

A Better Rest

Hebrews 3:7–4:13

This past week the world lost a legend, and heaven gained a faithful servant, as Billy Graham, the most famous evangelist in modern history, passed away at the age of 99. Graham's life was remarkable in too many ways to count. He was the pastor to the presidents. He met, and usually prayed with, every U.S. President from Truman to Trump.¹ Yet he was remarkably non-political; he chose to keep his emphasis on the gospel—the message that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). And he preached this gospel on 6 continents, in 185 countries or territories, live before 215 million people, with another 2 billion who heard him preach, and somewhere between 2 and 3 million receiving Christ as a result—some of whom are sitting here in these pews this morning.²

But of all the things one might say about Billy Graham, one of his clearest legacies is that *he finished well*. He lived his life above reproach. No money or marital scandals that have become so common today. No selling out his message for popularity. He wasn't perfect; but he owned his mistakes. And finished the race the Lord gave him, to testify to the gospel of God's grace (cf. Acts 20:24).

And part of what makes Graham's legacy so unique is that it seems so rare. There are so many who seem to start well and finish poorly, or not even finish at all. When I think through the different men who modeled the Christian faith to me early in my walk—in the time period between becoming a Christian at the end of high school and going off to grad school in 2005—there were five men the Lord really used in my life, to shape my Christian faith—a youth pastor, a pastor, two campus workers, and a professor. Of those five, only one of them is still in ministry today. The other four, either through moral or theological failure, have left ministry (or watched their ministries implode). Most of them are doing well spiritually now. One of them I no longer trust to teach the gospel. And one of them no longer believes the very gospel he so deeply instilled in me.

It is possible to start well and finish poorly, or not at all. And I say this as someone who would describe themselves theologically as a Calvinist—one who believes firmly in the eternal security of the believer, in the perseverance of the saints—that Scripture teaches that once we are saved, we are always saved, and all genuine believers in Jesus will persevere in faith to the end.

I believe that. I believe Scripture teaches that (e.g., Rom. 8:29-39). But I also believe Scripture teaches us not to take that confidence for granted. To think that because of our confession of faith we are somehow immune from tripping up or flaming out. None of us are immune; not one.

¹ Justin Taylor, “[Billy Graham at 99: A Look Back at the Evangelist and the Presidents \(From Truman to Trump\)](#),” *The Gospel Coalition*, Nov. 7, 2017.

² “[Billy Graham's Life & Ministry by the Numbers](#),” *Facts & Trends*, Feb. 20, 2018

And so God in his grace gives us warnings, like what we have in the passage before us. A warning *and* an invitation—to persevere in faith and finish well because in Jesus we have a better rest. A better rest than Israel’s old covenant can supply, and a better rest than anything this broken world can offer.

And to help us understand both the beauty of the rest God promises, and the danger of failing to enter that rest through disobedience and unbelief, the author of Hebrews begins by taking us back into the Old Testament and the tragedy of ancient Israel’s rebellion and unbelief in the wilderness.

The Possibility of Finishing Poorly

You’ll notice that our passage begins with a quotation of Psalm 95.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice,⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,⁹ where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works¹⁰ for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, "They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways."¹¹ As I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest." (Heb. 3:7-11; cf. Ps. 95:7-11)

If you go back to Psalm 95, you see that it begins as a psalm of praise and ends in a warning—a warning not to repeat the rebellion that took place at the waters and Meribah and Massah, in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. If you’ve read the book of Exodus before, or if you were with us last year when we worked through that book together, you’ll remember this story from Exodus 17.

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exod 17:1-3)

Think about what’s going on here. This is Exodus 17. In Exodus 15, just two chapters earlier, Israel was consumed with praise for God. "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; . . . The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him" (Exod. 15:1-2). And that’s because in ch. 14, God just rescued his people Israel by parting the Red Sea for them to escape from slavery in Egypt, and then brought the waters crashing back down, swallowing up Pharaoh’s army and showing his glorious power and salvation. Which is a fulfillment of what he promised to do for Israel through Moses, clear back in ch. 3 at the burning bush:

"I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . ." (Exod. 3:7-8)

God promises rest for his weary people; he rescues them to bring them into that rest. And in the beginning they believe. Exodus 14:31: "Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against

the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.” Israel started well—with faith and praise!

But not even three months³ have passed since the Red Sea, since the 10 plagues, since the miraculous salvation of God’s people, and they grumble. They’re thirsty in the wilderness—understandably so. But rather than responding with faith in the God who just delivered them miraculously or crying out for his help, they harden their hearts in unbelief, and respond in disobedience by putting God to the test—“Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” (17:3). “Is the LORD with us or not?” Now God in his mercy provides water from the rock, through his servant Moses. But they commemorate this incident by calling “the name of the place Massah [which means ‘testing’] and Meribah [which means ‘quarrelling’], because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (Exod. 17:7).

And what’s interesting is that this isn’t the last time we find Israel grumbling about water in the wilderness at a place called Meribah, with God then providing that water from a rock. In Numbers 20, decades later, the same thing happens again (Num. 20:1-13). And this time, not even Moses responds with faith (cf. Num. 20:12). And these two acts of rebellion kind of bracket Israel’s wilderness experience, epitomizing the unbelief and disobedience that ultimately cost so many of them their inheritance. As Psalm 95 looks back on it, “For forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways. Therefore I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest’” (Ps. 95:10-11). Because of Israel’s unbelief, he swore in Numbers 14 that the entire adult generation who came out of Egypt, who saw his miracles in Egypt but refused to trust him in the wilderness or to trust that he could bring them into his rest—into the land of promise—that this generation would die in the wilderness—except for Joshua and Caleb, who believed (cf. Num. 14:20-38).

As Kent Hughes has said, “The grand and terrible lesson of Israel’s history is that *it is possible to begin well and end poorly.*”⁴

For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? (Heb. 3:16-18)

It is possible to begin well and end poorly. And the essential problem, we’re told in v. 19—what ultimately causes one to end poorly—is unbelief. A refusal to trust God. “So we see that they were unable to enter because of *unbelief*” (3:19). Or as he puts it in ch. 4:2: “the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened”—people like Joshua and Caleb, who heard God’s promise and trusted it. The rest of the generation heard but didn’t believe. And we’re not talking about just agreeing that God *could* provide for them, or *could* protect them, or *could* bring them into the land; we’re talking about *trusting* him to actually do it. The kind of trust that shows itself in obedience—waiting on him in the wilderness, following him into the land he promised to give to Israel and her descendants—even if it doesn’t make sense. Stepping out in an obedience that flows from faith.

³ See Exod. 19:1.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2015), 100, italics his.

But instead their hearts were hardened in unbelief—‘God didn’t say it, he cannot do it, he will not keep his word.’ And that unbelief produced disobedience and rebellion, following their own ways instead of his. With the result of forfeiting the promise. They were unable to enter God’s rest because of unbelief (3:19).

And the reason the author points us back to this tragic story is not to beat up on Israel, but to warn his readers *not to make the same mistake*. If it’s possible for them, it’s possible for us.

What we need, if we’re going to not just start well but finish well, is *a faith that perseveres*. This is the main point of v. 12 all the way through 4:13, which is essentially a sermon on Psalm 95, warning us today not to make the same mistake as the wilderness generation, and inviting us instead to enter God’s rest by persevering in faith while the offer still stands.

And so what I want to do is look first at the call to persevere in faith—the goal before us, to hold fast to the gospel all the way to the end. And then I want to look at how the author of Hebrews tells us to do that, the tools or strategy that will help us finish well. So first the goal, and then the strategy.

The Goal of Finishing Well: Persevering Faith

Look with me at ch. 3:12-14. Notice again the problem of an *unbelieving* heart. That unbelief that kept Israel out of God’s rest—don’t make the same mistake. “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (3:12). Because, v. 14, “we share in Christ, *if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end*.” We share in Christ, we enjoy the inheritance he secured for us, we enter God’s rest, if we hold our original confidence—the gospel we believed in the beginning, when we started well—if we hold that original confidence firm to the end.

The faith that we began with when we first trusted Christ is the faith that will carry us home. Because it’s not a faith in what we can do, but in who Christ is and what he has done for us. Our Creator and King who is above us to rule and redeem us (1:5-14). Our brother who became like us, that he might share our humanity and suffer for our sin (2:5-18). Our apostle and high priest, sent by God to save us and reconcile us to the Father through his own sacrifice in our place (3:1-6). We must hold our original confidence in Christ firm to the end—a faith that produces obedience, not hardness and rebellion. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.”

It is *through faith* that we enter God’s rest and finish well. Hearing the gospel only benefits us if we believe. “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” (4:2). The ancient Israelites failed to reach God’s rest for lack of faith. But, ch. 4:3, “we who have *believed* enter that rest . . .” If unbelief is what kept ancient Israel out (3:19), then faith is that through which we enter in. So the goal is to persevere in faith. Hold fast to the gospel, through any trial and every temptation, that we might finish well.

But what will help us do that? Especially when it seems like so many fall or fail? Just as ancient Israel faced trials in the wilderness, so the first readers of Hebrews faced intense pressure to go back to Judaism and avoid persecution. And so readers in every generation will find themselves under pressure to give up or give in, as we live out our days in the wilderness between the cross and new creation. What will help us finish well?

Four Strategies for Finishing Well

The author offers or alludes to four strategies in these verses. Four rather practical ways we can strive together to finish well and enter God's rest: be honest about our weakness, be open with our lives, encourage one another daily in the gospel, and fix our eyes on the better rest to come.

1. *Be Honest about Our Weakness*

First, we need to be honest about our weakness. And I mean specifically our weakness when it comes to temptation and sin. Look again at ch. 3:12-13: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by *the deceitfulness of sin.*"

Sin is tricky. It's sly. It plays on your wants and your fears. It appeals to your dreams and desires and offers you satisfaction where you're most hungry. And it finds out your weaknesses and insecurities, and offers safety and stability where you're most vulnerable. And no one is immune from its siren call. Listen to the urgency of the author's appeal in ch. 4:1: "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." We have to take sin seriously, and God seriously, lest we find ourselves falling short in the end. Or again in v. 11: "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." Falling through disobedience is a real possibility, and we need to be honest about our weakness and vulnerability before sin, lest we be taken off guard. As John Owen wrote, "It is necessary to recognize the enemy you face. Take sin seriously—most seriously indeed. When people view sin superficially, they have no sense or need or motivation to mortify sin."⁵ If we're not honest about our weakness, if we don't see sin as a very real threat, it will take us down. Just this week I learned of another good friend and former ministry colleague who disqualified himself from ministry through sin. One of the godliest men I knew at my previous church. Now by God's grace he's repentant and doing well. But he wasn't immune. *I'm* not immune. And neither are *you*. We have to be honest.

And related to that, second, we need to be open with our life.

2. *Be Open with Our Life*

Being honest to myself about how vulnerable I am to sin doesn't do a whole lot of good if no one else knows and is able to help me. There is a certain level of transparency required if we are going to finish well and enter God's rest; none of us can do this on our own.

Now I'm not saying you have to be open with everyone about your sin. That would be foolish, because not everyone is safe. That's just a fact. Not everyone in your life can be trusted with the intimate details of your faith and doubts and temptations and trials. But there should be at least *a few people* before whom your life is an open book. People who can ask you any question and you'll give an honest answer, no matter how ashamed or afraid you are, because you know that person will meet you with the gospel of grace.

⁵ John Owen, *Sin & Temptation: The Challenge to Personal Godliness*, abridged and edited by James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983), 157.

Because here's the deal, we may do a good job hiding our sin for a while. We might look to everyone around us like we have it together when in reality we're not really trusting Jesus or following him. But eventually we will be found out. The message of the gospel will eventually expose the true condition of our hearts. If not in this life, then before the throne of God. This is what the author of Hebrews warns us in ch. 4:12-13:

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.¹³ 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.

We often memorize that verse to remind us of the power of Scripture—and it does do that. But one thing Scripture is powerful to do is to *expose us*—to lay us bare before God. To expose what we're really trusting in, who we're really believing, how we're really living. I may be surprised when I hear about a friend or fellow pastor tripping up or flaming out. God isn't. He knows where our faith really is. Our hearts are already open before God, and so we need open our lives to a few safe people that we might walk faithfully with him.

3. Encourage One Another Daily in the Gospel

But what do we do with each other? How do we help each other in our walk? The third strategy the author gives us is to encourage one another daily in the gospel. Look again at ch. 3:13: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

What does it mean to exhort or encourage one another daily? He's not just talking about saying nice things to each other (‘Boy, you're such a good basketball player.’ ‘You're such a great mom,’ or ‘You really cleaned up well this morning’). It's not a general encouragement or exhortation; it's encouraging each other *in the gospel daily*. That's the context when you look at v. 14: “Exhort one another every day . . . For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end” (3:13-14).

We need to encourage one another daily in the gospel. We need to remind each other of the truth of who Jesus is—how he's the Creator who made us in his own image, the King who rules us for our good and his glory, the Brother who knows us and can relate to us, the Priest who cleanses us from all guilt and sin and shame, the Savior who loves us so much that he willingly gave his very life to make us his own. And we need to remind each other who we are in Christ—beloved, adopted, forgiven, set free, hopeful, glory-bound.

And we need to do this *daily*—as long as it's called “today”—as long as God's offer to enter his rest still stands (cf. 4:6-7). The gospel is the message through which we begin our faith, but it's also the message that nurtures us all the way home. It's like a meal. We need to feed on it daily for fresh strength to persevere in faith. You can't make through the whole week on Monday's lunch. Neither will you have the spiritual resources you need to persevere in faith if the only time you open the Bible or pray or discuss the things of God is Sunday morning. We need to encourage one another daily in the truth of the gospel. To make space in our lives and relationships—in our marriages, with our kids, among our friends—for honest conversation, with Scripture open, speaking truth to one another in Christ.

And one of the specific ways we need to encourage each other in the gospel is the fourth strategy in our passage, to fix our eyes on the better rest to come.

4. Fix Our Eyes on the Better Rest to Come

When you're suffering, when you're hurting, or feeling pressure from temptation, any sort of relief looks really good. I remember one time I slammed my finger in the car door. I was holding Joshua in my left hand (he was three), and I shut the door with my right hand, and it was in there so far that I couldn't pull it out. Nor could I set Joshua down to open the door. So Carissa had to come around the car and open it for me. And that finger swelled up; it looked like a witch's finger—all purple and blue and gnarled. It hurt so badly, because there was so much pressure from the swelling, that I pretty much would have done anything to release the pressure. I finally went into the doctor so he could lance it—poke a hole to let it all out.

So it is when we're being picked at for our faith—pressured, mocked, or marginalized—or when we're struggling under temptation to sin, or just struggling to put one foot in front of the other in this broken world that never seems to go the way it's supposed to. It's really easy to look for the closest and fastest relief you can find. To compromise our witness and tell someone what they want to hear so that they'll like us or hire us or leave us alone. To compromise our integrity and indulge in some sinful pleasure as though that's going to provide happiness or escape. We want rest. For the Hebrews the temptation was to revert to Judaism and the old covenant. For us, that rest is offered in a hundred different forms every day. Just think of everything you're being sold in the checkout line: rest for your hunger through the candy bars and junk; rest from your financial struggles or weight loss struggles through expert magazine advice; rest that comes through an easy escape through pornographic pictures or celebrity gossip.

But the rest we really need, the only rest that will truly bring lasting relief and satisfaction, is the better rest Jesus offers: *God's own rest*. Not just the rest that God gives, but the rest that he enjoys himself and invites us into through faith. Look at ch. 4:3-5. When he says “they shall not enter *my* rest,” he's talking about the very rest he has enjoyed since completing his creative work. “For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.’ And again in this passage he said, ‘They shall not enter *my* rest’”—emphasis on “*my*” (4:4-5). As Kent Hughes explains, “When we are given rest by [God], it is not simply a relaxation of tensions, but a rest that is qualitatively the same rest God enjoys—his personal rest that he shares with us!”⁶

It's a rest that was established in the beginning—life according to God's design. The way it was meant to be. It's a rest that will be consummated in the end, when Christ returns and everything broken will finally and forever be made new. When we will rest from our labors—not in a mundane inactivity, but with eternal service in the presence of the Lord, free from the painful trials and toil of this broken world. “For whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his” (4:10).

And this rest is bigger than what Joshua offered Israel when he led them into the promised land. It's not just a zip code in the Middle East. “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on” (4:8). And it's bigger and better and more satisfying than

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, 112.

any so-called rest the world has come up with ever since. Snickers may satisfy for a couple of hours; it may feel good to lose yourself in someone else's tabloid crisis, or to indulge in sexual fantasies—but it all wears off and leaves you feeling more hollow than when you began. You may even for a time accomplish the financial security or physical health that you think will give you rest—but that, too, will one day rot, while the anxiety of holding onto it robs you daily of any joy while you still have it.

Jesus offers a better rest. And by faith, the promise of entering his rest still stands (4:1, 6, 10). It stands as a promise for the future—the heavenly kingdom, the new creation, the restoration of all things. But it also stands as an invitation in the present—“*Today* if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart” (4:6-7). The rest we look forward to in the end, comes forward to meet us by faith in the present, that we might find peace in God and have faith to persevere to the end. God has appointed a day, calling it “*Today*,” where he invites us to hear his voice and not harden our hearts. He invites us to *believe*. To persevere in faith and enter his rest.

If you're not a Christian, then you need to know that *today* is that day. Believe the gospel and find the rest and new life you're looking for in Jesus. And if you are a Christian, today is the day for you too—and tomorrow, and the next day—as long as it is called “today.” Today is the day to *keep believing* the message you believed in the beginning—to persevere in faith and hold fast to the gospel.

“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (4:11). That's what the author wants. That's what I want for you, for myself, for this church—to not just begin well, but to *finish well* through persevering faith. To one day take our place among that great cloud of witnesses, at rest from our labors, with hearts swelling at the voice of our Lord when he says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21, 23). That's my prayer. That's our hope. Jesus offers a better rest.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. How many times does the author quote from Psalm 95 in this passage? Take a moment to read that psalm together.
2. What is Psalm 95 about? What other Old Testament texts does it point us to, and what is going on in those passages? (hint: check the cross references that can be found in most Bibles for help identifying the other passages)
3. Why do you think the author of Hebrew quotes Psalm 95 so much here? What basic point is he trying to make?
4. What was the essential problem with the wilderness generation of Israel, with respect to entering God's rest? What does it take for God's people today to enter that rest?
5. What kind of “rest” is the author talking about here? How does he describe it?

6. What tools or strategies does the author give for helping one another persevere in faith?

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. If ancient Israel was able to start well but finish poorly, that means we can too. How does that idea strike you?

8. To the extent that you feel comfortable sharing, where do you feel most prone to wander?

9. How does the gospel of Jesus speak to some of the areas of weakness or temptation just shared?

10. What habits or practices do you have in your life for encouraging one another in the gospel?