

Jesus the Giver of Sabbath Rest

Sermon Series on Hebrews

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

March 5, 2017

TEXT: Hebrews 4:1-13

We continue this morning in our spring's New Testament series on the Book of Hebrews. We have seen throughout this series that Jesus Christ is God's climactic word to us His people.



Hebrew sets before us a grand vision of Jesus as exalted Son of God, as Son of Man, as the one who represents the true humanity, and this morning we see Jesus who is the one who gives us Sabbath rest. For many of you, as 21st-century citizens, the idea of rest doesn't even seem desirable. We have baptized busyness and made it a virtue in our society. Kevin

DeYoung writes in his book *Crazy Busy: A (Mercifully) Short Book about a (Really) Big Problem*: "We will have to work hard to rest." The Word of God takes us this morning into another lofty vision of Jesus as the one who gives us what our soul needs the most. Hebrews 4 gives us a portrait of Jesus as the one who goes before us and secures our promised eternal rest, and that rest begins even now. Let's look at Hebrews 4 together and follow the passage. It's another lofty, somewhat complex text, and yet, in this section of God's Word, we see Christ vividly and clearly, and we are called to follow Him.

Hebrews 4:1 starts with an imperative, with a summons for all of us, a note of alarm. It says:

"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."

This is one of those places in Scripture where we are challenged that fear is a God-given capacity. There is a healthy, God-given fear that He has placed within us. It is that fear of missing something important. In Hebrews 4:1, we are summoned to fear lest we fail to have obtained what God has promised to us. Maybe you can resonate with the heart-pounding fear of driving to the airport and being concerned about missing your flight. There is a healthy fear when you drive, especially with a new driver, into a crowded parking lot. You are in a new stage of vigilance and alarm. A few of us had the privilege last night of driving to Miami University and hearing a very compelling lecture, the Yamauchi Lecture from Dr. James Hoffmeier on the

Historicity of the Exodus. It was really an exciting lecture. I didn't want to miss it. I wasn't sure what building the lecture was in, so I was looking at the buildings as I was driving and not looking at the waves of college students that were going across the crosswalk. My attentive wife shouted out to me: "Look out!" I just missed bowling over about seven college students! I'm grateful for that healthy fear of the pedestrians, because indeed they do have the right of way. Can you embrace with me that there is right fear? You have got to have a right fear. Hebrews 1 says there is something to be afraid of, and that missing it can be costly.

What is it that we need to be alert not to miss? In Hebrews 4:2, the writer says:

"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."

For those of us who know the Bible well, we should recall immediately the scene that the writer is imagining, pulling to mind the great narrative of the Book of Numbers. Good news came to us; we have heard the Word of Christ, the word that he has been speaking of. Good news came to us just as to them. Who was the *them* in this verse? It is our ancestors of faith who also heard good news. The text is very explicit that they had the gospel preached to them in advance, and yet this good and glorious and wondrous news was not of benefit in their lives for a very costly reason: it was not joined together with faith. You can hear all kinds of good news; you can hear the announcement of God's promise and provision and intention for you, but if that word is not mixed together with faith, it doesn't benefit you. You can be exposed to the Christian gospel, but if you do not believe and join your heart together with those who do, that Word is of no benefit in your life. The writer has in view that dramatic moment in Numbers 13

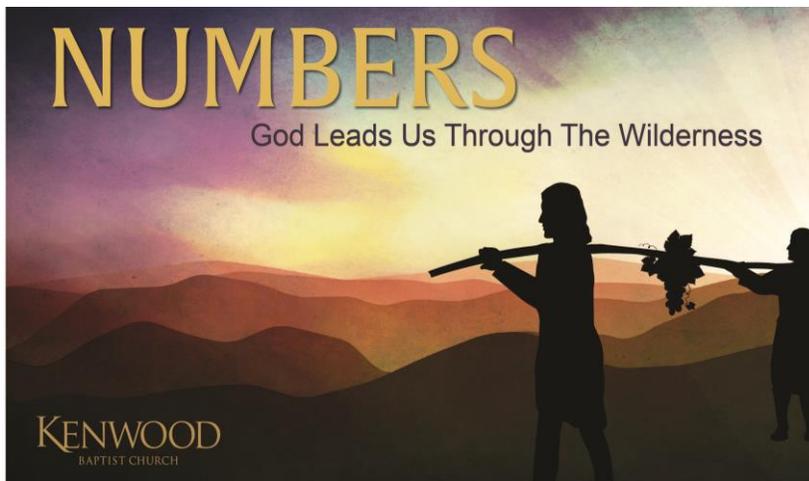
and for those of us who went through Numbers in the fall, this should be familiar territory, but we still need this reminder. All of Scripture studies, all of Scripture learning is cumulative. Remember in Numbers 13 that God's people had reached the very edge of the Promised Land. God had promised this land to Abraham. He had brought His people out with a mighty outstretched arm. I heard very compelling evidence for the detailed route of the Exodus last night and saw



archaeological images of the foundations of Egyptian forts. It was really compelling. I wish you all could have been there. This route, this event, really happened. It is interesting that the presenter last night said that the new article on the Exodus from Wikipedia says that the Exodus didn't even happen. He said they were trying to submit an alternative proposal, but so far they have been blocked. So right now, if you go to Wikipedia, you would never know the

Exodus actually happened, and yet it is one of the central events of the Scriptures and one of the central events of our faith. It forms a template for how we are to understand, how we are to learn to trust in God.

This event really happened, and God's people were brought to the very edge of the land which He had promised, and God told Moses to send out spies to scope out the land. They brought back to the people a good word, and this is the good word that the people heard in Numbers 13. They heard the gospel of the Old Testament which is that God is faithful to all of His promises, that the plans and purposes He has for us are good, and that all He is asking of us is to believe Him and take Him at His word and follow after His commands. The spies returned, Joshua and Caleb bringing fruit from the land. Remember the pomegranates and the figs and the clusters of grapes. This was the controlling image for our fall series. They brought back



these clusters of grapes and summoned the people to follow and go and take possession of the land, but the people responded with unbelief. When they responded with unbelief, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces. They heard the report of Joshua and Caleb that the land is an exceedingly good land and that the Lord is

with us. Do not fear the obstacles. I know that some of us this morning are terrified of the wrong things, and being terrified of the wrong things holds us back from entering into God's rest, entering into His promises. Joshua and Caleb plead with the people to trust God, to believe in Him, and the people respond by attempting to stone Joshua and Caleb. The glory of the Lord appears and speaks this devastating word to Moses in Numbers 14:11:

"How long will this people despise Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?"

A careful reading of Numbers shows us, and it is stated even in Numbers 14:22, that *"they have put Me to the test these ten times."* Remember how many plagues there were coming out of Egypt: the ten plagues, and there were ten rounds of grumbling, complaining, of unbelieving. When you match God's saving actions on your behalf with an equivalent number it seems of unbelief, the Lord speaks a word judgment, and I never want to come close to that. I never want any of us to come close that. But, the crucial line is: *"They didn't believe in Me."* God speaks a word judgment: *"They will not enter My rest. They will not enter the land."* In fact, no one will enter except Joshua and Caleb, and they are identified as *"those who have a different*

spirit and have followed Me fully.”

We need to take our stand with this minority report. When we go back to Hebrews 4, we see the writer saying that we who have believed, just like Joshua and Caleb, just like the great multitude of witnesses, the cloud of witnesses that we will meet in Hebrews 11, many did believe, and all who believe do enter God's rest, enter the land which He has promised, which is a signal of an everlasting inheritance. Entering into God's rest is the goal in Numbers 14. It is an image of looking to enter that place of God's dwelling. The entrance into the land in the narrative of the Pentateuch, in the first five books of the Bible, is a signal. It is an indicator of God's promise being fulfilled. Entering into the land, for the writer of Hebrews, also looks backwards, as he says in Hebrews 4:4:

“For He has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works.’”

Entering into God's rest, whether that be the physical land of Canaan or the eternal inheritance promised to God's people in a new heavens and new earth, looks back to a rest that God has promised to us from the foundation of the world. He says that God's works were finished from the foundation of the world, that He speaks of His rest in Genesis 2:2:

“And on the seventh day God finished His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done.”

The Sabbath provision is something that is from the very beginning. The Sabbath is not merely the cessation of activity, but it is an entering into time and space that God has made for you and for me and for all of His people to be in fellowship with Him. The Sabbath, one scholar has written, is like a cathedral in time. It is a space, a place, a time, where God's people are promised rest, and that rest of fellowship with the living God is what we were designed for. The writer says that the rest in the land looked back to creation but also looks forward. Hebrews continues and says that we are summoned, all who hear, to enter into God's rest. Hebrews 4:6 says:

“Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience.”

God never ceases on His intention and design to claim a people for Himself and to gather us to Himself in that place and space of rest. Hebrews 4:7 reads Psalm 95 as future-looking, that God appoints a certain day, today. Through David, writing Psalm 95, He says: *“Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”* Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as in the days of Numbers. Do not harden your hearts and fail to obtain what God has promised. He sees that the rest in the land looks back and also points forward. He says if Joshua had given the people rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. This is ahead, this coming day. So he

concludes in Hebrews 4:9-10:

“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His.”

The image of rest looks back to the Garden of Eden, it looks to the reclaiming of the world that has begun with the land, and it looks forward to a reclaiming of this entire world in and through Jesus Christ. It is through Him that we receive an inheritance of the new heaven and new earth.

The gospel is preached here regularly. The gospel requires a response from you of belief. It requires a response of faith, and it requires a diligence and attentiveness, because it is possible, it seems, to miss God's saving purpose. Hebrews 4:11 moves forward with another summons to all of us, and these terms at first strike us as a paradox. Hebrews 4:11 says:

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

That seems contradictory, doesn't it? You have to work really hard so that you can rest. Strive, labor earnestly, pursue entering that rest. We have to remember that *entering rest* is language that the writer is using to describe making it to God, receiving God's ultimate, His very best—to receive the inheritance. It is the writer's urging you and me to have not just a strong beginning to our discipleship but a glorious ending. I am longing for Kenwood to build momentum in following Christ. I don't want us to start well and just peter out and limp to the finish line. The image of Hebrews, as we will see later in chapter 12, is of a race, a race that we finish well. This language is for us to exert ourselves, strive, labor, run hard after it, go after it, to enter God's rest, claim all that He has so that none of us falls, so that none of us fails to reach the intended goal. It grieves me deeply when I see people who begin their following of Christ with great zeal, where there is fire in their soul, and somehow, like Jesus' parable of the sower, they get distracted by this world. Maybe that's true for you. Like Jesus' parable of the sower, different things happen in this life where thorns or thistles grow up and choke the growing of the Kingdom seed in our lives. We can get distracted by the pursuit of riches; we can get distracted by the anxieties of this world, and it can crowd out that growing life of the Kingdom. Sometimes we can accumulate doubt in this world. Sometimes the hidden purposes of God become obscure for us for a season in and doubt can creep into our soul. Sometimes it is the difficulty of the journey through this life that overwhelms us. Sometimes we make a hidden compromise that corrupts our soul in some place or weakens our resolve to follow hard after the Lord. We need what the writer knows that we need. We need God's powerful Word to do surgery on our souls. God's Word is very powerful. It is likened in Scripture to a pluripotent seed, such as Jesus describes in the Parable the Sower. In Isaiah 55 the Lord says His Word brings forth new life:

“. . . so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose.”

God's Word in Scripture is likened to water; it is likened to fire. I love Jeremiah 23:29 where the Lord says:

"Is not my Word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"

In Hebrews 4:12-13, God's Word, His very, very powerful Word, is described as a sharp two-edged sword:

"For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

God's word is richly described in this very pregnant passage, that God's Word is living. We don't worship a book; we worship the Author of a book whose word reverberates and is living. Martin Luther, whom we are celebrating this year, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, said: "The Bible is alive. It has hands, it takes hold of me; it has feet and runs after me." God's Word is living; God's Word is active; it is not passive. God's Word is likened to this very sharp, two-edged sword. It so sharp, in fact, that the writer wants us to see that it can pierce the division of soul and spirit, whatever that might be, and the division between joints and marrow. My friends at Children's Hospital in the bone marrow section say it is really hard to say where the bone stops or where the marrow stops. The writer is not making an anatomical observation as much as simply showing God's Word makes divisions we cannot make. Who among us can discern the difference between your innermost thoughts and your intentions? He says God's Word can do that. This Word that comes into us slices into us, and the effect is that none of us is hidden from God's sight. We are naked, we are exposed before Him, and we give an account to Him. We need Him to know ourselves. We need His Word to pierce our darkness, to reveal who we really are. N.T. Wright in his short commentary on Hebrews describes that to spend time prayerfully and thoughtfully with Scripture and with Jesus, the written and living Word, is to know the gentle but powerful touch, like a very sharp and fine blade producing surprising and perhaps alarming results. The purpose of the two-edged sword is always to cleanse and to heal. Hebrews calls us to receive the Word of God and to allow that Word to be powerfully active and effective in us.

Hebrews 4 calls us to action in a number of ways.

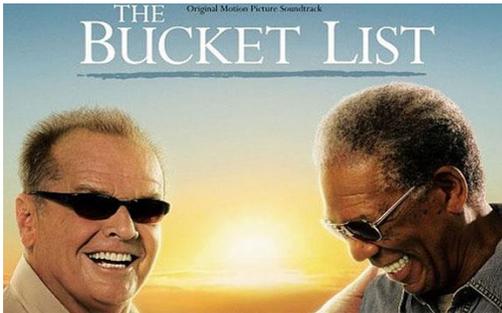
Number one: Hebrews 4 challenges us to ***have a fresh resolve not to miss what matters the most***. There is that healthy fear, an appropriate anxiety. Let us fear lest we should seem to have failed to reach it; a fresh resolve not to miss what matters the most. One of the ways that we affirm that fresh resolve is to not miss the effect of entering God's rest week after week. We who have believed, he says, enter it. One of the ways we signal that we have entered into God's

rest, that the eternal inheritance is ours, is by being here on Sunday. Being in worship on Sunday morning has a radical effect on your life and mine. I need to be here, and not just because I'm the pastor, but I really need to be here. I need to see you. I need to be encouraged by your presence. I need to be challenged to follow hard after Jesus. When we miss a Sunday, we often feel like we are on a two-week starvation diet, and we can get easily turned around, disoriented. I want to challenge you with a fresh resolve not to miss what matters the most, and part of not missing is a fresh resolve that I need to be here. I have really need to be here. Kenwood is a phenomenal and extraordinary church in so many ways. I don't know if you've noticed, but it's never the same group that's here on Sunday. When we keep track of who's here in a given month, the church would be larger if we all came at the same time. It would be it would be surprising, yet glorious.

Number two: Hebrews 4 challenges you and me to ***align yourself with people who trust God***. It means that you need to align yourself with the Joshuas and Calebs in your life. As we go through this life, there will often be another voice, either from the culture, or that voice can have a pseudo-Christian veneer to it that causes your heart to not trust God. We need to align our hearts with the Joshuas and Calebs around us, and we need to strive to be people like that. I have people like that in my own life that I reached to, and I just I love to hear them talk about Jesus, because they stir my own affection, my own resolve to trust Him.

Number three: Hebrews 4 challenges us to ***recalibrate our maps***. I just upgraded the operating system on my phone yesterday. I am always a little bit hesitant to do that because you just never know if you will have time to learn the new way; is it going to be intuitive; is it going to work better or worse; will my data transfer? There are all these problems that you think about. This seems to be working well for me except that I wasn't familiar with the upgrade on my maps. I'm not going to blame that for almost killing all those college students, but it was a factor, as I wasn't used to that interface, But, we need to recalibrate our maps. What do I mean by that? Hebrews 4 teaches us that God's Word gives us a map of this life, and that map is described in a typological way in the Old Testament narrative. The Exodus from Egypt, that redemption that leads to worship, where our enemies are defeated and our sins are atoned for, that is the beginning. The narrative continues where we go through a journey through the wilderness, and it's in that journey that we learn to live by God's Word. That is a vital portion of the journey. That journey leads to an entrance into our inheritance, and that template is: redemption, journey through the wilderness to learn to trust God, and entering into a final inheritance. The New Testament assumes that journey applies to us and those are the major markers of the journey—that we have a redemption. Remember Hebrews 2, that we've been rescued from slavery; that we are then on a journey through the wilderness, and we see that in Hebrews 3 and 4. As Hebrews unfolds, we will be continuously challenged to arrive safely at that ultimate inheritance. There are many different maps provided in our culture, different aspirations, different descriptions of the destination. There is one phrase that I have started to

hear more recently, and I want to go after it. It is the phrase *the bucket list*. The bucket list is a new term in the English language. It comes from the 2007 film starring Jack Nicholson and



Morgan Freeman, and the basic plot line of this film is two men with terminal cancer who escape from the cancer ward and head off on a road trip to fulfill a wish list of *to-dos* before they die. We are often acquiring new words, new terms, and this term came forward through popular media in 2007, but it wasn't fully established. When the print edition of the *American*

Heritage Dictionary, the fifth edition, came out in print, *bucket list* was not in the dictionary. One of the senior editors, Steve Kleiner, was asked why *bucket list* isn't in the dictionary, and he said that it needs a few more years of usage before it proves itself worthy of addition to the book. Well, that has happened. In 2016, in the online, updated edition of *American Heritage Dictionary*, you will find *bucket list*. It is established, and the definition is *a list of experiences one would like to have, or of accomplishments one aspires to in one's lifetime*. I hear people use this, so I viewed a few samples of published bucket lists. This one: *30 Things to Accomplish Before Turning 30*. Grab hold of these staggering ambitions: "Go on a road trip; attend a creative performance; see a favorite band in concert; visit Amsterdam;" and number 30, "do 30 days of something!" This one was published by a teenager: "Top of the list to do before I die: number one, be hugged by a tall boy; get a taxi and yell 'Follow that car!'; have a Disney movie marathon; know your crush likes you back." Here's another list published by a middle-aged person: "Live in Paris for a year; learn to rollerblade; fly first-class at least once; swim with the dolphins." The Bible does not invite us to see the meaning of our lives in a bucket list of personal ambitions or objectives that often just mirror the culture's prescription of joy and satisfaction.

The writer of Hebrews has a much loftier aim and destination. When we fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, the writer of Hebrews says, this is what we must have before we die: we must follow faithfully after Jesus Christ, wholeheartedly, so that we reach this ending, and this ending is described in this way in Hebrews 12, so vivid before the writer's mind. I want to reach this ending, to reach Mount Zion. I want to come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. I want to arrive to an innumerable number of angels in a festival gathering, and I want to reach the assembly, the gathered assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and I want to come before God who is the judge of all. I want to join in with the spirits of righteous men and women who have been made perfect. I want to see Jesus Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant, and I want to come before Him and His sprinkled blood that speaks now. I want to come to a Kingdom that cannot be shaken, an everlasting inheritance with all the saints. That's the goal. You can empty your bucket. There is nothing you could put in there that should skewer this great, single objective to follow faithfully after Jesus. We need the

recalibration of God's Word and regular worship so we can keep our head on straight. As we go through this world, we do accumulate doubt, we get disoriented, we get distracted, we fill up our time and schedule with things that really don't matter. How important is it that we make it to Amsterdam? It is crucial, though, that we make it to the City of God and join the hearing of the gospel with faith. Some of you are thinking: "I'm not living out of this controlling, vibrant sighting of the City of God. I don't see it. It's not my destination." That is why we need God's Word. That is why we need this very sharp sword. When we think of a sharp sword, it seems pretty dangerous, and it is, actually. A sharp sword could kill you if it's wielded with an untrained hand, but the imagery of Hebrews 4:12-13 is a sharp sword in the hands of a heavenly Father who loves us and wants to cut off the doubt and unbelief and the sin that so easily tangles us. Some of us are just caught; we are tied up; we feel blindfolded. I want to tell you that this sharp sword can cut that off.

Number four: Hebrews 4 challenges us to ***humbly allow the Word of God to cut away our unbelief***. All disobedience flows out of unbelief, Sin, unbelief, turns us into someone that we really don't want to be, and we need God's Word to cut into us with healing. C.S. Lewis provides a very memorable image of this process in his novel, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. The central character of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb. The opening sentence of the book says: "*There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.*" What a great opening line. As *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* continues and they reach these various destinations. On one of the islands, the crew lands and Eustace finds a dragon's lair, and he is greedy for the treasure. He puts on a gold bracelet and falls asleep in the dragon's lair, and when he wakes up, he has been turned into dragon. Lewis writes: "*Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself.*"

Eustace thought that he was going to be someone great, someone important, but he quickly realizes that his sin, his greed, has separated him now from his friends, from humanity, and he feels the weight of loneliness and desperately wants to change. Aslan comes to Eustace and he leads him, later in the narrative, to a very large well like a big round bath with marble steps going into it. Aslan tells Eustace that he has to undress before entering into these waters, and Eustace finds that no matter how many layers of dragon skin he manages to peel off, he is still a dragon. Then Eustace speaking says:

"Then the lion said, 'You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know - if you've ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it

coming away.

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off ... And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me - I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on - and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again...” - C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

Lewis concludes at the end of the chapter:

“It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that ‘from that time forth Eustace was a different boy.’ To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun.”

The cure has begun. The Word of God in Jesus Christ *un-dragons* us and sets us free so that we can follow hard after Him.

It is that Word that comes to us and invites us now to partake. “*Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed took bread in the presence of His disciples and said: ‘This is My body broken for you.’ He took the cup and said: ‘This cup is the New Covenant in My blood poured out for you.’*” This is not the table of Kenwood Baptist Church. It is the table of the Lord Jesus Christ, the living and active Word who can do surgery on our souls. If you have received Him and allow Him to *un-dragon* you, I invite you to partake in this celebration now. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we extol You and magnify You, exalted, radiant Son. Help us to believe in You and set us free from wrong fears, accumulated doubts, recalibrate our map to follow hard after You.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.