

The words of the writer here are bracketed with two warnings, **Let us therefore fear!** and **Let us labor!** The writer levels with the readers, with us. Not all will enter the promised rest. There will be some surprises when we reach our rest in the presence of the Lord in glory. Some men now esteemed as “saints” will be missing. Some whom nobody notices now will be there. As there was a promise given the Children of Israel there is a promise that has been made to us who live in the times following the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. **A rest.** Paul spoke of it to the believers in Thessalonica who were enduring severe and persistent persecution for their faith.

Thessalonians 1:7 And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,

Rest! What soothing comforting words. What a welcome prospect for those who are exhausted.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, . . .

Between the exhortations just quoted the writer enlarges on the background for the promise and related information of particular importance and interest to his primary audience, Jewish readers. He gives a detailed rationale based upon Old Testament scriptures anticipating arguments from those defending Judaism, their national religion. While all of this may seem, at first read, unnecessarily detailed to the Gentile mind, God sets it before us, shutting down any and all possible argument. Let's “unpack” it.

He first differentiates between God's rest after the six days Creation and His rest offered the Children of Israel in the Promised Land. But he moves beyond the rest promised them in the Land of Canaan to an urgent call by David long after they had indeed entered and largely occupied that land. **Today if you will hear His voice harden not your hearts,** Psalm 95:7-8. He states the obvious, now if Joshua* had given Israel rest in the land of Canaan David would not be still calling them to God's rest (Psalm 95) over 300 years later. The conclusion he draws is that there remains a rest for the people of God. He further reasons if they already were in the promised rest why are they still working. God rested from the six days creation. He rested and set apart the seventh day for man and beast of burden to mark His rest by resting. Moses' law codified and perpetuated this observance for Israel. But the sabbath only memorialized the rest and refreshing that marks the end of a period of work. But God had in view an earthly rest for Israel and repentant Gentiles that came to Him. And He has a heavenly rest now for those believers who die before the Lord's return, those who “sleep in Jesus.” Though disembodied by death they rest in the bosom of the Lord Jesus just as Lazarus rested in the bosom of Abraham. But beyond this there awaits an eternal rest for all believers, the New Heavens and New Earth promised in 2Peter 3 and Revelation 21. This passage demonstrates, in whatever age they may live, there always remains a rest for the people of God.** What mercy! What grace!

The examples cited show that God's rest is set forth and reserved for faith and is not available to unbelief. Those Israelites in the wilderness at the edge of the Promised Land who heard the promises and refused to believe and act lost out. Those who knew of this failure and loss of their ancestors still failed to believe and lay hold upon the promises and blessing that were theirs in the Land. Despite many God-sent exhortations and prophetic pleading they by and large went on in unbelief and disregard. Usually it was only a remnant that repented. And though they brought blessing and favor from God, the people soon relapsed into deeper departure from the promises. Read the history, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. Read the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the twelve shorter prophetic collections at the end of the Old Testament. It's all recorded there. The unbelief among the Jews persisted across 400 years between Malachi and Matthew into the New Testament through the four Gospels and the Acts. Their utter rejection of their promised Messiah only led to new attempts by God to reach them through the apostles and other disciples. This continued forty years to the days when this epistle to them was written, just a few years before their disastrous rebellion and destruction by their Roman oppressors. Yet scattered and displaced as they have been for nearly 2000 years He still holds out a rest for any who will personally repent.** A heavenly rest, the same rest as awaits all believers today. A promised rest laid hold of and cherished by faith. Let us be diligent to lay hold of the gospel and the rest it promises. Rest and peace for the soul today in the midst of turmoil and unrest of this world. And the eternal rest awaiting all who receive the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord. Let us labor, not to attain that rest, for Christ finished that work on the cross. But be laboring with it before us with a view to entering into it.

When the Israelites entered the land they had but to conquer it, occupy it and enjoy its blessings from God. Through lack of faith they only partially did so. They never enjoyed the rest that could have been theirs. Many “Christians” today also fail to possess the “land” we have been given and fail to enter into the promised rest. Many continue to work to obtain salvation, discounting the effectual sacrifice on the cross for sins. They never enjoy peace with God, Romans 5:1, much less the peace of God, Philippians 4:7, and the God of peace, 4:9. Have you? Do you? Let us fear indeed! Then let us labor indeed! The saving work was finished on the cross. Take hold of it by faith and enter into His rest. The loving works of service remain for us to do for Him, Ephesians 2:10. A sure rest remains.

By Ron Canner, January 7, 2009

* “Jesus” in verse 8 of the KJV is the Greek for Joshua and does not refer to Jesus of Nazareth but to Joshua the son of Nun.

** God also still reserves a future rest for Israel, His chosen nation, to be enjoyed in the Millennial reign of their Messiah.