

Rest, Diligence, Sluggishness, and Trust

A question that came up in our recent discussion was about the meaning or the nature of "rest" - specifically the rest described in Hebrews 3:7-4:11 (mentioned 12 times in 20 verses). I've done some more thinking and looking back at some notes I have been keeping on Hebrews and have a few thoughts.

The context in Hebrews refers back to Psalm 95 (quoted in part four times in the section), which in turn is a comment on the Israelites' refusal to enter the Promised Land (Exodus 17:1-7 and other similar OT passages). The point is that there is quite a bit of back-story to the idea of rest in Hebrews.

The Israelites saw the formidable obstacles in Canaan and refused to trust God enough to obey Him. They were challenging whether God was acting, or whether He was in control of the circumstances, or even if He cared for them. "Is the Lord among us or not" (Exodus 17:7) seems to be the critical point in the story. They refused to enter the land even having seen so much of God's previous work (Hebrews 3:9; cf, Psalm 95:9). The word describing the Israelites that is usually translated "disobedient" (Hebrews 3:18, 4:6, 11) is literally "unpersuadable". They forfeited the rest offered by God because they refused to trust Him when circumstances were overwhelming.

At least one conclusion I draw from this is that we experience rest when we grow in our trust of God regardless of circumstances. Not trusting (being unpersuaded that God is trustworthy) results in stress, anxiety, strained relationships, attempts to manage circumstances and manipulate people to make life work (as Larry Crabb phrased it). Lack of trust is not restful but just the opposite - it is exhausting.

Trusting God (even, as a book title says, "When God's Ways Make No Sense") is being persuaded of His loving intention for our best, of His infinite wisdom to know what is best, and of His sovereign providence to bring about what is best. Trust doesn't eliminate pain, but it brings rest - the tranquility of continually reminding ourselves and each other of God's infinite love, wisdom and power, especially when circumstances seem to contradict all three.

Hebrews goes on to exhort us to "diligence" (4:11; 6:11) and to warn against "sluggishness" or "dullness" or "laziness" (5:11; 6:12). Rest is not passive but actively pursuing the "full, satisfactory persuasion of mind, the highest assurance" of the hope we have (John Owen on Hebrews 6:12). Rest in our present life, the tranquility of trusting God, will grow as we help each other remember and see more of God's loving, wise, and providential character. And that comes back to the Soul Care series, helping each other recognize how our reactions to difficulties are often subtly self-obsessed and to discover God-obsessed ways to respond in all circumstances.