

## Hebrews: Laboring to Rest? (Hebrews 4:1–13)

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### Introduction

1. This portion of Hebrews seems somewhat disjointed and, as a result, has led to varied interpretations.
  - a. Some differences of interpretation derive from *doctrines* that are read into the passage.
  - b. Some differences are due to *presumptions* as to what one thinks the text should say.
  - c. The object of this message is to prove *from the text* what Paul does say in warning the Hebrew believers.
2. We titled the message as we did because this verse is one of those that is often misunderstood.
  - a. We save the verse for another week as we lay the foundation for it in its preceding verses (vv. 1–10).
  - b. Nevertheless, we give the following to set the stage for clarifying Paul’s purpose in his warning.
3. Verse 11 actually completes the sentence begun in verse 6.
  - a. The term translated “*come short*” (KJV) or “*fall*” (ESV) is derived from a root meaning “afterward” and, means, literally, “*to be a day late.*”
  - b. The events of Numbers 14 show us what it means to be a day late in entering God’s rest.

After Moses rehearsed the message of God’s judgment on their disobedience (v. 39), the next day the Israelites proceeded to go into Canaan (v. 40). Moses warned them against going because the Lord was not with them due to their disobedience. They would not prosper but would fall. Thus, Paul warns the Hebrew Christians to seek earnestly to respond correctly lest, in the delay of their not believing, they, like their forebears, find that they too were a day late.

### I. Israel’s Unique Circumstances

Observe the unique circumstances of Israel and of the Hebrew Christians.

1. Some teach that Paul is giving instruction for careless and backsliding Christians to beware lest they “*seem to come short*” of the full enjoyment of Christ’s rest.
  - a. The warning is not for such Christians who might miss out on the full spiritual potential of their Christian life.
  - b. In this case, “rest” would be defined as *communion* with the Lord, assuming that the contrast is with Israel, *as a covenant people*, missing out on God’s rest.
  - c. The fact is, Israel failed because the majority of those who came out of Egypt were *unregenerate* (Deut. 32:20), a fact demonstrated by two things: (1) their disobedience incurred God’s wrath (v. 3), and (2) their carcasses “fell” in the wilderness (Psa. 116:15).
2. The nature of Israel’s relationship to God is too often misunderstood in Christianity.
  - a. The true picture of Israel is that of a *nation* vs. the spiritual *remnant* within that nation (Rom. 9:6–8).

- b. It is a serious mistake to see the whole nation of Israel as the “people of God” because most were not a believing people (Gal. 3:28, 29).
  - c. The problem in Hebrews is that many were ready to abandon Christ to return to Judaism. In what category would they now belong?
3. Paul’s warning, then, was to test the Hebrews’ *profession of faith*, the evidence of which would be their *perseverance* in the faith (3:14; 4:1).

## II. The Nature of the Promise

Not only must we have a clear definition of Israel as contrasted with those to whom the promise was made; we must also clearly understand the nature of the *rest* promised to them.

1. We must notice, first, there are *two* Sabbath rests.
  - a. Paul addresses the creation week and God’s first resting on the seventh day to argue for *another day* (vv. 3, 4). The last phrase in verse 3 should be disconnected from the verses preceding and joined to those following. This is an explanation of *God’s rest*—from *His* works—creation rest is God’s resting from His creative work. That Sabbath was instructive, however, and was observed by Israel to show that they were both satisfied in and aware of their dependence on God. It also served as a prophetic signal of a greater rest, foreshadowing Christ and His eternal rest (Zech. 3:17). It was not *an absolute rest* because God continued to work (John 5:17), *providentially* preserving and ruling over His creation.
  - b. The future rest promised also cannot be that of Israel’s entering Canaan (v. 8). The point of showing Israel’s failure was not to argue that others may enter due to Israel’s unbelief but that unbelief led to Israel’s failure to enter. Joshua did lead another generation into Canaan, and God’s promise was fulfilled, as noted last week. Canaan rest was hard, dangerous, incomplete, and temporary due to Israel’s covenant-breaking.
2. Paul use of the former failure to show that there is a promise of another rest that is new and greater than any rest before addressed.
  - a. It is *Christ’s rest* (vv. 9, 10; Matt. 11:28, 29) both of *conscience* (forgiveness) and *soul* (through yoking with and learning of Christ).
  - b. It is *gospel* based, dependent on faith and obedience.
  - c. It is *future*—a certain day—“*today, after so long a time*” (Psa. 95:7; Acts 13:20).
  - d. The Scriptures use an entirely different word in verse 9 from that employed previously (vv. 1, 3). The Christian Hebrews had abandoned Judaism for Christ. Paul is informing them that they haven’t given up anything, but they have gained much more. “*There remains a Sabbath-keeping for the people of God*” (v. 9) in recognition of a greater rest coming. As the Jewish Sabbath honored the creation rest of the Creator, looking to its temporal blessing, the Christian Sabbath honors the redemptive rest of the Savior and looks to its eternal blessing. God rested from creation labor on the seventh day (Saturday); Jesus rested from redemptive labor on the first day (Sunday). As Israel labored and look forward to rest, Christians look back to resurrection rest as the power to labor for Christ. “*Labor, therefore, to enter into that rest*” (v. 11).