

CAN'T STOP
CAN I STOP

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vGroup Study



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Can't Stop Won't Stop: vGroup Study

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HEBREWS 4:1-13

N.T. Wright has described unbelief as falling asleep while driving.¹ With some yawns and a few nods, drivers risk swerving off the road, putting themselves or others at risk of injury or death. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Association, an estimated 795 lives were claimed by drowsy driving in 2017. In the same year, some 91,000 vehicle accidents were due to drowsiness.²

Just as people risk injury or death from driving while drowsy, Christians risk wrecking their faith through unbelief. Whether through societal pressure, personal doubts, or generalized spiritual apathy, Christians are not immune to asking questions like “is Jesus really worth it?” or perhaps, “is any of this really true?” If our unbelief is not kept in check, the New Testament gives severe warnings as to what happens when we fail to believe Jesus.

- Have you ever known someone who has denied Jesus and left their faith? What happened, and what led to their unbelief?
- Has Christianity ever felt empty and unfulfilling to you? What was it about Jesus, or the Church, that led you to question your faith?
- How might spiritual apathy lead to unbelief? Why might failure to spend time in God’s word or a lack of prayer contribute to unbelief?

Unbelief takes on various forms. For some, unbelief looks like apathy. For others, unbelief looks like a denial of Jesus’ sufficiency. Others cave into unbelief due to societal and intellectual pressures. For the author of Hebrews, any one of these types may have been at work in this Christian community. The author warns that if they are not careful, they may fail to enter God’s rest.

¹Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ²For 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.

Hebrews 4:1-2

The context of this passage comes from the chapter before it. The author likens his audience’s situation to the Israelite’s situation in the wilderness. The term “rest” comes from two references. The first reference is Genesis 2 when God finished his work and “rested” on

the seventh day of creation. The second reference refers to the rest the people of Israel were to experience when they entered the Promised Land. What the author intends to convey is that there is a “Sabbath” for God’s people—a Sabbath that the Israelites failed to enter, and that this author’s audience might still fail to enter if they are not careful.

- What happened to the Israelites in the wilderness? What did they do that kept them from entering into the promised land?
- According to verse 2, why did the message to the Israelites not benefit them?
- Therefore, what must we have to enter God’s rest? (hint: faith). Why?

This passage poses some difficulties. On the surface, Hebrews 4:1-2 seems to say that the promised land functioned as “rest” to the Israelites—Moses’ generation failed to enter the land and therefore failed to enter God’s rest. But this isn’t what the passage is saying. Read closely.

³For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

*“As I swore in my wrath,
‘They shall not enter my rest,’”*

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

⁶Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

*“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”*

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Hebrews 4:3-10

So here's the problem: if Joshua eventually led the Israelites into the promised land (v. 8), then how can David say in the Psalms (written long after Joshua led the Israelites into the land) that there is a future rest? Didn't the Israelites "rest" after they entered the promised land? No, according to the author of Hebrews—because "rest" never had anything to do with the promised land—that's why David spoke of a future rest.

- What might this Sabbath rest be? What is the author speaking of?

- How is this rest something we experience now? How is this rest something we will experience in the future?

The author of Hebrews has just challenged and encouraged his readers that unlike the people of Israel they should enter God's rest, and the rest that they have in Jesus is far greater than any rest in the past. The author now moves to an important challenge for the church.

¹¹Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹²For 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. ¹³And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Hebrews 4:11-13

- What is the author's main point in this passage?

- What does it mean to "strive" to enter God's rest? How is "striving" related to faith? (Hint: Think about our sanctification and holiness requires work on our end)

- In this passage, what is the "word of God?" (Hint: How did God speak to the Israelites? How did he speak to these Christians [Hebrews 1:1-2]? How has he spoken to us?)

- How is God's word related to our striving? (Hint: When God speaks, we obey)

What is the author's main point? Unbelief risks failing to enter God's rest. Though God's rest refers to when Jesus returns, there is a present dimension to God's rest as well. While we wait for Jesus to return, we should live in the light of the reality to come. Yet some who claim to follow Jesus won't get to see that reality because of unbelief.

Can a follower of Jesus lose their salvation? No—that is, if they really believe. The question this passage poses isn't "can I lose my salvation?" The question this passage poses is "will I remain faithful?" Faithfulness is the true test of authentic salvation.

Hebrews encourages us to guard against unbelief. But what does that unbelief look like, apart from the obvious rejection of Jesus? Donald McCullough offers this perspective:

Visit a Church on Sunday morning—almost any will do—and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades, or who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher unsure whether the sermon will go over; the only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing the offertory. . . . Reverence and awe have often been replaced by a yawn of familiarity. The consuming fire has been domesticated into a candle flame, adding a bit of religious atmosphere, perhaps, but no heat, no blinding light, no power for purification. When the true story gets told, whether in the partial light of historical perspective or in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century has been the trivialization of God.³

For McCullough, unbelief looks like a church that trivializes God. In the words of N.T. Wright, unbelief is a church that has become sleepy.⁴

- How's your trust of God? Are you currently struggling to trust him? If so, in what areas of your life, and why?

- How's your heart toward God? Are you in awe and wonder before God? Or is your heart cold and distant before God? Why?

- What are some practical ways you can combat unbelief or distrust of God in your life? Think about action steps you can begin to do this week.

- What are some practical ways you can warm your heart toward God? Think about action steps you can begin to do this week.

Close your time together praying for one another. Pray for the Holy Spirit to empower each other to take the necessary steps discussed.

REFERENCES

¹N.T. Wright, *Hebrews For Everyone* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 31.

²<https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/drowsy-driving>

³Donald W. McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 13.

⁴N.T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*, 38.