

## Hebrews 4:1-11

Dear Friends in Christ,

It's easy to be hard on the people of Israel as we read about all the times that they grumbled and complained and disobeyed God as they traveled in the desert. The Bible tells us that they are an example of what not to do. But put yourselves in their shoes and you will see that you would probably not have fared much better.

They had to pack up as many of their belongings as they could carry and leave their homes in the middle of the night. At first it didn't seem so bad. Moses told them that God would lead them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and they were free from those who were abusing them in Egypt. People were in high spirits, like you are when you leave for a long awaited vacation. But, the mood changed quickly when they realized that they were trapped between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army. Yes, God opened the sea and they escaped Pharaoh, but as the waters came crashing down on that pursuing army there was also no easy way to return to Egypt if the need arose. There was a lot of desert between them and the Promised Land. Even if you like to camp, living in a tent, sand in everything, no facilities, no running water, no baths, no showers for the foreseeable future—Even if you like camping you can see that it would get old very quickly. It didn't take long and the limited amount of food they were able to take with them ran out. Water was scarce. Yes, God provided manna; it was the perfect food nutritionally, but the same old thing day after day after day. When they finally got to the border of the Promised Land the spies showed them that it really was a land flowing with milk and honey, look at the huge bunch of grapes we brought, it's so big we had to carry it on a pole between two men! But they would have to fight to take the land; there were walled cities and the people who lived there had well equipped armies and some of their warriors were giants.

Israel was tired. They were hot. They had walked hundreds of miles. They had not had what many would consider a decent meal in months. What happens when you get hot and tired and hungry? You get ornery. You don't want to do anything. You just want life to be easier. You just want some rest. The majority were so ornery that they said "No" to God. God said, "here's your rest. I want to give it to you. Yes, you will have to fight to take the land, but don't worry; I'll be fighting for you. Just trust me." But the majority refused to trust God and so God said, "Ok, have it your way. **You will never enter my rest.**"

The Promised Land was there. God wanted them to have it. He was ready to give it to them. **But they did not go in because of their disobedience.** No one over twenty, except the two faithful spies, Joshua and Caleb, entered the "rest" in the Promised Land.

The writer to the Hebrews warns his hearers, and us, not to be like unfaithful Israel. There were some among those to whom he was writing who were being told and were tempted to think that they had to go back to Judaism in order to enter God's rest. They were tempted to think that unless they followed all the Old Testament rules about clean and unclean food and circumcision and the Sabbath they were being disobedient and that they would miss out on God's rest. But following rules wasn't the problem. Israel's disobedience wasn't failure to keep God's laws—they did fail just as everyone does. The disobedience that kept most of Israel out of the Promised Land was the fact that they didn't believe God's promises. They didn't trust that he would defeat their enemies for them, and that also meant that they were not trusting

his promise that he would send a Messiah who would defeat the even greater enemies of sin, death and Satan. They **didn't combine the promises they heard from God with faith.**

Like Israel, we have heard God's promises. **We have had the gospel preached to us! We heard it in those beautiful words of Jesus, Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.**

Jesus says all you who are weary and burdened. All you who are tired and worn out and need a rest. Don't you feel like Israel in the desert? You hear God's promise of rest and it sounds so wonderful. You think about being with God in perfection. You think of eating from the tree of life that is constantly producing fruit so that there is always enough. You think of drinking from the water of life that is flowing from the throne of God. You think of never having to lock your doors because there is no such thing as crime, there is no evil, there is no sickness or disease. The temperature is always perfect; you are never too hot or too cold. You are able to serve God perfectly so that you are never burdened with guilt or fear. But then reality slaps you in the face. You still live here on the earth. Work is hard. You have all kinds of aches and pains. People, sometimes even your own family members, say or do hurtful things. You struggle to make ends meet so that you can provide for your family and maybe still enjoy a vacation once in a while. We might wonder, "if God wants me to share in his rest, why doesn't he just give it to me now? Why do I have to live in the desert of this world and suffer and die before I can enter his rest?"

Part of the answer is so that we realize that God's rest isn't to be found here on this earth. After God saw that everything he had made was very good, perfect, he established his rest. But Adam and Eve lost the perfect rest they had with God when they disobeyed, when they did what Israel did in the desert, when they failed to trust that what God said was truth. God graciously showed that he still wants everyone to enter his rest by giving fallen Adam and Eve and all their descendants the promise of a Savior, Jesus, who would bring them into his rest.

If he says to those who refuse to believe him, **they will never enter my rest, it still remains that some will enter that rest.** His rest is still there and he wants you to share it with him. He says to you and me and all people of all time, **today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.** When God promises you rest, believe it. Trust his word. Trust that you can be *sure of what you hope for and certain of what you can't see* because the one who is promises is faithful. **If Joshua had given them rest** by leading them into the Promised Land after forty years of wandering in the desert, **God would not have spoken later** (500 years later through David) **about another day. There remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God,** not an earthly rest, but a spiritual and eternal rest, a sharing in God's rest in heaven.

**Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.**

Anyone who enters God's rest stands at the border of the Promised Land and thinks this way about the armies of Canaan and the Giant warriors and says, "I can't defeat them, Lord. I can't fight against all the temptations of life. I can't defeat the giant Satan. But you have promised to defeat them for me. In fact, I have seen what Jesus did in my place. I have seen him resist every temptation. I have seen him defeat the Devil. I have seen him rise from the dead and declare an end to the sting of death. I am putting myself in your hands. I am resting from my work and trusting in the work of Christ for me. I can't enter on my own. Help me trust your promise of rest in Jesus, for this life, and for the next. Help me enter your rest."

Like Israel, as we travel through the desert of life, we get hot and tired and ornery. Like Israel we want our rest and we want it now, on our own terms. We don't want to have to keep fighting sin and Satan. We don't want to suffer sickness, pain and death. But the writer says, **let us make every effort, let us hasten, to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.**

That's what Caleb and Joshua said, "Let's go! What are you waiting for? What are you worried about? God promised to be with us and fight our battles for us." That's what they say to us today. Don't give up. Forge on in life, whatever it may throw at you, with your eyes fixed on Jesus and the rest he has won for you, trusting that God wants you to share in his perfect, eternal rest. He has promised to be with you and to fight your battles for you. Sin and Satan are already defeated, no matter how fierce and frightening they may look. Even death has been defeated. The Gospel has been preached to you. Let that Gospel ring in your years every day so that your trust in God's promise of rest grows stronger and stronger every day so that you don't fall by following their example of disobedience.