jesus, you have entered His rest today. Hebrews 4 explains: *For the one who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God rested from his work.*

So SHE no longer needs to grasp and grapple for validation. She has been clothed with Christ's righteousness in Baptism. It is a perfect righteousness. She has entered the Promised Land. She has rest.

Though HE is still weighed down by aching addiction he is no longer under the added torture of God's disapproval. He can confess it and have it lifted away by having someone assure him for Jesus' sake he is forgiven. He is not alone. He has entered the Promised Land. Even as he struggles he has rest.

SHE may never entirely be able to process the shock of recent years, but God is not against her. He punished Jesus for her sins instead of punishing her. She discovers the never-failing peace of Christ's forgiveness which places her always on good terms with God, always under His umbrella of mercy. Even when she experiences recurring grief she learns to trust that His promise of deliverance is still true. She has entered the Promised Land. She has rest.

HE, even HE, no matter how confused his childhood, no matter what a mess he has made of his marriage and family, even HE finds that in Jesus he is forgiven so that with God's help and the Spirit's presence he may start

over from square one and pick up the pieces and beginning learning the careful art of giving glory to God in his marriage. He has entered the Promised Land. He has rest.

Hebrews 4 therefore adds this encouragement: *Therefore, let us make every effort to enter that rest.* Enter God's rest today by looking to Jesus for forgiveness and living in His forgiveness. Receive His forgiveness through Word and Sacrament. God's rest is eternal and those who remain in it will live eternally.