

May 10, 2015

# Lay Your Deadly Doing Down

## Hebrews 4:1 – 13

We are in the book of Hebrews written to a group of 1<sup>st</sup> century, urban Christians who are so beaten down by troubles and difficulties that they are in danger of giving this Christ thing up, going back to Egypt so to speak. They're in the wilderness; they're in the desert, and there's no food, there's no water, and they want to go back. And the writer continually reminds them that the only way through this wilderness is to keep their eyes on Jesus – He's the final word, He's better than the prophets, or the angels or Moses; He's our King who came down to us, our Captain who fights for us, our Brother who loves us; meditate on this Jesus.

And now here in this chapter, he is telling them, 'Keep looking at Jesus; keep going – there's a place of rest, don't stop now'. Eight times in eleven verses the writer talks about rest – entering His rest, entering that rest, they shall not enter My rest, there remains a Sabbath rest, and so on. The writer is calling these people to rest, and the implication is that they're not resting – they haven't come to it. In some sense they are still working at something. They're not at rest. What this text shows us is what are we being called to, what is this rest; why are we not resting; and how to come into rest. **What is this rest, why are we not resting, and how do we enter in.**

Before we get into that, I think it is helpful to look at something we see all the way through this book. Warnings. We get a lot of warnings in Hebrews. And it is important to know why God puts these warnings in His word to us. Essentially the warnings serve two purposes: **To provoke the sinner to repentance and to prod the saint to persevere.** In chapter two we heard, 'Don't drift – don't neglect this great salvation'. And last week in chapter 3 we heard: 'Watch out that you don't get hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and fall away – keep encouraging each other'. And today we read: *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.*

First of all, God uses warnings in His word to encourage Christians to persevere, to keep the Christian in the faith. That is, the warnings God gives are one of the means by which He brings about His word that says, *'I will put My desire in their hearts to worship Me and they will never leave Me.'* Jeremiah 32:40 The warnings from Heaven **do not mean** that it is possible to lose your salvation – but rather they are one of the means by which God ensures that His people will persevere to the end. Warnings are intended as a check to our soul. Where are we in this wilderness journey? Are we paying close attention or are we drifting? Are we being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, are we falling away in some respects, or are we leaning into God? Are we looking to Jesus? Warnings are intended to inspire a kind of desperate reliance upon God.

Warnings are also intended to provoke the sinner to repentance. In the Old Testament a man named Jonah was sent to the wicked sinful city of Ninevah with a warning: *'Forty days from now Ninevah will be destroyed!'* and the Bible records that the citizens of that city believed the warning – believed God it says – and starting with the king, repented in sackcloth and ashes. God woke them up with the warning and the whole city was saved. The interesting thing here is that Jonah did not go to Ninevah and preach that 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.' The fact that this is absolutely true is not the point. God does love us, and He has a wonderful plan for our lives – but that is not the basis on which we ought to call sinners to repent. **Our problem is not that we are sinners and have done bad things. The problem is that we have sinned against a Holy God and the penalty is death.** And until people come face to face with the enormity of their offense, the grace of God will be cheap. And we will simply create backsliders. **Conversion becomes convenience, and when it is inconvenient, we walk away.**

If these warnings stagger you, if these warnings cause you to tremble, if these warnings produce in you a deep, inner thoughtfulness about your life and your future – that is good. Because if you are presently an unbeliever – that means that you hear God speaking and the warnings should cause you to respond and fall on your face before a Holy God and repent and be saved. And if you are presently a believer – that trembling produced by these warnings is a safeguard for your faith and good evidence that you are saved. And these warnings will keep you from living below the standard and motivate you to run hard after God. **In the one it produces a trembling that leads to salvation – and in the other it produces a trembling that leads to perseverance.**

If Israel fell from the promised joy of God through unbelief, the same thing can happen to any **professing** Christian. Now I use that term 'professing' with care. There are many who profess to be Christians, but when it comes right down to it, there is no real evidence that they belong to Jesus. That is why these warnings are crucial to our faith – as we heed them they help to keep us from falling, and show that we are more than professing Christians. What this says is that the Christian life is a life of daily trust in the promises of God to help us and carry us and transform us and forgive us and bring us all the way to glory. And it is not automatic, but requires diligence and perseverance that will bring us into a lasting joy that will satisfy our hearts infinitely more than if we forsake Him and put our trust in ourselves or the promises of this life.

And now as he encourages his readers as they are persevering through this wilderness, the writer injects another warning and a promise. In effect he says, 'Good news, the road you're on leads to rest so don't stop short'. In fact he says that there should be an element of fear of not entering this rest. So what is he talking about? What is this rest? It is somewhat hard to get at because the writer is using this term on at least three different levels, in the text. First of all he quotes Psalm 95: "*As I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest,'*" That is a reference to God's warning to Israel in the wilderness, 'If you keep on rebelling and hardening your hearts, you'll never get in. You'll never see the Promised Land.' What was the Promised Land? That was Canaan – the land of milk and honey, a place of safety, a place of rest. Ultimately it speaks to us of our eternal rest together with God. That's the first way.

Secondly, when these guys were slaves in Egypt, they could only dream of a resting place. They were being worked to death by Pharaoh. They were slaves. They had no rest. 'Make bricks – make more bricks, make bricks till you die'. As my mother used to tell us kids as she handed us our list of daily chores, 'There's no rest for the wicked and the righteous don't need any'. And so when God rescued them out of Egypt, He tells them, 'I'm bringing you into the land of promise; I'm bringing you into rest. So start now. Start by keeping the Sabbath – the day of rest'. That is very enlightening, because God is saying, 'When you rest, it's a declaration of freedom – unending work is for slaves. When you put your work down, you are saying, 'I'm not ruled by Pharaoh anymore – I'm not a slave to this materialistic world – my identity is not as a working slave but a resting saint'. That's another way the word is used. It is a physical rest from your labor.

It is also used to refer to how God rested after all His work in Genesis in verses three and four: "*although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all His works.'*" God rested. What does that mean? What it can't mean is that God got tired. God never gets tired. He's never weary. He doesn't drop from exhaustion at the end of a hard day. It can't mean that God somehow runs out of energy, even after creating the universe. You have to go back to the context of His resting on the seventh day; and if you go back to Genesis 1 you'll see that when it says that God rested it means that God was fully satisfied and happy with what He had created. He said, 'That's good – that's very good. I'm done here.' He was able to lay down His work because He was completely satisfied with what He had accomplished. That's another way the word is used – to be so satisfied with your work you can lay it down.

You not only need physical rest from your work, you need to be able to lay it down. You need to be so satisfied with what you have done that you have this deep inner rest. Judith Shulevitz, wrote an article several years ago in the New York Times entitled, ***Bring Back the Sabbath*** in which she recounts her return to keeping Shabbat – the Sabbath. In the article she tells about how every weekend she would fall into this unaccountable deep depression that she just couldn't shake. It was not until she happened to return to her childhood roots by going to the temple one Saturday that she began to see that she had been suffering from what she called a lack of Sabbath rest. She was resting physically from work, but she still was restless. There was still some inner striving going on.

She says, '*Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. The inventors of the Sabbath understood that it was a much more complicated undertaking. You cannot downshift casually and easily, the way you might slip into bed at the end of a long day. As the Cat in the Hat says, "It is fun to have fun but you have to know how." This is why the Puritan and Jewish Sabbaths were so exactly intentional, requiring extensive advance preparation -- at the very least a scrubbed house, a full larder and a bath. The rules did not exist to torture the faithful...The story told by the Sabbath is that of creation: we rest because God rested on the seventh day. In other words, we rest in order to honor the divine in us, to remind ourselves that there is more to us than just what we do during the week... the machinery of self-censorship shut down, too, stilling the eternal inner murmur of self-reproach'.*

In other words, it is one thing to physically rest – she was doing that. But she wasn't at rest with who she was. The deep rest that allows you to lay down your work and walk away is to be completely at rest with who you are. There is more to us than what we do during the week. I like what she said about the 'eternal murmur of self-reproach'. We don't rest like this because deep down we're either not happy with who we are, or we are trying to prove ourselves all the time. We are working hard to prove ourselves to ourselves, to others, to God. Our self-censoring equipment is working overtime and we hear that eternal murmur going off in our heads. 'It's not good enough – you haven't done enough.' We're not working, but we're working. We're trying to earn our value – we're trying to establish our identity. We haven't entered in to that rest.

So why are we not resting? You have to go down to verses 12 and 13 to get this: *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.* The word of God is living and active. That is a direct reference to John 1:14 – The word became flesh and tabernacled among us. Again we are looking at multiple levels here. On one level is the written word of God. It's a living word, an active word. It is sharp like a two-edged sword and it pierces us to the deepest levels. It punches right through all your defenses right down to the heart of you. And it shows you your real motivations, the real reason you do what you do. It exposes the root of your problem. It strips you naked of all your pretence and posturing.

But the word is also a person. The word of God is the Christ of God. Verse 13 continues the thought and says, 'No creature is hidden from **His** sight – everything is naked and exposed to His eyes – to the One to whom we must give an account.' This is a reference back to Genesis. And when you get back to Genesis, what you see are two people in the garden, naked and unashamed. They were under the eyes of God, totally exposed, and they weren't threatened by that thought. It wasn't a problem. Do you know why? It's because they were totally at rest with who they were. They were absolutely satisfied with who they were. They saw who they were and they were not ashamed – it was good – it was very good. They were at rest.

But in the next chapter, the minute they decided to turn away from God, to be their own lord, their own savior, everything changed. They understood in an instant they were incapable of handling that job. They were overwhelmed with a massive sense of inadequacy. That was their problem. That is our problem. We're unfit to fulfill the job description, and we carry within us a deep, deep sense of inadequacy, a sense of not being right, not being acceptable, spiritual nakedness. And just like they did, we look for a place to hide from those searching eyes. We know that we are accountable and we can't answer the questions that will be asked. We know we'll be found wanting. And we cover up – just like Adam and Eve. Unless you recognize where this sense of inadequacy, this sense that I'm not O.K. is coming from, you are always looking to cover it up and you won't understand your drivenness, your work-aholism, your dependencies, your addictions, your hypocrisy.

You're naked and ashamed and you're looking for fig leaves. You're trying to make yourself acceptable. You are either consciously or unconsciously trying to make yourself pleasing the one to whom you must give account, and so you are doing stuff to justify yourself, making yourself acceptable. Why is it that some of us pour so much into our jobs that everything else revolves around our work? Your wife or your husband come second. Your children come second. Everything is subservient to your work. 'If I can just get to that position, if I get that promotion, then I'll be good, I'll be alright.' And you get there and you're not all right. It isn't work that's wrong – work is good. What's wrong is the reason for our work when we use it to justify ourselves, to feel good about ourselves.

Sometimes we don't realize how much of even the good stuff we do is because we are looking for this approval. Maybe we give our money and time to others, maybe we work hard at being kind to others, so we can feel good about ourselves and maybe get God's approval. 'Now He'll bless me because I'm doing the right thing.' The default mode of the human heart is wired to earn God's love and approval; and so we work. At some level you know that all your loving of others is really loving yourself. All your acts of kindness are an attempt to satisfy this deep need to be accepted by Him. And you'll never be satisfied. Because the things you're doing to feel good about yourself and look yourself in the mirror and win the respect of others and maybe get God's blessing is self-justifying and you'll never be able to lay it down. You'll never be able to stand naked and unashamed in God's presence. You'll never be able to lay it all down. You'll never be able to rest.

In an old movie, *Chariots of Fire*, there are two very good athletes with two very different motivations – Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell. Both run the hundred meter dash, and as he is describing why he runs, Harold Abrahams says, 'When that gun goes off, I have ten seconds to justify myself'. In other words, 'I've got to work hard to justify myself, to feel good about myself'. On the other hand, Eric Liddell says, 'God made me fast and when I run I feel His pleasure'. He's not saying, 'I'm trying to earn His pleasure', he's saying, 'I want to please the God who made me and loves me and takes delight in me and gave me the means to do it. Whatever pleases Him, pleases me'. In other words, 'I'm resting'. One guy is running to prove who he is, the other guy is running because he knows who he is. They're both working, they're both running hard, but one is tired even when he was resting and the other is always resting even when he was working.

So finally, how do we enter into that rest? First of all, you have to go back up to verses 2 and 3: *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 we who have believed enter that rest.* Very simply, **believing the gospel brings us into that rest.** The deeper rest we need we can only get through the gospel. When we embrace the good news of the gospel by faith, we get the rest we so desperately need. No more scrambling for fig leaves. The searching, piercing word of God comes to strip us bare, expose us and heal us. Through the gospel we have this deep inner security that our God knows us to the core and loves us anyway. Our identity crisis is solved. When you know that you are loved, absolutely, unconditionally loved by God, you can rest. You don't have anything to earn and you don't have anything to prove.

Verse 10 tells us: *for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His.* The gospel comes to us to give us rest. Rest from our works. Rest from working to prove ourselves, working to gain approval from God, working to justify ourselves, working to be our own saviors. We need the word of God to come and pierce us to the heart, to show us the thoughts and intents of our hearts, to expose our motivation, so that we can lay our working down. To show us as the writer says in verse 13 that we all stand under the gaze of heaven, *and no creature is hidden from his sight.* That is, nothing is hidden from His sight, and fig leaves won't cut it anymore. So embrace the gospel and come into the rest.

But the writer uses a very unusual expression as well there in verse 13: *but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.* He says that before God, not only is everyone naked, but everyone stands exposed. But simply saying 'exposed' doesn't really do this word justice. This is a word that has a very specific meaning. The word means to stretch the neck back or bend it back to expose it to the killing stroke. This was a word used to describe how animals were sacrificed and it paints a terrifying picture for us. **Verse 12 says that the word of God comes as a sword and verse 13 tells us it's coming right at our throats.** After all this talk of rest and relaxation, stop your striving to justify yourself, stop trying to gain approval, now we have a sword at our necks. What is the writer telling us here? What is he pointing to?

What he's pointing to is the fact that if we are judged according to what we have done, we're toast. If our acceptance is based on our work, it's over. We haven't entered that rest because we've been busy justifying ourselves to ourselves and to God. Listen, when our hearts are pierced by the word of God, our conscience will tell us we're guilty. We all, believer and unbeliever alike, look out on the injustice in the world, the wrongs done to others and to us, and we hope or at least wish for a God who will right all the wrongs and wipe every tear away. But we also know that if there is such a God of justice, our throats are exposed and we'll be the sacrifice. We deserve it. So what hope is there? Well if we had time we would jump right into the next section with verse 14, but there is so much there we would be doing the text an injustice if we continued on this morning. We'll get into that next week. So come back for that. There's the teaser.

Verse 13 leaves us in a bind. But thankfully the word of God does not. The answer to our dilemma is that we are not going to be the sacrifice because Jesus was the sacrifice. He was cut off, He was stripped naked on the cross, His neck was exposed to the killing stroke. He became the sacrifice so we wouldn't be; He was cut off so that we could be brought in; He was stripped naked so that we could be clothed with glory and honor; on the cross He was cut off from the source of eternal rest so that we might have rest. And when He died He said, 'It is finished' and all the work was done. The Sabbath rest has been reinstated for us. The self-justifying work every human heart is working to do is consumed in the work that Christ has done on the cross.

There's an old hymn that says it best and part of it goes like this:

Weary, working, burdened one,  
Wherefore toil you so?  
Cease your doing; all was done  
Long, long ago.

Till to Jesus' work you cling  
By a simple faith,  
"Doing" is a deadly thing—  
"Doing" ends in death.

**Cast your deadly "doing" down—**  
Down at Jesus' feet;  
Stand in Him, in Him alone,  
Gloriously complete.

The only way you can lay your deadly doing down and walk away from it is to know, to absolutely know, that you are loved by God; that you are delighted in by the only eyes in the universe to whom you are accountable. Jesus calls us to come to Him. He doesn't call us to do stuff that makes us acceptable – **'Come to Me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest'** He says. How else can you know that you are loved absolutely, unconditionally and completely? How else will you know that you are valued and treasured beyond anything you will find in this world? How else can you lay it down? You can't and you won't, unless you come to Jesus.

You can't lay your deadly doing down until you embrace the gospel; and the truth is, in this wilderness journey we're on, we have to keep laying it down. You see we haven't entered the ultimate rest yet. Verse three says that when we believe we enter that rest; but verse eleven tells us that we are headed for the ultimate rest, so don't stop short: *Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.* Just like everything else in this Christian life we get a foretaste of the rest, but we don't get it all now. We have to keep going back to the gospel to get that rest.

It's kind of like when you're camping on a cold, chilly night and you gather around the fire and warm yourself up. But when you walk back to the tent, it's cold again. To stay warm apart from the fire means you have to work at it. But if you just go back to the fire, you're at rest, it warms you up. That is like the gospel in your life. You have to keep going back to the fire. So much of the time we rest on our achievements, or the fact that we've hardly sinned today and we feel good about ourselves. We base our acceptance by God on how we've done today – 'I've read my Bible, I prayed a bit, I was kind to my awful boss, and I didn't kick the cat', and so on. We've been good so God loves us. But if we haven't had a good day, we've been downright ornery and feeling like sin on a stick, we are either discouraged and moved to drop this thing altogether, or we become self-righteous and make longer lists. We either want to quit or work harder at justifying ourselves.

But if our security rests on the sin-covering and accepting love of God and the sacrifice of His Son; if we warm ourselves at the fire of the gospel, we can rest. We need to keep coming back to the gospel. Richard Lovelace who wrote *The Dynamics of a Spiritual Life*, said: **'The faith that is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of peace.'** Warm yourself at the fire of God's love and you can lay your deadly doing down.

*Heavenly Father,*

*May Your living and active and piercing word warn and encourage us this morning; may it provoke and preserve. For those still in the shadows and darkness of unbelief, may Your Word awaken them to spiritual life and draw their hearts to the Author of Life. Break the bondage of self-justification and warm our hearts with gospel fire. Tell us once again that we are loved and accepted in the the Beloved, justified by what He has done and not what we can do; and bring us to our knees in gratitude and true humility. Wash our faces with tears of repentance and joy, and help us lay our deadly doing down and rest in Your love we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*