

Hebrews 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 4 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 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, 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. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

[1 : 23] 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. Since then we have a great high priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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 having entered into the rest of the awaited promise, and they must faithfully persevere.

[2 : 35] Hebrews chapter 4 is part of an argument that the writer has been developing since the previous 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.

For forty years I loathed that generation and said, there 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 the Apostle Paul does in 1 Corinthians 10, the author of Hebrews encourages the hearers of his epistle to consider themselves in terms of the experience of Israel, learning from that cautionary example.

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

[3 : 38] 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 14 and the judgment upon that generation, Hebrews 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.

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 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 own 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 that word fell upon poor soil. True faith effectively receives the promise of God, responds with obedience, and holds fast to him, and they failed to do that.

[4 : 54] Those who believe do enter into the promised rest, the rest that is testified to, even in the warning of Psalm 95 verse 11. The rest is God's own Sabbath rest, which was established when he first created the world.

At this point, he is 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, he is arguing, wasn't 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 described in Genesis chapter 2, that we might rest from our labours just as God rested from his.

The movement from the immediate promise of entry into the land, to promise of entry into a greater, a more fundamental, and a 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 time to those singing and hearing the Psalm.

They are expected to recognise 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 that there is something that is still held open for us.

[6 : 16] God promised that his people would one day enter into his rest, and this promise looks all the way back to Genesis chapter 2, when God rested from his work in creation on the Sabbath day.

He equips man to engage in work within the creation, and the expectation is that man will also enjoy rest when that is completed. The promise remains, a fact testified to by the word today within Psalm 95, which the author of Hebrews sees as that's referring to David's own day.

So it's obviously continuing beyond the age of Joshua. This clearly demonstrates that even though Joshua brought them into the land, this didn't achieve full entry into God's rest.

Canaan wasn't the great Sabbath for which they were waiting. Even as they enjoyed the land of Canaan, Israel recognised that they were sojourners and pilgrims awaiting a greater homeland.

In Hebrews chapter 11, verses 13 to 16 we read, 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.

[7 : 26] 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 in verses 39 and 40 of that chapter, And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God has provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect.

Now the notion that the promised land wasn't their full homeland and rest is already something that we can see within the Old Testament. Leviticus chapter 25 verse 26 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 then, Israel still hasn't truly attained to rest and their true homeland. Consequently, there remains a Sabbath rest for us to look forward to, and to strive to enter into 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 before them.

[8 : 52] The word of the living God is itself living and powerful. It discerns and tests the thoughts and intentions of the heart. As God speaks, he exposes hearts.

Every creature is naked and exposed in God's sight, in the sight of him to whom we must give account. So 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.

The final three verses of this chapter are the transition into the chapters that follow, concerning the priesthood of Christ. Jesus, the Son of God, has passed through the heavens and sat down at God's right hand.

He has gone in advance of us as our great high priest, completing his sacrifice and entering into rest. His work completed. However, despite his character as the great champion that goes before us, he has entered into the same struggle with temptation that we face.

The temptation here isn't so much with sin as we tend to see it. It's not sin as such, it's the struggle with temptation to draw back from calling, the failure to persevere through suffering to the end of this mission that's been set before us.

[10 : 16] Despite being tempted to divert from the pain of the cross, Jesus endured the pain and the shame and has entered into the glorious rest of God as the high priest and the leader of his people.

This is an assurance to us that we will enter too. We must faithfully follow Jesus and look to him. Through him, we can also draw near to God's very throne, which is a throne of grace to us, a place where we will find aid when we need it and from where we will discover the strength that we need to persevere and receive the promise of rest that God holds out to us.

On the cross, Jesus declared, it is finished. And on Holy Saturday, Jesus rested in the tomb. In the original creation, God finished his labours and rested from them on the Sabbath.

Holy Saturday is a sort of conclusion. It's the closure of the story of an old world. On the first day of a new week, a new creation would be born in the resurrection of our Saviour.

But on Holy Saturday, that had not yet arrived. The resting place of Christ was the dread darkness of the tomb, a prison, not a promised land.

[11 : 27] The rest of that terrible Saturday seems like a hollow parody of God's promised rest. But yet, in entering the realm of death, Christ is able to open it up and to release its prisoners.

As the first fruits of the resurrection, the firstborn of the dead, Christ overcomes the barrenness of the cold tomb and makes it a fruitful womb.

Thereafter, the tomb is a passage into rest. We rest in peace so that we might rise in glory to the glorious rest of God that Psalm 95 held out to us in promise.

In Revelation chapter 14 verse 13 we read, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.