

Hebrews 4:1-13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 4 verses 1 to 13. 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.

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. For we who have believed entered 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, 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.

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again 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.

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

[1 : 19] Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. 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.

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. The author of Hebrews presents the experience of the Christians to whom he is writing, in terms of the experience of the generation of the children of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus.

Like the Israelites, they are in a realm between realms, no longer in Egypt, but not yet having entered into the rest of the awaited promise. They must faithfully persevere.

Hebrews chapter 4 is part of an argument that the writer has been developing since the preceding chapter, expounding Psalm 95 verses 7 to 11 and exhorting the people in terms of it.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massa in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

[2 : 30] 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.

As Paul does in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, he encourages the hearers of the epistle to consider themselves in terms of the experience of Israel, learning from their cautionary example.

All of the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, but on account of their unbelief, an entire generation perished in the wilderness before entering into the land, into the rest that God had promised them.

The people to whom Hebrews is written are the people of Christ, who is greater than Moses. Moses was the one who led the Israelites, and they need to learn from the failures of the people of Moses.

If Hebrews chapter 3 mostly looks back to the cautionary example of the wilderness generation of the Israelites, reading the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Numbers chapter 14 and the judgment that came upon them, Hebrews chapter 4 focuses upon looking forward to the rest promised to us, and reads the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Genesis chapter 2 verses 1 to 3, where God first establishes the Sabbath.

[3 : 44] In chapter 4 verse 1, the fear is repeated, not so much in terms of rebellion and punishment as it was earlier, but in terms of missing out on promise. As in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, the point is strengthened by heightening the awareness of an analogy between the experience of the Christians that are being addressed in the epistle and the experience of Israel.

Good news! A gospel came to Israel, just as it had come in their days. However, the good news of the rest of the promised land that the Israelites received did them no good, as they failed to grasp hold of it by faith.

The seed of the word fell on poor soil. True faith effectively receives the promise of God, responds with obedience, and holds fast to him. Those who believe do enter into the promised rest, the rest that is testified to, even in the warning of Psalm 95 verse 11.

That rest is God's own Sabbath rest. It's established when he first created the world. At this point, he's moving from the unbelief of the wilderness generation that we should learn from and focusing upon the promise that is still held out to us.

Psalm 95's mention of rest was not merely about the promised land of Canaan being offered to the wilderness generation. It looked beyond that to entering into the fullness of God's Sabbath rest, the rest that is described in Genesis chapter 2.

[5 : 08] This movement from the immediate promise of entry into the land to promise of entry into a greater, a more fundamental, and more permanent rest is already anticipated in the Psalm, which takes the historical statement made to the wilderness generation and addresses it in the present to those singing and hearing the Psalm.

They are expected to recognize that behind the historic rest of the land promised to Israel is a greater rest. The very fact that entering God's rest is spoken of as it is in Psalm 95 implies something that is still open for us.

God promised that people would one day enter into his rest, a promise that looks all the way back to Genesis chapter 2, where God rested from his work in creation on the Sabbath day.

This promise remains. It's a fact testified to by the word today within Psalm 95 from David's day.

This clearly demonstrates that even though Joshua brought them into the land, this did not achieve full entry into God's rest.

Canaan wasn't the great Sabbath for which they had been waiting. Even as they enjoyed the land of Canaan, Israel recognized that they were sojourners and pilgrims awaiting a greater homeland. Hebrews chapter 11 verses 13 to 16 and 39 to 40 say, These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

[6 : 36] For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. And all these, though, commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect.

This notion is not novel to the New Testament. Leviticus chapter 25, verse 23 declares, The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me. Even when settled in the land, Israel still hasn't truly arrived at rest and their true homeland.

Consequently, there remains a Sabbath rest for us to look forward to and to strive to enter as the people of God, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The heroes of Hebrews faced the same danger as the Israelites of the wilderness generation. If they didn't strive to enter into God's rest, they could fall short through disobedience, like the Israelites.

[7 : 48] The word of the living God is itself living and powerful to discern and to test the thoughts and intentions of the heart. As God speaks, he exposes hearts. Every creature is naked and exposed in God's sight, to him to whom we must give account.

Faced with the wonderful continued promise of rest, the fearful risk of falling short of it and the unmasking power of the word of God, we must respond to that dividing word with faith, holding on firmly to the promise of sharing in God's Sabbath and entering into it.

A question to consider, where in the Old Testament might we see a connection between God's rest on the Sabbath day and his work of bringing Israel into the land?