

Entering into God's Rest

Scripture: Hebrews 4:1–13

Code: 1609

INTRODUCTION

Chapter four continues the warning to unbelievers that began in Hebrews 3:7. Throughout this section, the writer of Hebrews illustrates his point with the nation of Israel. Israel left Egypt, but was stopped short of the Promised Land by their failure to believe God. An entire generation never entered the full rest of Canaan. The warning is not to do what Israel did, but to enter God's rest through faith in Jesus Christ.

A. The Availability of Rest

The rest of Canaan pictures the spiritual rest that comes by faith in Christ. God has a rest that is far greater than Canaan--eternal rest available by faith in Christ.

B. The Definitions of Rest

The dictionary gives the following definitions of rest:

1. To cease from action

The word rest means to cease from labor or exertion. Applying that to God's rest, it means no more self-effort--no more trying to please God by your fleshly works. Rest involves cessation from legalistic activity; we rest in free grace.

2. To be free from worry

Some people are never at peace because they're always bothered about something. To rest means to be free from whatever disturbs you, or causes you to worry. It means in this sense to be quiet, still, peaceful, and free from guilt. To enter God's rest means to be at peace with God--to possess the perfect peace that God gives. It means to be free from guilt, because our sin is forgiven.

3. To be settled

God's rest is the kind of rest where a man is established in Christ, and does not run from philosophy to philosophy. He is no longer blown about by every wind of doctrine, but is rooted and grounded in the truth of Christ.

4. To be secure

To enter God's rest is to be secure, having absolute trust and confidence in God's care for you.

5. To have something to lean on

To enter God's rest means that you can lean on Him. You can rely on God for support, trusting Him to supply all your needs.

There are two final definitions of rest not found in a dictionary. The Bible speaks of rest in the millennial kingdom and rest for eternity in heaven. That's what God is promising and that's what He calls rest. Many people fail to believe in God's promises, and thus do not enter into rest because of their unbelief.

I. THE AVAILABILITY OF REST (v. 1)

"Let us, therefore, fear lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it."

A. The Forfeiture of Rest

"Therefore" takes us back to what the writer has said previously about Israel. The unbelieving, fence-sitting Jews whom the writer is addressing had reason to fear after being reminded of Israel's forfeiture of rest. Unbelief brings about fearful consequences.

Scripture indicates that Christians don't need to fear. Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). Paul told Timothy that "God hath not given us the spirit of fear" (2 Tim. 1:7). However unbelievers have reason to fear. It's not a trifling thing to fool around with the rest that God offers, "for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).

B. The Promise of Rest

1. To Israel

Verse 1 says, "A promise being left for us." The "us" is a reference to the Jewish people. What the writer of Hebrews wants to make clear is that when Israel fell because of unbelief, that didn't mean the end of God's rest for them. When Israel failed in the wilderness, God didn't forsake them and start over with another people.

Is God Finished with Israel?

Many Jewish people who had heard the gospel were fearful that Israel had forfeited any possibility of entering God's rest because of what they had done to their Messiah. Many people today teach that when Israel rejected Jesus, they forfeited their right to God's blessing. They believe God is no longer dealing with Israel, but only with the church. Therefore they conclude there will be no restoration of

Israel, and no kingdom for Israel. That position is known as amillennialism, and is widely held today. However Hebrews 4:1 says that the promise has not been removed from Israel.

One of the great passages in the Bible that indicates God is not finished with Israel is in Acts 3. Peter is preaching and says in verses 14-15, "Ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of life." It seems from those verses that Israel must have forfeited everything. However in verses 25- 26 Peter goes on to say, "Ye are the sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up His Son, Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities." Even though the Jewish people had killed their Messiah, they were still heirs of the unconditional covenant that God made with Abraham. Following the resurrection of Christ and the birth of the church, the Jewish people were the first to be evangelized. God did not write off Israel. Paul says in Romans 11:1, "Hath God cast away his people [Israel]? God forbid." And so the writer of Hebrews affirms there is a promise left to Israel. Rest is still available.

The phrase "any of you should seem to come short of it" at the end of Hebrews 4:1 could be more accurately translated "lest you think you have come too late to enter into the rest of God." The author is telling his Jewish audience not to think it's too late to enter God's rest.

2. To the church

a) By exercising faith in Christ

There is a perfect rest available to us through faith in Christ. In Matthew 7:26-27 Jesus says, "Every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house and it fell; and great was the fall of it." Jesus warns against missing grace by failing to exercise faith in Him.

b) By acknowledging our sin to God

Some people fear they are too great a sinner to be forgiven, but that's not true. People who acknowledge their sin are the kind of people God likes to deal with. Paul says of himself in 1 Timothy 1:15, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." You may be too much of a sinner to deserve salvation--no one deserves salvation--but you're not too much of a sinner for the grace of God to handle (Rom. 5:6-8, 20; Matt. 9:12-13).

The Littlest Awful Sinner

I remember my dad telling me about a five-year-old boy who came into a prayer room after church service and said, "I want to receive Christ." The counselors told him he could pray and ask Jesus into his heart, and this is how he began his prayer: "God, I don't know if You can save an awful sinner like me but if You can I want You to." Yes, God can save even an awful sinner like that! (My Dad had to bite his lip to keep from cracking up!) You're never too far gone for God to deal with you. If your heart

is tender and you're sensitive to what the Spirit of God is saying, now is the time to listen to His call. God's rest is still available.

II. THE BASIS OF REST (vv. 2-7)

A. Personal Faith (vv. 2-5)

"For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them; but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. For we who have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest; although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he spoke in a certain place of the seventh day in this way, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works. And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest."

"Gospel" (v. 2) should be translated "good news." That word has a specific connotation in the New Testament, but here refers to the good news about rest preached in the Old Testament.

1. The necessity of faith

Although the good news about God's rest was preached to Israel, it did them no good because they failed to believe it. Some people have the mistaken idea that they can become a Christian through osmosis just by being in the church. However, hearing the gospel doesn't mean anything unless you believe it with your whole heart. It's tragic to realize that hell is going to be populated with people who will say to Jesus, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out demons? And in thy name done many wonderful works?" only to hear Him reply, "I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matt. 7:22-23).

a) The faith that doesn't save

This was an important message for the author's audience to hear because they thought they were safe because they had the law as an heritage. Paul says to such people in Romans 2:25, "Circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law; but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision." Circumcision, Paul says, is meaningless unless you keep the law.

If a police officer stops you for speeding, you could have the entire Vehicle Code memorized and it wouldn't help you-- you'd still get the ticket. Merely having the necessary information does not help unless you act on it; in fact, it makes you all the more responsible. Unless the information you have is mixed with faith, it profits you nothing.

b) The faith that does save

(1) 1 Thessalonians 2:13

"For this cause also we thank God without ceasing because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it, not as the word of men but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."

(2) 2 Thessalonians 2:13

"We are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth."

(3) James 1:22

"Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

2. The cruciality of faith

Hebrews 4:3 tells us the destiny of those who exercise faith and those who don't. The first part of the verse says, "We who have believed do enter into rest." Note it doesn't say we are on the way to rest; it states we are in it. Every Christian is in God's rest. That is just another way of saying we are saved.

God says of those who fail to exercise faith, "As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest." A better translation of that last phrase is, "They shall not enter into my rest." That expresses God's attitude toward those who do not exercise faith. To fail to believe the truth is to forfeit God's rest for all eternity.

3. The rest of faith

a) Rest defined

In verse 3 God defines the rest as "my rest." God's rest is not a rest of weariness or inactivity but of finished work. God's rest began after the sixth day of creation. After creating the universe, the earth, and all life (including man) in six literal twenty-four-hour days, God rested. His rest is described in verses 3-4: "Although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he spoke in a certain place of the seventh day in this way, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works" (cf. Gen. 2:1-2).

b) Rest forfeited

There was only one condition for Adam and Eve to remain in God's rest, and that was to believe God. However, they chose to believe Satan's lies instead and by their unbelief forfeited rest.

c) Rest recovered

The rest of the Bible records God's efforts to get man back into His rest. To do that, He had to deal with man's sin. The coming of Jesus Christ took care of the sin issue, and through the death of Christ, men may enter back into God's rest. Christ bore the sins of those who lived prior to the cross as well as those of us who live after the cross.

Verse 5 reiterates the statement of verse 3 that the unbelieving Israelites failed to enter God's rest. I believe that the people who sinned in the wilderness not only forfeited Canaan, but also forfeited the eternal life Canaan symbolized unless they exercised personal faith in God.

B. Divine Decree (v. 6)

"Seeing, therefore, it remaineth that some must enter into it, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief"

The second basis of rest is divine or sovereign decree. We are saved not only by our personal faith, but also by God's sovereign choice before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). Jesus puts both elements of salvation together in John 6 when He says, "No man can come to me, except the Father, who hath sent me, draw him" (v. 44), and "him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (v. 37). How those two doctrines can be harmonized is beyond our limited ability to understand.

Hebrews 4:6 gives us the balance to what the writer said previously in this passage regarding

personal faith. By God's sovereign decree, rest still remains. God does not design things for no purpose. Since He designed that there be a rest, He has always preserved a remnant throughout history to enjoy it. Although the way is narrow and few find it (Matt. 7:14), some do. Paul writes of Israel in Romans 11:5, "At this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace." God has selected a remnant to enter His rest, and they enter it by personal faith.

C. Immediate Action (v. 7)

"Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, Today, after so long a time, as it is said, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

The age of grace will not last forever. That's why the apostle Paul said, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). Right now is God's today. In Genesis 6:3 God says, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years." There is a limit to His patience. The pre-Flood civilization is an example of that.

"Today" refers to the day salvation is offered. The Spirit of God urges immediate action in verse 7 because today doesn't last forever. This is the day that rest is available. Don't delay and risk missing out on God's rest.

III. THE NATURE OF REST (vv. 8-10)

"If Joshua had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth, therefore, a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also has ceased from his own works, as God did from his."

A. It Is Spiritual

The rest spoken of in this passage is not the physical rest of Canaan. Verse 8 says that Joshua failed to give Israel rest, yet he took them into Canaan. The true rest comes not through a Moses, a Joshua, or even a David; it comes through Jesus Christ. Many cults promise happiness, health, and wealth in this life, but that's never the emphasis of the Bible. Many of God's people are busy, hardworking, or even afflicted with physical suffering, yet they are in God's salvation rest.

B. It Is for Israel

The term "people of God" may refer generally to anyone who knows God, but in this passage context reveals that it refers specifically to Israel, the people of God in the Old Testament. God's rest is promised to Israel and I believe that He will not be finished with them until they come into His rest.

C. It Is Future

There is a final rest coming when we will cease from our work. In Revelation 14:13 John says, "I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from

henceforth. Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors." I believe Hebrews 4:10 is a reference to that final day when we cease from our labors and enter into the presence of Jesus Christ.

IV. THE URGENCY OF REST (vv. 11-13)

"Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God is living, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight, but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do."

The Greek word translated "labor" means "to make haste" or "to work diligently." The passage is not teaching that you can work your way to salvation, but that you diligently seek to enter God's rest by faith.

A. The Power of the Word

The writer warns us to be diligent to enter into God's rest because the Word of God is living and powerful. It will pierce you to the depths of your heart to determine whether you are a genuine believer or not. Although you may claim to have faith in Jesus, if your faith is not real, the word of God will reveal the emptiness of your profession. Several passages in the book of Revelation illustrate the Word of God used as an instrument of judgment. In Revelation 1:16 we read, "Out of his [Jesus'] mouth went a sharp two-edged sword." In Revelation 2:16 Jesus warns the church at Pergamum to "repent, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." Revelation 19:15, 21 refer to the Lord's smiting the nations with the sword of His mouth. Those passages illustrate that the Word of God is used not only in saving men, but in judging them as well.

B. The Penetration of the Word

The Greek word translated "sword" (*machaira*) does not refer to a large sword, but to a dagger. Like a small knife that can be thrust with accuracy, God's word penetrates to the innermost part of a man. "Discerner" is a translation of the Greek word *kritikos*, from which we get the English word *critic*. The Word of God analyzes a man's thoughts, motives, and attitudes. It penetrates all disguises and lays bare the soul.

The Greek word translated "opened" in verse 13 had two connotations in ancient times. It was used of a wrestler who seized his opponent by the throat so that he couldn't move. In such a situation, the two opponents would be face to face. The Word of God grabs us, and forces us to come face to face with God. The second use of the word was in reference the trial of a criminal. A dagger would be strapped under an accused man's chin with its point up, thus keeping him from bowing his head and forcing him to face the court. Sooner or later, all men will stand before God, whose Word will lay bare their heart and force them to face God and their own sinfulness. In light of that sobering reality, I urge you not to harden your heart.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What does the writer of Hebrews use Israel as an illustration of?
2. Give the dictionary and biblical definitions of the word rest.
3. Why do people fail to enter God's rest?
4. Does God have future plans for Israel? Support your answer with Scripture.
5. Are there some people whose sin is too great for God to forgive? Support your answer from Scripture.
6. Why was it not sufficient for Israel merely to know the truth?
7. When did God's rest begin?
8. The Bible records God's efforts to get man _____ .
9. What are the two aspects of salvation?
10. What is the point of verse 7?
11. Who are the people of God referred to in verse 9?
13. The Word of God is used not only in _____ men, but in _____ them as well.

Pondering the Principles

1. One of the blessings Christians enjoy by virtue of being in God's rest is forgiveness of sin. However many Christians fail to experience God's forgiveness in their daily lives by struggling with feelings of guilt. If doubting God's forgiveness is a problem for you or someone you know, do a Bible study on God's forgiveness, and write out your own theology of forgiveness. You might wish to use a concordance or topical Bible to help you in your research. Some of the questions you might consider are: Who does God forgive? On what basis does He forgive them? How does one obtain forgiveness? What is the extent of God's forgiveness? How does God view the person he has forgiven?
2. The rest spoken of in Hebrews 4:1-13 is a spiritual rest. God does not promise us freedom from physical suffering or hardship in this life--in fact, He warns us to expect it (Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:3; 2

Tim. 3:12). If you're discouraged because being a Christian hasn't brought you health, wealth and an easy life, meditate on Paul's instructions to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:1-10. Ask God to give you the grace to follow His way, even when it isn't the easiest way.

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