

Work Before Rest

The Book of Hebrews

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Tonight's title for our sermon is this, "Work Before Rest." Work before rest and we're taking before us tonight as our passage verses 11 to 13 in Hebrews 4.

Well, we were looking last time at the promise of rest, a rest that is actually speaking to us of fellowship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is God's rest, God's rest for us, that which we can receive and which was already patterned and revealed on the seventh day of creation, a promise of fellowship with God which, well, Adam and Eve would have enjoyed it in their pristine state for maybe just a short while but God was showing to us that there is fellowship to be had with him and that that fellowship ultimately is to be with and in his Son. Something of it was seen in the promise made to what Joshua might accomplish in the Promised Land, to be able to have peace and find fellowship with God there. Of course, that was only imperfectly realized and many didn't even take heed to that opportunity, fell short of it, and the day of opportunity, the today which the writer speaks of quoting Psalm 95, remains as a standing invitation to enter into that rest. It was not exhausted by the meaning of what it meant with Joshua and his, well, his attempt to lead the people but their failure in so many ways to fully make good of that rest that was promised. Then, of course, never even reached that far, they perished in the wilderness having failed to believe that God really could bring them into the Promised Land, Joshua and Caleb being the noble exceptions amongst the 12 spies who had gone to spy out the Promised Land.

So rest, the day of rest, our Sabbath day, our Lord's Day is fulfilled in all its hope and all its significance in Christ and our fellowship with him which ultimately, of course, finds its best and choicest fulfillment in heaven itself. Here on earth, we've already entered that rest, we're already receiving what are the promised fulfillments of the day of rest, and that will come into glorious fulfillment when we go to glory itself. So we see the promise but we see the dangers of refusing the promise. That is also there, isn't it, this danger that if we refuse the invitation of God, if we think that it is not meant as a serious possibility, then there awaits for us difficulty, as we saw at the end of Hebrews 3 and throughout that passage or latter part of it, the dangers of not entering that rest, the disobedience that was shown by the people under Moses when they had the opportunity to leave, the better report of Caleb and Joshua, but failed to believe it.

Well, there was rest and that thought of rest is there in verse 11, the promise of it to enter that rest, to come into fellowship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. God's rest, he never needed to rest from any work in that way because he was never exhausted by it, but he was inviting people to enjoy the survey of his great works, his great work of redemption in Christ with him through his Son.

My first heading tonight is this: we need to work. We need to work. That as we consider the matter of rest, we find it again in verse 11, "Let us," that is therefore an exhortation, isn't it? There is a call to us. The writer is not sort of speaking down to us because he's including himself in this, he's identifying himself as a person in need to hear this exhortation as much as all his readers do. "Let us therefore be diligent." That's the word, isn't it, being diligent. That speaks of work. That speaks of expense of energy. That is not something that we do sitting down. So there is a rest and an entering into that rest. There is a possession of the full entitlement that comes with that promise and it will only come to those who are diligent and we, therefore, see that the Bible knows nothing, knows nothing of effortless Christianity. It knows nothing of effortless, careless Christianity. It has no place. It has not advertisement here in Scripture, nothing at all to commend it. And we are in that more curious position, aren't we? We know that in his grace that we rely upon, in fact, grace is spoken of at the end of this chapter as we just read it, and we know that there is this, just as we have to go to the throne of grace, well, you can see there is another exhortation in verse 16, "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace." There's something to be done, there's a diligence, there's a work, there is an expenditure of energy, there is a resolve of will, and we as the Lord's people, therefore, need to work, work before rest, putting it in that way.

What other examples do we find of this? Well, just to take a few. Philippians 2 is a well-known one in verse 12. We see there, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." It goes on to say, doesn't it, in this mystery of God working with us as we work with him, "it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." But we note that, we're to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. That's strong, isn't it, fear and trembling? We talk about grace, we talk about favor, the mercy of God. Yes, yes, and yes again, but we also talk about fear and trembling. We believe in a great God, a holy God, and Paul writing in Philippians speaks of that there. So there's a diligence to be shown, there is a warning, there is an example to follow, an example to most heartily avoid, an example of disobedience.

So 1 Thessalonians 1:3 he writes there, "remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father." Well, there we see again a work of faith, that exercising of faith, of prayer and of diligence in these things, outworking our convictions by the kind of people that we are, including our labor of love. Well, it talks there again of work because love just doesn't happen, to be loved that suffers long and is kind, that does not envy, that does not parade itself, that is not puffed up, does not behave rudely and such things. Well, that takes work. That takes a lot of energy and a lot of application of ourselves against all the opposite tendencies and trends, so we can see we need to work. Energy has to be

expended against inertia, against opposite countervailing tendencies, pressures and forces. Don't think I'm any expert in physics, I have people that are more expert than I in my congregation here this evening, but we are having to live out practical, real Christianity with diligence against things which push back against us, which would try and prevent us from doing such. It means we have to make hard choices at times in life, difficult choices, choices that require, ask much of us. We have to be people who stand up and speak up and have to make things known, speak before unbelievers and say things to them, speak to the powers that be and disagree with them, different from them, what governments are doing or what they are saying.

We have to exercise our will. Nobody can do it for us, can they? It has to be us. We can't rest on our parents. We can't rest on some other Christian and upon our past or some preacher we listen to on the internet, or anything like that. We have to be the ones to exercise our will where it matters. We were having that reading after lunch at fellowship meal and Spurgeon and that we are Christ's, that he is ours and we are Christ's and we show it practically by the choices we make, that we don't opt for leisure and just pamper ourselves, or we don't opt for just being idle and slothful and looking for leisure and lack of effort. We don't look for easy wealth or just to get rich and that kind of thing, but we opt for those things that God gives to us, that we exercise our will towards what God wills and when it may be difficult, sin can seem so easy to speak something there that we want to say, to shout out at somebody or do something like that, and we have to exercise our will not to do that. That's the diligence, that's the work, that is part of the work of faith.

And we have to discipline our thoughts. We have to do it. Nobody else can do it. There's plenty of self-help books out there and some good Christian books which help us to discipline our thinking, win the battle to the mind, that kind of thing, but there are plenty of thoughts going on there which are going to need our effort. We are the ones that have to resist temptation. We are the ones that have to choose to obey. We are the ones that have to refuse sin. Nobody can step in and do it for us, though we will find the wonderful mystery in which God works with us and we cooperate with his Spirit and his Spirit cooperates with us, that we will find help and we'll find heaven is on our side if we do.

For what do we have in the heart of man? Well, we have, don't we, there it is the warning, verse 11, "lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience." And that is all the people who refused to enter the Promised Land, refused to believe that it was achievable and God would be with them, and whose bodies were scattered there and their corpses fell in the wilderness with whom God was not pleased all those days, 40 years in all. And unfortunately the fact is disobedience is built into the heart of man, sinful man, sinful nature. There is disobedience. These are the big words, aren't they, there? We've seen the word "unbelief," we looked at that the other week, the refusal to listen to and obey the word of God, that sort of downright refusal, and we can see how that couples up with disobedience, couples up with pride because we're not going to obey God, we're obeying ourselves and we think we've got it better than him and no better than he does.

And we can tie that up furthermore with things like rebellion and lawlessness, all words that are so descriptive and fundamental about what sin is. It's there in verse 11, their example of disobedience, and we note that the word "fall" goes with it. They fell physically in the wilderness and their corpses were found there, but of course, they'll fall more significantly finally at the judgment throne. That's where their fall will be most spectacular and most sad to actually behold, and therefore we have to exercise ourselves, we work against the still remaining lawlessness, still remaining disobedience, the still remaining rebellion that the enemy works within the sinful nature and kicks in hard there. And if we allow it, well, sin crouches at the door and it will have dominion over us and we would then be in the very sad and very sorry state if we allow it to run amok and so we have to fight back against sinful nature with all the resources of the Holy Spirit, as we'll see in a moment, the word of God, and to bring those resources to bear for it is natural to object, natural to disagree, and in the end of the natural man not to submit to the word of God, and will not, indeed cannot, and therefore to fall short. Natural not to listen, natural not to obey, natural to be perfectly unbelieving and to discount the word of God as of no effect.

So we have to fight and we have to labor and we must work at this matter of being in communion with God and enjoying his rest. We fight against futility when thoughts come and they certainly do come, and we feel ourselves there in a situation where what's the worth of it, we say. What's the worth of it? Where is this getting me? I find myself not less worried but more worried. I find myself not with burdens lifted but being a Christian seems to impose more burdens upon you, and the pathway of holiness is a harder path, it's a difficult way that leads upwards to heaven and that broad road and that wide gate seem much much easier, even though we have to note what it says about it, that it leads to destruction.

So we're having to fight against a futility that sometimes opens up to us. The devil is only too quick to impregnate our minds with it's just not worth it and heaven isn't real, that it's not a place worth striving for, and what rest is this when we find ourselves often beleaguered and find ourselves under great pressure and how many Lord's Days that don't turn out as we had hoped and intended because some emergency cropped up, or something we had to attend to that we'd rather not to have had to attend to. And we fight against sin and all of its deceitfulness there as we were thinking about that the other week, the deceitfulness of sin and unbelief, and that comes hard against us. And fighting against excuses and often we're the people making excuses, excuses for ourselves, that we are not able to apply ourselves strongly to what we should be doing, what we know is our duty, and that we are found making excuses why we're not there, why we can't do that, why that is too difficult, too great a challenge. And these are things which require of us energy against it, work to prevail over those things and to overcome those things.

So we must be diligent, that working word, that word that speaks of effort and energy so that we will enter the rest and not be those that fall short of it. Second heading: the word keeps us awake. The word keeps us awake. It keeps us diligent. This is where we come to because his antidote is the word of God that will keep us diligent and which will actually if applied, if we listen to it, will bring us into that rest. Indeed, it will be part of us

enjoying that rest. The riches of it will bring us that fellowship with Christ, will make it multifaceted, multidimensional, will add depth and texture to it if we heed it, if we allow it in that way, putting it in those terms, to do its work upon us.

How often the writer here in quoting Psalm 95 at some length and repeating it, "Today, if you will hear His voice: Do not harden your hearts." That's unbelief, unbelief says, "I won't listen. I'll harden my heart," under God's judgment maybe that we can't listen, we've lost the capacity to listen and that is really a very very sad end. But here is the word of God if we receive it and we feel it is there to be applied to us, well, that is a word that is living and powerful. It's working. Just as the writer quoting Psalm 95 is hoping that, "Today," as that's thrustful to his readers, "Hear it. That's for you today." That "Today" in its promise is for today's today, so hear what it has to say. "Don't harden your hearts. Hear His voice."

So for us there we attend to the word of God. There is the source of keeping us alert and keeping us awake. There is something to stimulate us in our work, in our diligence so we're not lagging in diligence and which can bring us the refreshment of that rest. I was just checking actually with Bob at lunchtime, that in the driver's cab every minute the driver has to respond to a little alarm by pushing down on these dead man's pedal there, as it's called, and that makes the train keep going. And if he didn't do it when that minute is up, the train would eventually suddenly apply the emergency brake, so it would come to a halt. It's keeping sure that the driver is awake and he hasn't fallen asleep there at the controls.

So there is this alarm, there is this alert, there is this sort of vigilance checker, and that's what the word of God is to the Christian, keeping us awake, keeping us alert, checking us, not allowing us to fall asleep at the controls or at the wheel as we steer our life through this world of difficulty and challenge. The word of God is there, not just words on paper, not just printed page, this is something far more than that. It's alive and it has as it was given to us of God there a probing, discerning, that getting into us there and opening us up to the people that we actually are and revealing ourselves to each other and also to ourselves and also, of course, to God.

And if that living and that powerful word is received by us, if it's doing its work in us, then the good act comes. Well, that leads on to the rest. That is taking us into fellowship. We're finding fellowship with God through his word because we are in the word, we are taking it seriously, it's doing its work, keeping us alert, keeping us awake if we're listening to it. And we notice in verse 2, there is the word, the gospel is preached to us as well as to them. Those who heard it did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. Well, the word was there and it was living and powerful and it was ready to do its effect, but the people didn't listen to it, didn't mix it with faith, didn't believe it, but unbelief which is the opposite of faith. Instead there's the word and it was as though they just smothered its activity, its living power. They exercised there their will. They hardened their hearts, did not heed the voice of God, and the results were not good. They fell.

So here is this remarkable book instead. Truth, truth, truth expressed in words that God has chosen. God chose these words, chose to put them in this way, chose to use the people that he used, poets, kings, whoever they might have been, keepers of sycamore, fig trees, however and whoever and whenever. God wished to speak to the people of his day and leave a record of that speech, written here in infallible inerrant words, well, this is the Bible that we presently have today, what God has chosen deliberately and particularly to give. In Bible translation, we try as best we can with the best tools and understanding there to give the best account in our English language that we can.

And it is the word of God whether we heed it or not. It's not something that contains the word of God, as though its printed page and those who would say it's got errors, it's got some mistakes in it, but if you read it something nevertheless comes out to you, something will happen in you, you'll get the message, you'll get the truth almost despite the Bible, despite its mistakes. You'll get the message. Well, no, we say God did much better than that. He didn't give us a book full of errors and mistakes and leave us there some mystical experience that we'll get the real truth out of it despite all the kind of messiness of it and the difficulties caused by the mistakes in it. No, it is itself the word of God. We know it needs spiritual grace there to see what it is actually saying and apply it, but we need not worry that somehow it's sort of covering the word of God and we have to kind of get into some spiritual experience to receive it. And it's not as though it's just a word to us and only becomes the word of God when it comes to us, but it is the word of God whether anybody reads it or not. It's truth whether anybody picks it up and takes time and thinks it worth the reading of it or not. It will stand as such whether you or I take it off the shelf, read it each day, or whether we are found a little casual, careless, not reading it at all.

So it is living and in that respect we can see and apply it in some ways there. The power that it has is ultimately to change people's lives. That's what it has the power to do, to change people's lives whether we're reading it just as in our own sort of homes there, whether it's being preached or whether it's being read from the pulpit, it has the power to change people's lives. That's what it's to do, it's to impart faith and inspire works and cause there to be real adoration and worship, and to regulate that worship and to make it proper, to be worshiping in spirit and in truth, and to show us what our duties, our responsibilities, to have us work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

This is what the word of God does. It's powerful. It's active. It changes us. It exposes and it discerns for us. We can see, can't we, it drills down, all this two-edged sword, it cuts in all directions. You can't really hide from it. And it divides there the division of soul and spirit, that part of us in some fashion where we relate to God in the Spirit, but something of that whereby in our soul, our responses there, the more kind of personal, the more emotional system that we have, maybe we can think of it in that way. Well, these are deep things. The word of God as it works there within us will bring some of those things, things of our personality, things about who we are, what makes us the people that we are, and looks at those things there very carefully in relationship we have with God, our relationship with others, what is happening within our soul.

So it is able to expose and discern thoughts and intents of the heart that the word of God as it's there used by God, by the power of his Spirit, is getting into us. Who are we? What are we thinking? What are our intentions? Who are we at heart? What kind of people are we when nobody else is there? We're on our own, when we've got privacy, well, who are we then? Are we people that would be recognizably Christian people? Or is our thinking and the conversation that follows from it more that of a child of the world, a child of the devil, than a child of God? Is it trivial? Is it thoughts that have any depth? Are we inquiring about ourselves and analyzing carefully with the word of God open and with the Spirit of God, a sensitivity and conscience to him about who we are, how we need to improve, what we need to be working on, what we need to be doing better and better areas and other areas of life that we perhaps neglected?

What does it do to us? Ah, it can draw people, can't it? Or it repels people. People hurl it down, don't they, refuse it. It's living and powerful but they're hardening their hearts and their conscience there is screaming at them to listen. Their will is fighting back and they will not read it, and they might cast it aside. People, that's often not a bad sign, maybe coming under conviction of sin is annoying them. They're humbled by it and they hate that. It's telling them that they're a sinner and they don't like it. And it tells them of a sovereign God. They don't like that. And so it's doing something, it's discerning their hearts, it's coming into the people that they are and opening them up not in a callous way, not in some sort of clever way like an interviewer there and they get a politician before them and, oh, my, these car crash interviews and they skewer them left, right and center, don't they, and leave them wriggling there. Well, not in such a way there where might at times the interviewer just wants to look a bit clever.

God here is wanting to do this for our good. He's wanting us to learn because he's wanting us to change and the direction of change is always to be more like his Son. That's where the whole process is driving us on. That's where sanctification is driving us on. Holiness is not something abstract out there, it's to be Christ-like. There it is, to sum it up, it is to be Christ-like and the word is working these things, yes, as we've said. It will fascinate some and they'll be drawn into it and, well, there are many who have started with Scripture and that's converted them, that's undone them, that's ended their career as an unbeliever, people who have started out not believing the Bible, then couldn't not believe it. They were overcome, overpowered by its truth and they became Christians. And there are others who harden themselves against it.

So it is the word of God, it keeps us at it. It keeps us working. It's always provoking us. It's always stimulating us. It's always coming into break open something in us, the joints and the marrow there, the soul and spirit, something fundamental to the person, the people that we actually are. And it imposes itself on us, not we on it. It imposes itself on us, not we imposing ourselves on it. Oh, it's a very very uncomfortable book, isn't it? There are parts of it that just refuse to fit in, or at least in our present understanding. They just refuse to fit in and they're provoking to us. We wonder, well, how does that relate to that part of truth? How does this, like having a jigsaw, we can't quite see where this works and we, you know, we try and fit it in somewhere, perhaps you've got a jigsaw there for Christmas, you know, 10,000 pieces, all of the stars up there and you're trying to

fit in, it's not quite that one there and it might fit but it doesn't quite fit, and it looks not quite right. And there it is, you're struggling with it and there are parts of God's word sometimes like parts in a jigsaw that you just put them on one side, they're on the edge and you're waiting for a moment to see where that will fit in. That's good. We've got to be patient in that way.

It's always, always going to be uncomfortable. How can you read any of the parables and the sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ and not come away feeling that somehow there's more yet, that it was saying something more still, that those disarmingly simple sayings of our Lord have such a wealth and wisdom and require of us much thought and application. There's always more to God's ways than we can ever say, always more to him. We do not limit the Holy One of Israel. We don't limit his word, always something that it's got to say to us. It poses questions to us, doesn't it? It sets us problems. It presents us with things there. I mean, that's the very source, isn't it, of academic interest, to have something, a problem there that you're wrestling with and it's there, it niggles away, it's always somewhere at the back of your mind and when you come to the word of God again and relating that piece or trying, it's posing a question. How do I understand that? How do I apply it? What is God asking of me there?

So we trust him. We trust him with his word. We trust him with the parts we don't understand. We pray. We wait on him and we keep reading it, don't we? And we keep re-reading it, and we read it and read it and read it again. Oh yes, it asks of us much, doesn't it here? We read, don't we, that all things are naked and open to the eyes of him to whom we must give account, and it is God's sight, as it were, his eye is upon us and we are accountable for what we do with what we have. What's our aim in life? Is it asking us of that? What are our fundamental aims in life? What are the things that we really really want to see done? What are the things that we really really want to be? And how are we setting about finding those things? What are we defending? What are we loving? What are we hating and why? And those speak to the very depths of our being. Nothing is hidden from his sight. There is his word. It is an exposure of ourselves to his mind and his will.

Well, finally this: our reaction is vital. How we react to this is vital. We were saying about how some can deaden themselves, harden themselves, just get annoyed and refuse further to read it. Sure, there are parts we don't understand, probably never will fully understand this side of glory. But we keep reading it. We keep reading it and when we've read it, we read it again. When we've finished it, then we start at the beginning again and we keep ourselves in there. We keep ourselves open to him, the one to whom we must give account. As creatures, we're not going to willfully try to hide ourselves from his sight as though we could, but we'll be in the word. We'll be there, allowing it to do its work in us. Maybe this year, start a new year. If you've got a Bible reading plan perhaps and as some of us have, and to assuring one way or the other that we're in the word of God. Different parts of it. Not just majoring in one part but all parts of it. The parts that you might account more obscure, that you'll be in there and looking for treasure.

That's always the way, isn't it, you're looking for treasure. You're looking for something to happen, expecting something to happen, something to strike you, something to ponder, some challenge to receive. We're looking, well, we've got examples here, isn't it. "Lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience." Well, we look for those examples of disobedience in Scripture and we note them. We note the people to whom it went wrong and we think to ourselves, "That is not going to be me. I'm going to see that and I'm going to hold that example there." Judas Iscariot, one of the worst, isn't it, but kings who might have started out well, then declined, and we say to ourselves in that, "That example I'm going to keep in my thinking, and that I'm going to resolve before God is not going to be me." And that's good.

Good examples, none better than the Lord Jesus but the Apostle Paul, Peter, whoever we might take there, Hezekiah, Josiah, Abraham at his best, the various other patriarchs. Well, we look to learn from them, don't we, and hold before us their good example. When we are tempted to act one way, well, we'll remember Joseph. Well, what did he do in that situation? And his situation was always ten times worse than anything that I'm in, but what did he do? Well, he saw God's hand, didn't he? He found it in prison. He found when things weren't going right as would be accounted, but yet nevertheless trusted in God.

We're looking for the big story. We're looking for the big implications of what we're reading, not to lose sight of the wood for the trees. We're wanting to find Christ. We're looking for him. We're looking for where he is. Well, we did that this morning with the young people if you were here at our young people's service. We're looking in the Old Testament for Christ. We're looking for the Lord Jesus, where is he in some of these people or these events or these places. Where is he? And we've got our eyes open for that, the big story which, of course, is always about him. The gospel, its implications in salvation, what are our duties, how can we find our duties in different places in Scripture, likely places. Well, maybe minor prophets, throw those out as a suggestion there. Look through there. Well, it might be saying to you and to me what duties, responsibilities, how are we to approach life, what things we are to regard as important.

Memorizing Scripture. I read something that was in the Evangelical Times quite recently on that, memorizing Scripture. Well, there's something. That's a worthy aim to have so we can get hold of more of it, because the more we get hold of it, the more it's in us, and the more it's in us, the more that what we are, what we say, how we react is going to be what the Bible in the end is what God wants us to do. What kind of person should I be.

So we imbibe it, we dwell in it and around it and with it so that we can discern ourselves better, review our hearts, be able to discern other people better and understand them and be able to come alongside them. For there is a warning in this, and perhaps you can feel the power of that warning there when it talks about thoughts and intents of the heart and everything being hidden before him, because in the end this, when we are judged, we are judged in many ways for what did we do with what we were told. What did we do with his book? How did we treat it? How did we respond to it? Did we react to it there with understanding and with desire, or were we argumentative with it, refusing it, meeting it

with unbelief? For if the word of God doesn't find us out and lay us open to that inspection that we are wise to follow through and apply to ourselves, well, it will happen at the judgment throne and there's no hiding there from any of it.

So what we do with the word of God becomes to us as this living and powerful word, sharper than any two-edged sword, well, we either receive it as such now or at the judgment throne. There is the living and powerful God and into his hands we fall. There is the sword of justice, a two-edged sword, and none escape it. And we will find ourselves sorely undone there. So it's given to us now as a precious gift, as treasure for us to learn from, allow it to do its work in us, painful at times, difficult at times, but good and taking us forward in holiness or else the exposure and the sense of nakedness and being open to his sight will be our unhappy experience at the judgment throne. So we would be those who are working and working with and working in the Bible and having the Bible do its work in us and we're going to enjoy that rest, we're going to find the blessings of fellowship with Christ and we're going to be those who answer very happily on the day of judgment, well, then they're found in a state of disarray and nakedness. Amen.