

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
September 1, 2019

## **Make Every Effort**

Hebrews 4:1-13

My email this past week included an offer to take a cruise. And not just any cruise. A Christian cruise. What makes a cruise Christian? Not simply that many of the passengers are followers of Jesus, but most of all that the journey includes plenty of Biblical teaching and storytelling, live worship music, and lots of fellowship. Notable preachers/teachers and singers will be on board to inform and inspire. In addition to the Word and the worship, you'll get sightseeing expeditions at various ports of call, all-you-can-eat gourmet meals, non-stop entertainment, and more! So if you want to combine relaxation with spiritual edification, a Christian cruise may be the way to go.

In today's Scripture passage, the preacher isn't forwarding cruise emails to the congregation. In fact, a "Christian cruise" would probably sound like a strange concept to him. Not that rest doesn't matter. Actually, the language of "rest" is all over the place in our text. At this point in his letter, the writer/preacher is presenting the congregation with what one commentator has described as a mini-sermon on the subject of rest.<sup>1</sup> In this case, "rest" means more than setting work aside and taking time for renewal. "Rest" is a rich theological term that has multiple dimensions. In one respect, it refers to the beginning of time, and how God rested after completing the work of creation. In another respect, "rest" refers to the end of time, God's finished work of redemption and the new creation in Christ. Thirdly, "rest" refers to what's possible for the faithful in the middle of time, as God's people remember his past faithfulness and anticipate his future victory when the Lordship of Jesus is fully revealed.

As God's people live in this time between the already and the not yet of salvation, between creation and full redemption, there are constant dangers and risks. This journey toward the goal of God's kingdom is no cruise. We have to stay alert to the things that lead us into disobedience or distract us from our destination. Otherwise we end up lost and wandering, relying on our own plans and instincts, rather than steadfastly holding onto the promises of God.

Today's text begins with the primary promise. "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands . . ." (v. 1). The promise of entering his rest. As I said, "rest" is a crucial theological term here in Hebrews. It basically means, as Thomas Long has said, "the will of God brought to completion."<sup>2</sup> In other words, rest means that when all is said and done, God's goodness and love will prevail in reconciling and redeeming the world. What God has accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus will be brought to completion. "And here, in the middle of history," says Long, "to 'rest' is not to stop working . . . but to have the calm joy that one's labors are, by the grace of God, part of fulfilling this promise."<sup>3</sup> So the promise is still open, but reaching the destination requires faith. And faith means trusting that our efforts are gathered into God's everlasting purposes.

It's no wonder that later in our text, the preacher says, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience" (v. 11). He's evoking the memory of Israel's failure to rely upon God's promises, not so

that we can pat ourselves on the back, but so that we can be warned about losing confidence in God's will to redeem. That loss of confidence, and the disobedience it creates, can take many forms.

In our day and time, faithless disobedience can often take shape in the way that we pursue convenience and comfort. Author Tim Bascom has written, "We're too comfortable to be spiritual. . . . We think we will be able to pursue God better without danger or hardship. And yet it works in just the opposite way. Nothing is more difficult than to grow spiritually when comfortable."<sup>4</sup>

And yet, we prize our comfort, don't we? We like it better when things are convenient and efficient. The fewer obstacles and challenges we have to face, the better. The more that we take this approach to things, the more life becomes primarily the daily pursuit of comfort.

Law professor and technology expert Tim Wu has described convenience as "perhaps the most powerful force shaping our individual lives and our economies." Wu quotes Evan Williams, a co-founder of Twitter, who has noted, "Convenience decides everything."<sup>5</sup>

Consider how many of your own decisions today have or will be shaped or driven by the opportunity for convenience. Wouldn't it be easier to experience church by watching that charismatic TV preacher rather than going to all the effort of getting up, getting ready, and going to an actual house of worship? Wouldn't it be easier to pick up food at the drive thru rather than dine in? Wouldn't it be easier to send so and so a text rather than call them and speak to them by phone or make a face-to-face visit? Wouldn't it be easier to let the kids play on their devices rather than load up for a trip to the local park? Wouldn't it be easier to set my DVR to record that show this afternoon rather than rushing home to watch it live?

Don't get me wrong, there are times and circumstances where convenience is the best or necessary route to go. But it still helps to step back and recognize how much our daily choices are motivated by the pursuit of comfort, convenience, and that other word I just used a lot—"easy." I quote Tim Wu again, who says, "Easy is better. Easiest is best."<sup>6</sup> In many respects, that could be the motto for life in our society.

Of course, it's hard to speak of "easy" without also speaking of what, probably more than anything else, makes it possible, namely, technology, and especially modern technology. Across time, various kinds of technological advancements have reduced the amount of time and physical effort required of us in order to complete our tasks or reach our destinations. Appliances in your home. Tools and machinery at your workplace. Advances in transportation, on the ground and in the air. Technological progress has been part of our lives for a long time. But the rapid pace of modern technology, especially computing devices, has accelerated our desire for ease of life.

One commentator puts it well when he says that we live in the age of "easy everywhere."<sup>7</sup> That's often the purpose and the outcome of our technological progress. You can shop for your merchandise online. You can order dinner from your favorite restaurant and have it delivered to your front door. You can telecommute to work. You can do all your banking from your phone. You can video chat with your doctor. You can adjust your home's thermostat while away on vacation. You can tell Alexa to play your favorite song. You can let your car switch from high beam to low beam all by itself. Eventually you may be in a car that can drive itself. These days, all you have to do is click, swipe, tap, or speak, and things happen. Things get done. Things get easier.

In this age of easy everywhere, technology promises greater and greater comfort, convenience, and efficiency. But how are we to think about technology's promises in light of God's promises? It's true that technology has enhanced and enriched our lives, individually and together, in a multitude of ways. And for that we can be thankful. But God's work of a creation fully reconciled and restored through Christ isn't a matter of ease and efficiency, convenience and comfort. If the fulfillment of God's promise were just a matter of tapping a button on a screen, we wouldn't have texts like today's portion of Hebrews, exhorting believers who are weary and worn, discouraged and in danger of disobedience.

In our contemporary context, the lure of a life of ease can be a distraction and obstacle to a life of faithfulness. God has promised his rest to those who persevere in the way of Christ and his cross. This is why spiritual growth and progress can be hindered, not helped, by making comfort and convenience the primary objective of your life. Take to heart these words from author Jen Pollock Michel:

As our lives (at least in the developed world) get easier, we are increasingly formed by the desire for ease. Of all the cautions we raise about technology—its distractions and temptations, its loneliness and superficiality—this promise of unencumbered living is perhaps the most insidious danger and also the one we talk the least about.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of being shaped by the longing for ease, we need to be shaped by the longing for rest. God's rest. And God's rest is different from popular notions of ease and convenience. As I said earlier, God's rest is about what he has already done through Christ, what he's going to do through Christ, and what he's doing through Christ now in our lives, enabling us to participate in the accomplishment of his will, assuring us that our lives count, and promising us that all we say and do is gathered into his everlasting purposes. So why settle for a life of ease when a life of faithfulness, hard and costly as it is, is available to you? Why build a life on the pursuit of comfort, when a life built on the pursuit of the cross, is open to you?

"Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest," says the preacher here in Hebrews. Make every effort. That effort will often involve forsaking ease and inconveniencing yourself for the sake of others. It will often mean setting aside comfort and making sacrifices for the purposes of God's kingdom. It will often mean letting go of efficiency and waiting patiently for the Lord's plans to unfold. It will often mean relinquishing the notion of a pain-free life and facing head-on the challenges, struggles, and suffering that can give life greater depth and meaning. God has promised his rest to those who are faithful. Let us make every effort to enter that rest.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*. Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Long, *Hebrews*.

<sup>3</sup> Long, *Hebrews*.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Bascom, *The Comfort Trap: Spiritual Dangers in the Convenience Culture* (Intervarsity, 1993) n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Wu, "The Tyranny of Convenience." *The New York Times Sunday Review*. February 16, 2018. Accessed August 29, 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/opinion/sunday/tyranny-convenience.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Wu, "The Tyranny of Convenience."

<sup>7</sup> Andy Crouch uses this phrase a lot in his books, interviews, and presentations. See, for example, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Jen Pollock Michel, "Move Over, Sex and Drugs. Ease Is the New Vice." *Christianity Today* website. Accessed August 29, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2019/january/technology-move-over-sex-drugs-ease-is-new-vice.html>>.