



How was your Christmas? Did you have a few mornings to sleep in? Do you feel rested? Or do you need a holiday to catch up on the sleep and stress that was caused by your time off at Christmas? I ask that because if you ask most people how they are doing, their first response is often 'doing fine but I am way to busy and stressed'. While that may sound like whining, it is actually closer to the truth than most of us would like to admit. When I looked up the top 10 selling drugs in North America last year, I found that the number 1 & 2 top sellers are Lipitor and Zocor respectively (both are used to combat high cholesterol and combined it is worth \$12.8 billion). Ranked number 3 is Nexium and 4 is Prevacid (which is to help stop heart burn caused by excess stomach acid). All four have much of their causality in worry, stress and overwork. The Associated Press has stated that over 30% of all Americans who died last year died because of heart related diseases brought on by high blood pressure, hypertension and anxiety. We are a tension ridden people and we don't cope very well with it. Studies of late have shown that the stress we are under has even begun to change our physiology. They have found that our adrenaline glands are actually getting larger. A recently completed study of 3000 adults who had died of cardiovascular disease found that because of the stress in their lives, every one of these people had an enlarged adrenal gland. The author of the study said "We have a body designed for camel travel and yet we are living at a supersonic pace". While we have been designed to use our adrenaline gland just for emergencies, we have found that the excitement and stress of work and life, running at such a fast pace, has us pumping adrenaline into our system none stop. Even though we may enjoy every moment of our adrenaline, when used with such regularity, it wears out our system and is a key factor when it comes to the issue of cholesterol problems. While cholesterol is what gums up our vascular system, only 13% of the damage is caused by cholesterol. It is the stress induced adrenaline secretion which messes up our system. If you want to know if your adrenaline is getting too high put your hands on your checks. If your hands are colder than your checks, your adrenaline is already beginning to rush.

The problem is one of getting our lives back in balance so we don't wear out these bodies God has given us. One of my favorite professors at Fuller was Dr. Arch Hart (Head of the Psychology department). He said "God has designed your body as a wonderful system of life, thus we need to start pulling our lives back into balance. Because we are the ones who set the pace of our dying... we, by how we live our lives, choose the rate of our dying".

The problem is this: one author wrote "All of us have a churning place deep within us that is either at the bottom of our throats or the pit of our stomach which periodically or continually churns - causing us to stay awake when we ought to sleep and run when we ought to stay put and be caught up with fear when we ought to be resting in our God"

Because of that I thought it might be helpful as we walk into the New Year to turn to Hebrews 4. Here, the author holds out some suggestions which may help. He doesn't give you three easy steps on how not to worry, but he does give us practical suggestions that can help us on our way.

I. He offers hope

The book of Hebrews reads like a sermon manuscript. As you come to chapter 4, the preacher has already dealt with a number of heavy issues. Then as if he says 'now let me stop for a minute, this is free', he gives us 11 verses that will give us hope in the midst of all we are going through. He says 'I want you to understand that there is the potential of finding a resting place in the midst of all the stress you face.'

As you look at Hebrews 4:1, you can tell that this is another example where the 'chapter break' experts blew it again. Verse 1 begins with a therefore, so let's go back to Hebrews 3:16 - 19 to pick up the context of verse 1. The picture he places in front of the readers is that the Israelites had come to the very edge of the Promise Land and decided to not cross the Jordan River and take the Land as God commanded them. As well, this group of 2 million people circled for 40 years in the wilderness in what should have been an 11 day journey and they left the desert strewn with 2 million grave sights. Why? Because they decided not to trust God and enter God's Promise Land. And now the author in verse 1 says "Therefore". (He is hoping that Arnold Tornbee's observation would not come true "the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn anything from history") He says "look at all the grave sights and learn something." He could have just as easily said to read the medical journals which talk about those who have died of stress related medical conditions, so you will take seriously my offer. His offer is in verse 1 in that there is a place each of us can enter where we will find a place of rest.

Rest means to cease one's activities or to put something at rest (at peace). You see, he is saying to the Hebrew Christians amidst the turmoil of their lives and amidst the stress of our lives, there is a place you can enter (and need to enter) which we could call 'God's Resting Place'. What kind of rest is he talking about? He is talking about *Peace with God*. Something which the world had waited for, for centuries, had arrived that first Christmas morning and was finalized that first Easter evening - a way to have our sins forgiven and our life reformatted by God himself. That something so that we could increasingly become transformed as God renews our mind into new people, deeper and more God connected people. He is also talking about *Peace in God*. That there would be this place where God would meet us in a deep way where we can not only catch our breath but actually in that quiet place become stronger in Him. Notice what verse 1 says and verse 3 repeats, the fact that God's promise and offer to us is that if we will take advantage of it, there is a place that we can access where we will be able to renew our strength and gain peace and perspective again. But then he adds an important comment in verse 2. He says it was also within the grasp of the Israelite people but they failed by faith to pick it up.

So why didn't the Israelite people enter into the Promised Land during those 40 years in the desert? It says it was because they didn't reach out in faith and take it. It would seem that when they reached the outskirts of the Promised Land they felt that in order to move in, it all depended on their strength, their activity and their ability. God may have been strong enough to get them out of Egypt but it was up to them and their strength and their actions to get the job done of taking over the Promised Land. The parallel today would be that while God can save us, we act and think like the running of our lives, businesses or this church is totally dependent on what we do, how hard we work or how brilliant we are. In short, we have no time to stop and rest in God because resting doesn't get the job done or increase our personal strength.

As we talked about this, Jerry gave me an insight which may be helpful. Do you know that when you are weight training or exercising that you don't just build your muscles while you are working out but your muscles also grow while you are resting. As you pump iron or run that 10 km, your muscles are being stretched, stressed and to a point shocked, by your activity which of course helps them expand and grow. But as important as that is, so is resting those muscles. Trainers will tell you to rest between the weight lifting reps and the rest days between your jogging are as crucial as the work out. Here is the amazing thing, you actually grow muscle mass and gain strength as you rest. So next time you are sitting in your easy chair and someone asks what you are doing, just tell them you are completing the most crucial part of your exercise regime. But don't miss that we grow in strength not only in the doing, but also in the resting. What God is saying here is that He has made you physically and spiritually in such a way that not only do you need rest, but as you spend time in that place of rest God has set aside to meet you in, it is not a waste of time. Actually, it is a crucial time to your physical and spiritual growth. The author is reminding the people in his congregation the same thing I want to remind you. Amidst the stress of all you are going through, don't forget a promise of God. He has designed a resting place, a small alcove of peace, quiet, and release that you and I can run to at anytime. The only issue is just like in the example of the children of Israel, you must *enter* into it to enjoy its benefits.

II. That hope is for you today

This sounds great, but I bet I'll have to be a spiritual giant or wait until I am in heaven to experience that don't I? Look at verse 7 & 8. When can we claim these promises? Today. When can you hear His voice? Today. When you need it the most, is when God wants to come your way. It is like the manna of the Old Testament. You couldn't fill your pockets and keep it in storage until tomorrow. Why? Because each morning a new batch of manna fell which was just enough to meet that day's need.

A while ago on the TV, it showed a clip from Harvard University's 300th anniversary. All the greats came back for the celebration. There was a parade with the teachers and deans, followed by famous alumni and then came the freshmen class of that year holding a banner high over their heads "Harvard has been waiting for 300 years for us". What they were saying was that Harvard was about to enter its Finest Hour because they were there 'today'. Every generation is the generation that God has been waiting to help find that place of Rest. The Lord looks at us and says "I have been waiting for years to call you my own and walk through today with you". God isn't waiting for the perfect people to offer His rest to, He is waiting simply for His people who are tired and battered, to come and enter His rest in their 'today's'.

If you are still not convinced that this is for you, look at verse 9. You will see the term Sabbath-rest used here. It is the only place in the bible this specific greek word is used (sabbatismos). It is the idea that after God finished creating our world, He sat down to rest and wait for the time you would come to join Him and experience His care and refreshing. So God waiting today to meet you in a place where you can be refreshed and have your spiritual muscles grow.

III. He gives instruction on how to receive that hope

The Eastern Religions will say to sit on the floor, cross your legs, make your mind blank and now say these few strange words over and over again until you forget about your situation and in the forgetting (tuning out) of your reality, you will discover peace.

Christianity teaches the exact opposite. We are told to stay in the reality we are in, look it square in the face and then take God's hand and walk through your reality. Look again at verses 2 & 3, for God gives us a formula for how to proceed..

Hearing + Believing = Resting

i) Hearing

First we need to hear the promise of God. Here is the promise in verse 1. There is a place near God's heart where you can find calm in your storm. Verse 7 says you have access to that place today.

ii) Believe

Now that you have heard it you need to actively believe it. You decided to place that fact in your mind, that you can go to him and find that kind of rest. This is different than a person repeating a Mantra who is tuning out. We as Christians tune in to what we believe. Believing is taking what we know in our heads and forcing our minds and hearts to accept it. Here is where it gets tough, for the issue is not what you know but how you apply what you know. We have churches full of people who love to hear good preaching and teaching and can kick around all kinds of great ideas. They can quote all kinds of verses like "Let not your heart be trouble - you believe in God, believe also in me", " Come unto me all you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest". And yet some of them are the most stressed out, burned up, snarky people you could meet. They are like the Israelite people who, as they sat beside the Jordan River, would have stoned anyone if they even said the word Yahweh out loud because they said they revered God as the great God of power and yet they grumbled their way into disbelief (Numbers 13,14). When it comes to finding God's resting place, the issue isn't how much you know about God, it is how well you know Him and how well you can place your focus on Him.

That means for me that in the middle of a stressed time I must do 2 things to move what I have heard in scripture into what I believe in my mind and thus apply it to my life.

1) I must wrestle my focus back on God and off my situation. Why did Israel not enter into the promise land? It was because they saw Giants in the land and concentrated on how big the men were instead of seeing how huge their God was. Now picture this, at breakfast as they sat there eating manna which fell from heaven that morning, they could see the 200 - 300 foot column of fire that stood guard outside their camp blazing in the dawn darkness. And they could see the clouds forming which had lead them during day light hours through the desert for the last number of months. And yet they said "you know those soldiers are so tall, I think they are too big for us". What they needed to do was turn their faces and look into their bowl of manna. They needed to look out at the fiery pillar and wondrous clouds and believe again what they knew to be true already. They needed to let the wonder of God wash over them and give them hope. There are times when I need to literally grab my cheeks and turn my inner eye toward God. I force myself to remember what I have seen Him do in my life. At times I make a list, yet again, of who He is and who He is to me. I force what I have heard from scripture into my heart again. As I crawl into my quiet resting place with my God, at times when things are really bad, I sing the worship songs and hymns out load so it will slide deep into my soul.

2) Then I need to stop and sit quietly and wait for God to share His peace with me. As I read again verse 9, I remind myself that the resting place is open for me to enter. I remember that God is waiting and saying that there is a place of quiet rest near to the heart of God, so come in and rest a while with me. I don't want to sound sacrilegious but it is like the old Friendly Giant show that always began with a large hand reaching down and he would say 'there are two chairs over here and right there is a chair right beside the fire for someone else to curl up in'. When you are stressed and need a place to find relief, it is there. But the best plan is to set aside some time every day to find rest and also to sit in His presence quietly so He may pour spiritual strength in the muscles of your soul.

Go back to verse 1. The preacher says 'Look around at how well others in our stress filled society have made it through. Count the grave stones and broken lives. Now come and sit a spell.' Entering the Lord's resting place is no more complicated than finding a quiet place, getting out the Bible or a good Christian book or just find a quiet corner and sit down in an easy chair all alone and carve out some quiet time each day. Tell the Lord what is on your mind and then sit and listen. Enjoy the silence He lets wash over you. Hold close the pictures He places in your mind, the verses He brings to your thoughts and the whispered ideas He gives you. You will find joy, peace, renewal and perspective as you enter His presence and sit for a spell in His resting place and the churning will begin to depart. One man has said 'Come apart a while before you come apart'.

Two men, Wall and Arnold, challenged each other to race out to the buoy in the ocean. When they got there, they decided to catch their breath on the buoy. There they lay, white caps breaking around them, strong currents washing by them and wind tossing them back and forth. And yet they just lay there, no churning nor anxiety because they have found their resting place.

As you walk into this New Year, remember that your faith has found a resting place. It is in your relationship with Jesus. Be sure to also remember that His promise from the scripture is that daily He is waiting in a place where you can find rest for your soul and strength for one day at a time. If you make that a habit as you walk into this new year, it will profoundly change your experience with Him and life this next year.

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