

Sermon Series on Hebrews

By John Atkinson (May 2000)

Sermon 2.

Sermon Two - The Promised Rest (Heb 3:7-4:13)

III. The Promised Rest (3:7-4:13)

- A. Scriptural Basis (3:7-11)
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INTRODUCTION

The second section of our journey through the sermon to the Hebrews (Messianic Jews) focuses on rest. You might have expected this in the twelfth or thirteenth chapters as the preacher began to wind down and his energy (and that of his hearers) was almost spent. Instead having introduced us to Jesus, who is superior to angels and to Moses, the preacher's mind turns to this fundamental aspect of true spirituality - rest.

Our reading today begins with "*Therefore*" and the rule in Bible reading is this – when you see a therefore check out what it's there for!

Hebrews 3:1-7 speaks about Jesus' superiority to Moses even though Moses was faithful to God.

Moses was faithful *in* God's house but Jesus was faithful *over* God's house. Or as Eugene Peterson translates it

"Moses did a good job in God's house, but it was servant work, getting things ready for what was to come. Christ as Son is in charge of the house.

Now if we can only keep a firm grip on this bold confidence, we're the house!

Keeping Moses and the story of the Exodus journey in mind the preacher quotes from Psalm 95.

Psa 95:7 ...Today, if you hear his voice,

Psa 95:8 do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert,

Psa 95:9 where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did.

Psa 95:10 For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways."

Psa 95:11 So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."

In the book of Exodus during the time that Moses was pleading with Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go to worship the Lord, we read that God sent a series of plagues to persuade the Pharaoh to surrender his will to God's will.

However a constant refrain is that the Pharaoh "hardened his heart" and would not let them go. (Exodus 8:19, 32)

However, hearts that are hardened against God's will are not the prerogative of those who are unbelievers. Moses experienced the Israelites hardening their hearts in the wilderness after their liberation.

The climax of this ongoing hardening of hearts to the providential care of God came when the people vented their anger about having no obvious source of water. The Lord was angry with them and the place was marked by the names Massah and Meribah, the Hebrew terms for "testing" (the Lord) and quarreling (see Numbers 20:1-13 ; Exodus 17:1-7)

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The preacher uses the appropriate part of this Psalm to remind his hearers of the danger of hearts that have become hard. Given the circumstances the hearers were living in – the persecution of forfeiture of their property it is easy to imagine how some may have been tempted to harden themselves toward God. Don't make the same mistake as your forefathers did – or you will not enter God's rest either.

*Heb 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart **that turns away** from the living God.*

In verse 12 the word translated “that turns away” is the Greek word *aphistomay*. It is a very strong word. It means to desert, betray or fall away and it is the word from which we get apostasy which means to deny Christ.

The momentum of the words used in Hebrews 3:8, 10, 12, 13, 18 builds up into a picture of conscious rebellion against the living God.

Hebrews 3:8 *harden your hearts*

Hebrews 3:10 *their hearts are always going astray,*

Hebrews 3:12 *an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away*

Hebrews 3:13 *be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

Hebrews 3:18 *those who disobeyed*

Entering God's Sabbath – rest

Following his warning about the dangers of turning away from God in the way that the first generation of the Exodus had done, the preacher moves straight on to hold out the promised blessing of a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

He is a Jewish preacher speaking to Jewish people. He makes a natural link between Psalm 95 and Gen 2:1-3

Gen 2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts.

*Gen 2:2 By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and **He rested on the seventh day from all His work** which He had done.*

Gen 2:3 Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

The connection between these passages is that both are read during the Sabbath. They are liked in the minds of those who have read them every week of their lives in the same way that the liturgy of the Eucharist makes connections for you. The Sabbath is the day of rest.

The festival of the Sabbath (SHABBAT)

Observed from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, this festival has been the weekly observance of faithful Jewish people since the time of Moses. On Friday evening, the candles are lit by the woman of the house and the blessing is said reminding all that God is the Light of the world and the source of Creation. The *Shabbat* meal includes bread (*challah*) and wine with special blessings recited over each. **(Exodus 31:12-18)**

The Focus of Shabbat

Shabbat is a creation festival. Genesis tells us that as part of the creation process God rested on the seventh day. It is the first thing to be called, “holy”. It is the only day, or festival for that matter, whose observance is included in the Ten Commandments. There is

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a well-known Jewish saying, (*Rav Achad Ha'am*) "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel."

A gift to Humankind

Not only did the Sabbath keep Israel but it has been a blessing to humankind. The quality of life of Jewish people was greatly enhanced over other peoples because of this mandatory day of rest. It is Judaism's great gift to humankind. Today the value of leisure is accepted even without the sanction of religion, and secular societies, on purely sociological and economic grounds will legislate for a weekly day of rest. It is accepted that a weekly day of rest makes labour more, rather than less, productive. However, this recognition is hardly more than a hundred years old. Well into the nineteenth century labour was cheap and expendable and the rights of the labourer were not even considered. A day of rest was something that the ancient world did not understand. The Greeks considered the practice of keeping the Sabbath a sign of "Jewish laziness". Christianity borrowed from the concept of Sabbath for its Sunday (the Lord's Day) in much the same way as Mohammed instituted Friday as a day of rest for his followers centuries later. However, these originate in the concept of Sabbath that is contained in the Jewish Torah.

A Day of Holiness.

Four separate reasons are given for the institution of the Sabbath day;

1. To remember God as Creator (Exodus 20:11)
2. To remember God as the Lord of history. (Deut 5:15)
3. To acknowledge the intrinsic worth of the human person. (Deut 5:14)
4. As a sign of Covenant relationship (Exodus 31:13)

Keeping the Sabbath is not about doing nothing. If you stay in bed all day you may have rested but you have not observed by sanctifying the Sabbath. This is not a cessation of creativity but a change in focus from the creation to God and to restoration. Shabbat involves two interrelated commandments: to remember (*zachor*) the Sabbath, and to observe (*shamor*) the Sabbath.

Zachor: To Remember

Jews are commanded to remember Shabbat; but remembering means much more than merely not forgetting to observe Shabbat. It also means to remember the significance of Shabbat, both as a commemoration of creation and as a commemoration of freedom from slavery in Egypt.

In **Exodus 20:11**, the fourth Commandment is given and God explains, "*because for six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and on the seventh day, He rested; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it.*"

By resting on the seventh day and sanctifying it, we remember and acknowledge that God is the creator of heaven and earth and all living things. We also emulate the divine example, by refraining from work on the seventh day, as God did. **Deuteronomy 5:15**, while Moses reiterates the Ten Commandments, he notes the second thing that Jews must remember on Shabbat.

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"Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord, your God brought you forth from there with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

The Shabbat is about freedom. Slaves did not get days off. Thus, by resting on the Sabbath, Jewish people remember that they are free.

Shamor: To Observe

Of course, no discussion of Shabbat would be complete without a discussion of the work that is forbidden on Shabbat. This is another aspect of Shabbat that is grossly misunderstood by people who do not observe it.

Most Westerners see the word "work" and think of it in the English sense of the word: physical labor and effort, or employment. Under this definition, turning on a light would be permitted, because it does not require effort, but a rabbi would not be permitted to lead Shabbat services, because leading services is his employment. Jewish law prohibits the former and permits the latter. Many therefore conclude that Jewish law doesn't make any sense.

The problem lies not in Jewish law, but in the definition. The Torah does not prohibit "work" in the 20th century English sense of the word. The Torah prohibits "*melachah*" *Melachah* generally refers to the kind of work that is creative, or that exercises control or dominion over your environment. The quintessential example of *melachah* is the work of creating the universe, which God ceased from on the seventh day. Note that God's work did not require a great physical effort: he spoke, and it was done.

WHY DO MOST CHRISTIANS NOT OBSERVE SHABBAT?

On the first day of the week, the day after Shabbat, the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, and therefore early in the history of the Church it became the day above all others - "the Lord's day" (**Rev. 1:10**) - on which Christians met for worship (**cf. Acts 20:7**);

At first the Christians were a Jewish sect made up almost exclusively of Jews. They would have observed the Sabbath and joined with other Jews for the observance of the Sabbath. When greater numbers of gentiles began being brought to faith in Jesus Christ the Council at Jerusalem did not expect them to observe the Jewish Sabbath.

Acts 15:28 *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:*

Acts 15:29 *that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well."*

Thus the Jewish observance of Shabbat was not practiced by gentile believers. This had a negative impact on Christian / Jewish relations. For the Jewish Community through the centuries the Church's decision to worship on Sunday has been interpreted as a rejection of the Torah.

From a New Testament Christian perspective the sabbath and other matters of the law were seen as a shadow of the reality which had now been revealed (**Col. 2:16-23**), and the sabbath became a symbol of the heavenly rest to come (**Heb. 4:1-11**).

The Christian Sunday was not made a 'day of rest' until Constantine decreed it in AD 321. The fact that this day coincided with the day set aside for Roman pagan practice of sun

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worship was not lost to Jews and to many Christians. Despite this the day was accepted as the Christian day of worship.

Most evangelicals observed Sunday as a day of rest strictly, but the Victorian evangelicals were strictest of all. The Lord's Day Observance Society was founded 1831. Numerous letters and articles in the newspaper *The Record* protested against Sunday opening of parks, museums and zoological gardens. For six years, the evangelical minister at Cheltenham managed to prevent all passenger trains stopping there on a Sunday.

In our day the need for a day of rest has become more and more apparent. Though one would not want to support a return to Sabbatarianism the reasons God gave for the Sabbath in the first place warrant more that a second glance by Christians of the present time.

The Sabbath Rest of the Messianic Age

The keeping of the Sabbath at this time is seen as a foretaste of the Sabbath rest - the rest from struggle and toil that will be given to all who entered God's rest. All who trust God for their daily bread instead of neglecting the Sabbath to ensure that they have something to eat.

In this way trust and obedience are our preparation for eternity.