

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS AND THE REST OF GOD

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I. SETTING THE STAGE

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice,⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness,⁹ where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works¹⁰ for forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.’¹¹ As in my anger I swore, ‘They will not enter my rest.’”¹² Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.¹⁴ For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.¹⁵ As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”¹⁶ Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses?¹⁷ But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient?¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief (Heb 3:7–19).

- A. There is a rest of God that remains for us to enter—a motif that is developed in 3:7–4:16. Even so, summarily this section focuses on the importance of a believer’s journey as being a deliberate and focused progression to a divine goal.¹
- B. In these verses the author focuses on one OT text and one OT scene. The actual text in focus is a direct quotation of Ps 95, which in turn references the scene of Num 14 as an example of those who failed to enter the rest of the Promised Land due to their unbelief.

...your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness...³¹ But your little ones, who you said would become victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised.³² But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness.³³ And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness (Num 14:29, 31–33).

¹ For those interested in studying the Book of Hebrews more intently, the following is a list of resources worthy of your attention: Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989); David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews in Social-Scientific Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012); Kenneth Schenk, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Brenda Colijn, “Let Us Approach,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (39/4, Dec 1996), 571-586; Katerina Friesen, “A Sabbath Rest Remains: Finding Hope in the Face of Ecological Crisis,” *Vision* (16.1, 2015), 20-27.

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- C. This sets the stage for the author's objective in 4:1–16, where they continue this subject concerning how to enter the rest of God.

II. OVERVIEW OF AND INTRODUCTION TO OUR TEXT IN FOCUS

- A. These verses are a continuation of the theme of God's rest (4:1, 5, 6, 11 repeat the subject began in 3:11). It begins with a warning against failure to attain the promise that is still open (4:1). The failure of those in the wilderness to enter the rest is not to be characteristic of God's people (4:2–3a). Although the rest referenced in chapter 3 referred to the Promised Land, the author here explains how the rest remains open—God's promised rest is not of this earth; it is a heavenly reality that God entered on the seventh day of creation (4:3b–5). Thus, although previous recipients failed to enter it because of disobedience, there still remains a time of fulfillment, which the author, citing Ps 95:11, describes as "today" (4:6–7). Joshua did not provide it (4:8), consequently it remains open for those who seek it (4:9–11). This is followed by the author reflecting on the power of God's word, the prayers of the saints, and the superiority of Jesus's office and the new high priestly order where Jesus currently resides in the divine rest (4:12–16).
- B. Summarily, the objective of this chapter is to articulate that Jesus and his promises are greater than both the geographical Promised Land of Israel and the one who originally led them into that land (Joshua, son of Nun). The warnings of Hebrews are progressively intensifying as the writer emphasizes the way we are to walk in the New Covenant.

III. ENTERING GOD'S REST (4:1–16)

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us fear (φοβέω, "fōbeeō") that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it (4:1).

- A. The entrance of the Israelites into the Promised Land did not fulfill God's intentions for them to enter his rest (cf. Num 14:22–23). To emphasize the significance of this point, the author begins by warning the audience they need to take this subject very seriously. As clarified in 4:11, they need to be careful, so they do not come up short like those at Kardesh-Barnea (Num 14).

For indeed the 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.³ For we who have believed enter that rest... (4:2–3a)

- B. The author continues to contrast the faithful/believing (those in Christ) with the unfaithful/unbelieving (Exodus generation). Joshua and Caleb were the only two that returned from the Promised Land who believed God would give it to them. They stood alone, and thus were not "united by faith" with the other Israelites.

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- C. Nonetheless, we who believe enter God's rest. But this is not a onetime event, it is a process. As mentioned elsewhere in Hebrews, there are various aspects of a believer's progressive movement into God's presence and our identity before him (cf. 4:16; 6:1; 10:22; 12:18). It is understood as a perpetual engagement.

... just as God has said, "As in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest,'" though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. ⁴ For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." ⁵ And again in this place it says, "They shall not enter my rest" (4:3b–5).

- D. Returning to Ps 95:11, the author connects the subject of God's rest to that which transpired on the seventh day of Creation. In so doing, the definition of "rest," is defined as something that is God's (i.e., "my rest"). Consequently, we are to enter something that is his—specifically, a location and identity that is knit to God.

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (Gen 2:2–3).

Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he sets a certain day—"today"—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (4:6–7).

- E. God has designated another day—"today"—as the time to enter his rest.

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day (4:8).

- F. The divine, heavenly rest to which the author is referring cannot be referring to the rest given by Joshua in the Promised Land (cf. Deut 31:7; Josh 21:43; 22:4). Because if this had been the fulfillment, the words of the Psalmist (95:7) that appeals for us to heed God's voice "today" would be unneeded.

So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; ¹⁰ for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs (4:9–11).

- G. This is the first and only instance that the word σαββατισμός, *sabbatismōs*, "sabbath observance" is used in the NT and, for that matter, Greek literature in general. In Judaism, the Sabbath was not meant to be a time of quiet inactivity, but of worship, festive praise, and celebration.²

² Cf. e.g., *Jub* 50:9; *Ps.-Philo Lib. ant. bib.* 11:8; *2 Macc* 8:27.

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Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. ¹⁴ Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (4:12–16).

- H. It is in these final verses of the chapter that we are given insight into how we are to enter the divine rest of God. First in 4:12–13 God’s word is in focus. It is God’s word that not only creates and judges, but also cuts to the core of human identity. Access to the divine rest of God means embracing a life that allows God’s word to form, shape and identify you. Second, 4:13–16 establishes Jesus’s identity as the one who makes a way for God’s rest to be accessed. Joshua entered the Promised Land but the God-Man is seated in the heavens. We not only have a God who enjoys us in our weakness, but we also have a God who sympathizes with us because he was tempted like us. The revelation of the sympathizing High Priest gives us confidence to come before Him in our struggles and weaknesses. To this end, it is through the *Word* and *Prayer* that we are to enter the rest of God.