

## Hebrews 4

Since chapter 2 the author has had the readers on journey towards God's promised rest. The picture of the exodus, wilderness wandering, and entry into the promised land has provided the background to chapters 2-4. He moves them from deliverance out of slavery (2:10-18) to a sojourn in the desert (3:1-19) and entry into God's promised rest (4:1-13). This pattern recalls the Israelites' journey from slavery in Egypt to rest in the land of Canaan. Moses said in Deut 12:10 that "in the land that the Lord your God is allotting you," God will give "you rest from your enemies all around so that you live in safety".

### 1-5 "Those who believe may enter"

The author is continuing from chapter 3. He has just shown how the Israelites failed to enter God's rest because of their unbelief. Now he wants them to think of this and as a result be afraid.

- **Let us fear then (Gr.)** the author is building off God's oath to those who did not believe his word. He wants us to think of this and as a result **fear**.
- **Fear** is an interesting word. It can mean straight up "be in a state of fearing" or "to have such awe or respect for a person as to involve a measure of fear".
- **Lest** is a marker of negative purpose. He doesn't want something to happen. He wants them to fear so something doesn't happen.
- He says that the **the promise**, referring to the promise to enter God's rest, **still stands**. This means that the promise has been "left to exist" or "caused to remain". This shows them that God's promise is still there to enter into. He is showing them the importance of why they should **fear**.
- **Any of you** refers to them, the community of believers.
- **Should seem to have failed to reach it** means to already have failed to attain the promise.
  - In other words he wants them to fear so that they do not seem to have failed to attain the promised rest which is still available. Fear/awe is the correct response to hearing God's oath to Israel. For a heart that fears is not hardened against God. The heart that hears God's oath to Israel and does not fear may show that it is hardened and thus appears to have failed to attain the promise like Israel.
    - **Calvin:** By saying *Lest we be disappointed of the promise left us*, he intimates that no one comes short of it except he who by rejecting grace has first renounced the promise; for God is so far from repenting to do us good that he ceases not to bestow his gifts except when we despise his calling.
      - The author is holding out to them the hope that those who believe receive the promise that Israel never received. He does this by framing this section with exhortations "let us fear lest any... fail to enter his rest" (4:1) and "let us then strive to enter his rest" (4:11). He is arguing that since Israel did not receive the promise, it is still open to be received. God's oath is not only a stern warning to those who harden their hearts in unbelief but also a promise to those who believe. Just as the ancestors wandered without a homeland but lived to obtain the promise (11:9, 13, 17, 33; 6:12), the new community also lives in hope of a homeland. Having indicated in 3:12-19 that Israel failed to enter God's rest, here at the beginning and end of this section the author urges his readers to enter into the rest in the land of promise that Israel forfeited.

In **vs2** the author connects the dots just in case the people haven't seen the link yet.

- **For** is explaining why they should fear.
- **Good news** the Gr. Word 'euaggelizo' – evangelise, proclaim.
- **Came to us just as to them** is highlighting that God spoke both in the past and in these last days. Thus both the church and Israel received **good news**.
- **Benefit** means 'to provide assistance, with emphasis upon the resulting benefit'. It can be translated to 'help', to 'benefit', to 'cause advantage'. The good news did not help them, why? It was not united by faith.
- **United** means 'to cause parts to fit together in an overall arrangement'. It can be translated to 'fit together', to 'put together', to 'compose', to 'structure'. The good news did not benefit them because it was not united, joined together, fitted with faith.
- **Faith** means 'to believe to the extent of complete trust and reliance'. It can be translated to 'believe', to 'trust', to have 'confidence' in.
  - The author is making the connection clear. The listeners are in the same situation as their fathers. They have been delivered from their bondage to the devil (2:14-15) by their brother Jesus, and now have the promise of new life before them, guaranteed by God's Spirit. They have heard the word, received the word, but are now in danger of missing out because they are starting to throw their confidence away in God's word. Those who heard the good news did not combine the message with trust or confidence. As a result it did not benefit them. We should fear because just like them we have received good news. The

implication is that if we don't put our confidence in it, it won't benefit us either.

**Illustration:** A soldier hears the declaration of peace... don't help him unless he believes it.

Q. what is the goal of a sermon? To bring faith into the hearts of people.

**Vs3,** The author uses the quote from Psalm 95 to show that the rest is still open. He says:

- **For** = indeed. It is marking emphasises. He is emphasising his point.
- **Enter** = “move into, begin to experience”. It is present tense. We who believe are “entering” that rest (promised). It is not past tense, they have not yet entered God's promised rest, but they are “entering” it now.

The author quotes Psalm 95 again to show the certainty of this. He says:

- **As he has said** = just as. Marker of similarity. Just as God swore in his wrath and closed His rest to those who did not believe, in that same way His rest is open to those who believe.
  - Thus since they are entering God's rest, they need to patiently endure until this has been realised and not throw away their confidence in God's word.
- **Although God's works were finished....** Here we learn that it was not God's fault that they didn't enter the land. All of God's work had been completed at the foundation of the world. Everything was ready. It was God's desire and purpose for them all to enter into it, He was not lying. The reason why they didn't enter was because of their unbelief.
  - How is it possible that God's rest was ready for them to enter since the foundation of the world?

**Vs4-5**

The author here links psalm 95 with Genesis 2:2. Specifically using the word **rest**. This was the rabbinic hermeneutical principle *gezera shewa*, according to which the same word in two different passages means the same.

- **Rest** means “to cease one's work or activity, resulting in a period of rest”. It can be translated “to rest”, “to cease from work”. The author here quotes both from both the Psalms and Genesis and concludes that the rest mention here in Psalm 95 is God's Sabbath rest in Genesis.
  - Indeed the Psalm prepared the way for this interpretation by the words “**my rest**”.
    - The rest God had for them was not simply rest from wandering in the wilderness, from slavery in Egypt, it was the very rest of God. It was God's Sabbath rest, God's own rest. The rest God himself entered into after completing His creation.

**Vs6-11:** The author is now going to show in vs6-11 that the psalm which condemned the unbelieving can be read as a promise. He emphasised the last line of the quote “and I swore they shall not enter my rest” as the warning, but now emphasises the beginning of the quote “today if you hear his voice...”. The today becomes the basis for the promise which they can hope in.

- **Vs6-8** the author explains why this rest remains open to these believers. The author gives us 4 reasons to establish this fact.
  1. **The rest was not entered into.** ==> the Israelites failed to enter because of their disobedience, unbelief. Therefore it remains for some to enter the land. How do we know it still remains...?
  2. **God has appointed another day, Today.** ==> God has spoken through David by the holy Spirit saying that there is another day to enter, namely today. How do we know that this promise was not for the second generation of Israelites under Joshua...?
  3. **It was spoken through David.** ==> God spoke through David hundreds of years later. The rest still remained to be entered.
  4. **If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have said this.** ==> Therefore we see that there is still a Sabbath rest for the people.
    - Because the earlier generation **did not enter (4:6)**, the “today” of the psalm is a new day. The announcement of **today** in the psalm indicates that Joshua never gave the earlier generation rest in the promised land. The author is making the conclusion that because the psalmist wrote after the time of the conquest in Joshua, the “**today**” of the psalm is actually speaking of a new day that is available to the church. Like Israel before them, these believers still stand overlooking the promised land, and God has announced a new opportunity to enter. **Today** then is a promise.

**Vs9-10, shows what kind of rest it is.**

- In vs9, the author called the rest a Sabbath rest. This already defines the rest for us.
  - Sabbath = sabbatismos. It has to do with Sabbath observances that include both rest and celebration.
    - **Rest:** the seventh day was to be a day of rest. For slaves as well as free people. The slave would

receive an ember, or spark of freedom that would help them look forward to their complete liberation.

- **Celebration:** Israel was not to do any work on the Sabbath, except to praise the Lord in the assembly of the elders. The people kept the Sabbath by giving great praise and thanks to the Lord, who had preserved them that day.
  - In Hebrews the eternal Sabbath is connected to the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12), where the righteous rejoice in the presence of God.
    - The author describes the Christian life as a journey where we lay “*aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely*”, and run “*with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith*” (Heb 12:1-2). The eternal Sabbath celebration in God's heavenly Jerusalem is the goal.
  - In saying that “there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God”, the author is reaffirming the earlier claim that “we who believe enter God's rest”.
    - He is going to use this truth as the basis for his exhortation in vs11.
    - Also the author seems to be assuming that since God's Sabbath rest followed the beginning of creation, it will also follow the end of creation. Some even believed that the earth would exist for 6000 years and then would follow God's Sabbath rest on the 7000<sup>th</sup> year.
  - **In vs10**, the rest is identified as **His rest**, or God's rest and **a resting from his works**.
    - Rest from works can be related to several aspects.
      - **To the limit's of creation:** people are subject to the decay that is apart of this created order because of sin. This created order will be shaken (judged), and then those who now labour will rest in God's unshakeable kingdom.
      - **To the conflict with society.** The people of Hebrews were reproached by the wider society. Their support to fellow Christians included the “work” of hospitality and serving those in prison. Christians will rest from these works in the city that is to come.
      - **To the struggle with sin:** Christians have God's spirit with them, but still contend with sin. And so they must strive to keep sin in check until they are made complete in God's presence.
        - In view of Hebrews it points towards the completion of the race which we now run with endurance.
    - **Just as God did from His.** Some Jewish interpreters have called God's rest a “working with absolute ease”. Here **Just as** is emphasising that the believer who enters God's rest enters it fully. It is not that there are different levels of rest, like some more perfect rest which belongs to God alone. The believer when he completes his course enters the same rest that God entered when he completed his course in creation.

### **Vs11, is an exhortation to enter into that rest.**

- **Let us therefore strive** = because a Sabbath rest remains for the people of God where they rest from their works and those who believe enter that rest, let us now be “eager, do one's best” to enter that rest.  
**to enter that rest** = The goal of the “pilgrimage” is God. Jesus, the exalted Lord is the guarantor that the pilgrimage leads to the goal. He is the pioneer (2:10) of the exodus to heaven (12:2) and our forerunner. According to 6:19-20, Jesus is the forerunner who entered behind the curtain of the heavenly sanctuary. He entered a sanctuary not made with hands to offer a sacrifice (9:12,24) and opened the way for others to follow (10:19-23).
  - Thus to enter into God's rest is to follow Jesus into the heavenly world. “living this life, running this race, looking unto Jesus”. “Rest” in Hebrews is the equivalent of other terms describing the hope of believers. Elsewhere the author speaks of the hope for a homeland (11:14), a city (11:10, 16, 12:22, 13:14), and an unshakeable kingdom (12:28).
- **That no one fall** = those who did not believe **fell** in the wilderness, meaning they died. There is a close connection between falling into unbelief and falling under divine judgement.
- **By the same sort of disobedience** = Unbelief and disobedience are used interchangeably in Hebrews. The author here again is using the unfaithfulness of the fathers as an example for them to avoid. He doesn't see the same thing to happen to them. (ie. Them to throw away their confidence in God's promise and end up falling in the wilderness).

### **Vs12-13, give us the motivation to strive.**

Here the author reminds his readers of the implications of being confronted by the word of God. These 2 verses summarise the first major section in Hebrews, as the *inclusio* with 1:1-2 suggests. Not only that it also is the appropriate conclusion to 3:7-4:11, which focused on God's oath (word) to Israel.

- **The word** includes both the promises and the threatenings, whatever God has spoken in the OT and in His

Son.

- **Living = alive, life**
- **Active = effective, it is effective in causing something to happen.**
  - **Living an active** are built upon the background of the author's warning "not to fall away from the living God" (3:12) and his insistence that God's oath was irrevocable. God's word is the power that determines salvation or punishment, as the oath to Israel indicates (warning + promise).
    - **Isaiah 55:11** In the same way, the promise that I make does not return to me, having accomplished nothing. No, it is realized as I desire and is fulfilled as I intend."
    - **Jeremiah 23:29** My message is like a fire that purges dross! It is like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces! I, the LORD, so affirm it!
    - **Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
    - **1 Thessalonians 2:13, 1 Peter 1:23, James 1:19-21**
      - God's word is alive. A living word effective to cause things to happen. It does all that God intends and desires, and says. It breaks the rock in pieces, it purges life a fire, it is the power for salvation to everyone who believes, it grows life and faith in the heart, it works in believers, it is able to save souls.
- **Sharper than any two edged sword** indicates the role of the word of God as the instrument of judgement.
  - **Isaiah 11:4** He will treat the poor fairly, and make right decisions for the downtrodden of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and order the wicked to be executed.
  - **Ephesians 6:17** And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.
  - **Revelation 1:16** He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp double-edged sword extended out of his mouth. His face shone like the sun shining at full strength.
  - **Revelation 2:16** Therefore, repent! If not, I will come against you quickly and make war against those people with the sword of my mouth.
  - **Revelation 19:15** From his mouth extends a sharp sword, so that with it he can strike the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he stomps the winepress of the furious wrath of God, the All-Powerful.
    - **John 3:18.** God's word is not only a life giving effective word, it is also a word that brings God's judgement to those who don't believe it. Why? Because they are calling God a liar.
- **Penetrating between the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.** The word reaches down into the whole person. What does it do?
- **Judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart.** The background to this is the warning to avoid "an evil, unbelieving heart".
  - The penetrating function of the word is its activity of judging the heart. As God's oath to Israel indicates, those who hear God's word are confronted with the God who is "judge of all" (12:23).

Vs13, the perspective shift to that of a creature when confronted with the two-edged sword. The perspective of every creature before God's word is described using 3 parallel terms.

- In the presence of God's word they are not **hidden**, they are **naked** and **(exposed) laid bare**. The word of exposes the innermost parts of the human body. **Laid bare** is a term that means literally "to grab the neck".
  - Kretzmann - The figure used by the inspired writer at this point is that of a sacrificial animal whose head was bent back and then cut open, exposing the interior to the inspection of the priest. The person who fatuously believes that he is able to keep some transgression, some sinful condition hidden before the eyes of God and the penetrating power of His Word, is deceiving himself. No man may forget for any length of time that there will be a final reckoning, at which time all the hypocrisy and deceit practised by men will be exposed and laid bare in all its hideous nakedness.
    - The word of God uncovers and judges the listeners, leaving them defenceless and prostrate before the eyes of the one to whom **we must give account**. Logos is used twice, God's word (logos) and account (logos). The author is suggesting that God's word (logos) demands a human account (logos). Later the author is going to say "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31).
      - This puts the readers under a different word/reputation than society. They are Christians who are reproached by the world. They have a bad word from the world. The temptation to leave the community and go back into the world is strong. The author he puts them under a different word/reputation. It puts them under the word of God. ==> listeners can bear the reproach of society knowing that God's word is the highest word.
        - The word of God the community of believers have received has placed them in a situation where they now need to respond to it. God's oath to Israel not only stands as a stern warning to them who dismiss it, but also as a promise to those who believe it. **God's word is**

**speaking to them today.**