

## Hebrews Study Session 7 - Chapter 4

When Stephen Langton, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury, divided the Bible into chapters in 1227 A.D., he did a lousy job when it came to Hebrews, especially between chapters 3 & 4. It should be the same chapter as the author is still making the same point he's been making since the beginning of chapter 3 - mainly that faithfulness to God is one of the hallmarks of the genuine Christian life. Both Jesus and Moses were faithful. The wilderness generation was faithless. Now the author moves on with encouragement and warning. While the purposes of God are not frustrated or negated due to the faithlessness of old Israel, Christians are warned not to be complacent in their faith either. Yet on the other hand, the promised rest of God remains open for God's people to enter. While we touched on the idea of rest last week, this week we're going to dig in deep and as just a preview, we're going to see that this "rest" mentioned here is the ultimate gift of God and something to avoid missing at all costs.

This chapter is divided into three sections. 1) There is a rest available for God's people, 2) Christians are encouraged to enter into this rest, & 3) Our confidence and foundational hope for entering God's rest.

To fully understand this passage there are two big questions we must answer correctly.

- 1) What is the meaning of this rest mentioned in this chapter?
- 2) When does this rest happen?

### I. There is a rest available for God's people [Read Hebrews 4:1-3]

The author transitions from the unfaithfulness of the wilderness generation to his current audience. He opens up with a warning. The word "fear" is "phobeo" which is where we get our word "phobia" from. It can mean anything from frightened or alarmed to awe or reverence. Notice, the author includes himself in the warning. It is a general warning that actually applies to everyone - all humans.

The word "promise" is key to understanding this passage. There is a promise from God that He has a rest which is available for His people. The word "remain" refers to something that is dropped and left behind. In other words, God's promised rest was left behind by the wilderness generation but is still open for believers to enter. However, the author warns of a possibility that some may "come short" of the promise. "Come short" is the phrase to mean that one arrives too late for an event, to fall behind not reach the goal or finish line.

Q: What was the oath that God made that was brought up in chapter 3? (*that the wilderness generation would not enter His rest*) This will become important when we get to v.3

Q: Why was the wilderness generation unable to enter God's rest? (*3:19 - unbelief*)

Q: According to last week's study, what was the definition of "unbelief" as the author uses it in Hebrews? (*refusal to believe what God says*)

Q: What does the author say is the reason that fear or alarm might be justified? (*that some might come short of the rest of God*)

Q: Is the author accusing anyone in his contemporary congregation of missing out on the rest of God? (*no*)

Q: What word does the author use in v.1 to let us know that he is not accusing anyone of missing out on the rest of God? (*seem - by their outward behavior and desire to return to Judaism, they appear to not be saved. This word "seem" actually is used as an encouragement to the listeners who might be fearful of missing God's rest. He doesn't want them to think that since the wilderness generation failed to enter into God's rest, they will assume that they will fail to enter as well.*)

Before proceeding, we need to have a conversation concerning the salvation of other people.

Q: How do we know another person is saved or lost? (*expect multiple answers, allow brainstorming*)

Q: Can we know for sure that someone else is saved? If so, how? (*we can't know for certain*)

Q: Why can we not know for certain if someone is saved or not? (*we can't see their heart - only God can. Their behavior is all we can know for sure because that's the only thing that is external and visible to us. Their true identity is an inner reality something only God can see and know for sure*)

When it comes to the salvation of another person, we cannot judge definitively. We can only judge what we see which is outer behavior and not inner reality. The problem is that we as humans are not 100% consistent. Our behavior does not always match our identity. Lost people can act kind or with goodness towards others while those who are saved can sin. Both are examples of being hypocritical of our true nature - either of sin or Christ.

Remember that Hebrews was written/preached under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, there is a huge nugget of truth for us today in dealing with people as ministers of the gospel. This man had a great deal of pastoral love and concern for these Christians. Here's what we're going to see in Hebrews as we proceed. The author walks a very fine line on this issue and does so masterfully as led by the Spirit and his pastoral heart. He will never accuse any of these Christians of being lost. He knows he cannot see their heart. He only sees their behavior and of late, that behavior is becoming more and more inconsistent with their Christian profession. He invites these people to examine the condition of their own hearts. He makes the warning that those who are lost will not enter God's rest because of unbelief like the wilderness generation. It's a statement of fact, not an accusation as it's true of all humanity. The author expects that these people are genuinely saved based on their past behavior being consistent with their Christian profession (this is held by the grammar and wording throughout chapter 2 & 3) yet wants them to see the inconsistency in their current behavior and plans (to go back to Judaism to avoid persecution).

The problem is that if we consider/judge/treat people who sin as if they are lost, then we do them a grave injustice. We may place a wedge between them and God in that we may cause them to doubt their salvation. Even if they repent of any sins in the present, they may still carry the doubt of whether or not their repentance was sincere and lead them to carry that doubt with

them so that they will lack confidence in their faith - maybe for the rest of their lives. There is a very fine line that we must walk when dealing with the salvation of others, as this author demonstrated for us.

Q: Based upon this, how should we react to a person we consider a believer when they behave inconsistently with the Christian faith? (*encourage them and lead them to see the inconsistency between their current behavior and their profession*)

Q: How should we pray for such a person? (*various responses*)

Q: What did the ancient Israelites and the original audience of Hebrews have in common (v.2)? (*they both heard the good news - it was preached to both generations*)

Q: Why didn't it profit the wilderness generation? (*hearing was not united with faith*)

Q: What do you think the author means when he says "it was not united by faith in those who heard"? (*It is not enough to hear the good news. One must act on it as well.*)

**[Read James 2:17-18]** (*James is not speaking of faith for salvation but rather faith from salvation that leads to good works. (Eph. 2:10) The author of Hebrews is speaking of saving faith but that this faith should be able to be seen by others - and it isn't*)

The word "united" (NASB) means to commingle, to mix together or temper with. The message of the good news must commingle or be tempered with faith which leads to action and righteous behavior on our part. Think of how metals are tempered together - they are melted under heat and then they are commingled so that they become one piece of metal - something new. This is how faith in the preached Word and actions become united - by fire or hardships in our lives.

Q: According to v.3, who enters God's rest? (*those who believe the good news*)

This is actually a great encouragement to those in the original congregation. The word "have believed" is in the perfect tense, meaning that they believed in the past and their belief was completed in back in the past. They do not need to dredge up more belief to move forward but to rather continue to move forward in the faith they already have. Also, the word "enter" is emphatic and present meaning that it is certain that those who are in a right relationship with God are already entering God's rest. God's promise is and will be honored.

Now we need to tie up a loose end. There is a promise and an oath are work. God made a promise that those who are in a right relationship with Him will enter His rest. God also took an oath that those who are not in a right relationship with Him will never enter His rest. Both of these, the promise and the oath are unchangeable.

Canaan was only a mere symbol of God's rest. Just as certain as they did not enter the rest, believers will enter it and are already entering it. However God's rest has been available since the foundation of the world.

**[Read Hebrews 4:4-10]**

Q: What exactly did God rest from on the 7<sup>th</sup> day? *(From creating more things. He was still active in His creation. Since everything He made in the first six days was very good, there was nothing left to create so He rested from creating.)*

Q: Why did God rest on the 7<sup>th</sup> day? What was His emotional state of being on the 7<sup>th</sup> day? *(He was satisfied with His accomplishment, of what He had done)*

Q: When did God resume creating things? *(He didn't, it was completed on the 6<sup>th</sup> day.)*

Q: How long was the 7<sup>th</sup> day then? *(It is still continuing. God is still resting from His creative work on the first six days as it was fully finished. The important note is that this rest is on-going and perpetual now.)*

Q: What does this tell us about God's rest for believers? *(that it is linked with the satisfaction of being completed and done - there is no longer any need for any more labors to gain salvation)*

The author sums up his arguments to this point in that God rested and by implication that rest is open to any who would enter it. Yet, Israel didn't enter it and divine judgment fell upon them. "Enter" at the end of v.6 in reference to the wilderness generation is aorist. Their inability to enter was the result of a decision they made in the past that they carried (disobedience) into their present (which was the remainder of their lives). Notice that the author is only considering two generations: the wilderness generation and the generation contemporary to himself.

In v.7 the word "fixes" means to mark out a boundary. It is present tense meaning that God, as long as there is a today, is marking out that boundary for believers. As long as there is a "today" the way is open for people to enter God's rest.

### **[Read II Corinthians 6:1-2]**

Q: What does the author's use of the word "today" mean for us? *(that God's promises stand for all who are alive to hear them and act upon them in faith - this rest is always available to people as long as they are alive)*

Here's the progression of the author's logic concerning God's rest when dealing with the current generation.

- 1) David lived long after those who God originally spoke the promise of rest.
- 2) God, through David, again issued an implied promise through Psalm 95 that the people of God may enter His rest by NOT following the pattern of disobedience found in the wilderness generation.
- 3) God gave this promise of rest through the psalmist because the physical entrance into the land under the leadership of Joshua did not fulfill the original promise.
- 4) The universally relevant Word of God, issued in the form of Psalm 95, shows that a Sabbath rest still exists for the people of God, who are under obligation to "hear His voice" in the time frame of "today".
- 5) V.10 concludes this portion of the author's exposition by reflecting on the interpretive relevance of Genesis 2 for the Psalm 95 text: The essence of entering God's rest means resting from one's own work just as God did on the seventh day. Once a person is saved, they have

entered God's rest and don't need to strive any longer to earn God's rest or to keep or obey any religious rituals or laws in order to have God's acceptance and thus His rest.

The name Joshua is the Old Testament form for the New Testament name Jesus. They both mean "God saves". In the Old Testament, Joshua brought the Israelites into the Promised Land. Yet it is Jesus who brings His people into God's rest. The rest Joshua brought the people into was not God's rest. The other thing about invoking the name of Joshua tells us a little more about the author's meaning of rest. Joshua was part of the wilderness generation. He wandered for 40 years and like Caleb, survived and was allowed to enter the Canaan. For their earliest days, the Hebrew people were mostly nomadic. One of the ways the word "rest" is used in the Hebrew language is that it means to settle down or colonize or as we'd say "put down roots" in an area. So now the people of God were to cease from their wandering around spiritually in order to settle down in God's promise.

In v.9 the term "Sabbath rest" is used. This is the only place in Scripture where this term is used. There were no words available to him to describe God's rest to the degree the Spirit was impressing it upon him so he coined a new phrase - Sabbath rest.

Q: What happened on the 7<sup>th</sup> day after creation? (*God rested*)

Q: What was the Sabbath like for the Old Testament Jews? (*a day of rest and contemplation and worshiping the Lord*)

However, the word the author uses is from the verb form of the Sabbath which means "to celebrate the Sabbath with praise". Thus the idea of God's rest is linked with the celebration of the Sabbath here.

### **[Read Leviticus 16:29-31]**

While there are many priests in the Old Testament system of the Law, there is only one high priest. Besides the special garments of the high priest, there is only one function that the high priest performs that none of the other priests perform. The high priest, on the day of atonement, sacrificed the offering for the sins of all the nation and then entered into the holy of holies in God's presence to sprinkle the blood of the offering before the Lord.

V.10 shows indicates that believers have already entered the rest of God to some degree and thus are in some way at a state of rest already. It's got the same "already-not yet" quality as the kingdom of God and Jesus' exaltation. To some degree it's already here and active and yet there is another aspect of it that waits for a future time to be consummated and fulfilled.

Now let's try to answer the big two questions of this passage.

Q: How do you see the author defining God's rest? (*it is a state of not engaging in works, it is a celebration of praise to God, it is a place of being with God, it is no longer wandering around spiritually but settling down forever with God, it is the reward for those who unite the good news with actions by faith, there can be other ideas*)

Q: When does the rest of God take place? (*it has started now but will not fully be consummated until after we die*)

Q: What implications does knowing that you can experience the rest of God now have for you? (*you are saved and don't need to do anything further for it to happen, you can rest in Christ's work for you, you have been fully recreated by God, and other ideas*)

So in the already-but-not-yet quality to God's rest, believers are already experiencing the joy and peace of the knowledge of being fully forgiven of all their sins and being fully accepted by God - that their salvation is full and secure. While believers do not need to work for their salvation (no one does - Ephesians 2:8-9) the Spirit within them leads them to do good works for the Lord on behalf of His kingdom. However, the fulness of God's rest comes after this life. At that time believers will also cease from all their labors related to this world and will enjoy unbroken, unending, fellowship with God in person. This is why the writer of Hebrews says that no one should miss the rest of God for the world (literally).

## II. Christians are encouraged to enter into this rest. [Read Hebrews 4:11-13]

Here's one of the greatest oxymorons of Scripture in v.11. We must be diligent or strive to enter the rest. The word "diligent" means to be speedy about something, to make an earnest, prompt, or eager response to something. So this is the author spurring the audience to action - in this case to check the status of their salvation by making sure their actions are lining up with their profession of Christ. Do not follow the wilderness generations' example.

### **[Read I Corinthians 10:1-13]**

This is Paul's use of the wilderness generation for the same sort of teaching example but for the Corinthian church. (Which for those of you keeping score is another point in the "Paul wrote the book" column...just saying.)

Q: In the I Corinthians passage, what is the reason Paul said these examples were handed down to us was? (*for our instruction - for our ability to see the difference between genuine faith and faithlessness.*)

Following the example of disobedience of the wilderness generation (again) the author reminded the listeners of the permanence and power of the Word of God. One scholar called Hebrews 4:12-13 "a rhapsody on God's penetrating Word."

**[Read Psalm 95:7]** - This forms the basis for author's comments on the Word. For the Old Testament saint, the Word of God was a creative, administrating and judging force. In the New Testament the Word is often symbolized by a sword. (Ephesians 6:12, Revelation 1:16, 2:12 and 19:15)

Here in vv. 12-13 the Word of God is a powerful word of discernment that penetrates even the darkest corners of human existence. It is called "living" - as opposed to some dead word of antiquity. It is called "active" means it was effective in carrying out God's intentions.

The same word that brought the universe into existence is the same word that builds our faith. It is transformational.

The fact that the word cuts to the division between one's soul and spirit means that it cuts through and past the surface religion one claims to possess to the inner spiritual reality of a man. The Word is able to judge both thoughts and intentions - mental and emotional activity of the heart. But not to leave the outer behavior alone - the Word also cuts or judges between the righteous and unrighteous of what we can observe. The Word is able to see both the actions and the attitudes that motivate the action so that everything is properly judged by God. V.13 is just a repeat of the same thought in different words. Nothing can be hidden from God's eyes. There are some interesting words in this verse.

a) "uncovered" - nude or naked - used to describe a bare kernel of wheat or a body without clothing. What you see is what you get idea.

b) "laid bare" - a wrestling term used to describe grabbing an opponent's by the throat and exposing it by bending the opponents head back. This was a move done to prove victory in the sport. In other words, God is always victorious in seeing in us what is really there.

Q: In what way would this be encouraging to the believers receiving this letter? *(It lets them know that God knows the truth of their condition. If they are truly saved, then they are already in God's rest. If not, they still have not missed the boat.)*

### III. Our confidence and foundational hope for entering God's rest [Read Hebrews 4:14-16]

Remember that the main slant of the author is that these people are saved and they just need to be encouraged to remember their faith in Christ and how Christ is better than anything Judaism has to offer. He's been telling them that certainly they have nothing in common with the faithless wilderness generation, so quit acting like them. Now he turns to let them know why they can have rock-solid confidence of experiencing God's rest.

Q: Why is it important that Jesus is called the "high priest" in this passage? *(He offered Himself as the sacrifice for everyone's sins)*

Notice that the author brings together Jesus, the humanity of the Lord, and Son of God, His divine nature in this verse. The Jews had a belief in many different levels of heaven. In this case, Jesus has been to the heavenly throne and thus has been triumphant over sin, death and this world. Since this is the case about Jesus, we are to hold firmly to our confession - that of the gospel. Live out your faith instead of living like one of those people from the wilderness generation. While the phrase "hold fast" is used 47 times in the New Testament and can mean to grasp someone (like Jesus grasping the hand of a sick person, etc.) here it means grasping tightly to their Christian profession.

Q: What is it about Jesus that makes grasping tightly our faith possible? (v.15 -16)

Jesus shared in our experience of temptation but not in our experience of sin. It is said that the full force of temptation while we don't. Those who give into temptation don't know the full force of the temptation because they give into sin, which is the shortcut out of temptation. However, Jesus, who didn't ever give into sin, had to endure the full force of every temptation

hurled at Him.

Q: Why is it important to us that Jesus can sympathize with our weakness? *(so that He can help us overcome them in an understanding manner)*

Q: What does knowing Jesus as the great high priest give us in prayer? *(confidence)*

“Draw near” in v.16 is present tense which means we need to be drawing near perpetually or continually. It’s a continuous action for the believer. Instead of a high priest, removed from the average person, entering the holy of holies one day a year, believers are now called to enter into God’s presence constantly and in a confident manner knowing the God wants us before Him.

Q: What are the two things Christians can receive from Jesus by drawing near to the throne of grace? *(mercy and grace)*

Q: What is the difference between mercy and grace? *(mercy is not receiving just punishment for something bad you did while grace is receiving a good gift even though you didn’t do anything to deserve it)*

Q: Why do we need both mercy and grace? *(give time for answers)*

The phrase “in our time of need” this is the only place in Scripture where this phrase is used. It literally means “for well-timed help”, help that is on-time and not late in arriving. Notice that it doesn’t mean it’s help on our time but on time with God’s schedule. This last section is really like a big rhetorical question for the wavering believers and could be asked, “*What can hold believers back from considering Jesus for all the help we need in this life and the one to come?*” Of course the answer would be nothing!

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?