

- a. Chapter four begins with a succinct exhortation/warning: “*Let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it.*” Again, the writer was continuing the same line of argumentation, drawing from Israel’s experience in the wilderness (ref. 4:2-3) in order to demonstrate to his readers their need to persevere in faith and faithfulness. At the same time, he was developing his argument by pressing the relationship between *hearing, faith* and God’s *rest*. In the case of the children of Israel, they’d heard “good news,” but it had proved unfruitful and unprofitable; they hadn’t embraced it in faith. And it was this lack of faithful response that left them perishing outside of God’s rest; “*they were not able to enter because of unbelief.*”

The writer obviously was aware that some Israelites did cross the Jordan into Canaan, and, in this sense, *did* enter God’s rest. In fact, that truth is critical to the point he was making, which is that even those who entered Canaan and experienced God’s sanctuary in their midst *never truly entered His rest*. He acknowledged that Joshua led the twelve tribes into Canaan and settled them there, yet he insisted that Joshua hadn’t given them rest. The proof was the fact that God later spoke through David of an unrealized rest for His people (vv. 6-9).

The implication, then, would have been obvious to his readers: They shared the same opportunity and obligation of rest as their forefathers. So also, their relationship to that rest depended on the same dynamics of *hearing* and *faith*. They, too, were recipients of “good news,” which they likewise were obliged to embrace in faith and with all faithfulness. And, just as with their forefathers, their response would determine whether or not they entered God’s rest (vv. 2-3).

Three things about the writer’s exhortation/warning should be noted:

- 1) The first is that he again included himself: “*Let us fear*” (cf. 2:1-3, 3:12-14). He wasn’t putting anything before his readers that he didn’t apply to himself; he recognized that everyone who’s embraced Jesus the Messiah has the obligation to hold fast to Him and guard against the danger of unbelief and falling away. It is those who persevere in faith and faithfulness who show that they are truly partakers in Him.
- 2) Secondly, the writer wasn’t speaking of the *appearance* of coming short of God’s rest, in spite of the impression given by many English versions. If this were the case, it wouldn’t make sense to draw on Israel’s experience, for the Israelites didn’t merely *appear* to not enter God’s rest; they actually perished outside the land. The verb translated “*seem*” emphasizes the reasoning process – reaching a conclusion or understanding on the basis of careful and reasoned examination of data (John 5:39, 45, 11:13, 31, 56). Here the writer was referring, not to what *seems* to be true, but what will be *shown* to be true when all is revealed and rightly understood.

- 3) Finally, *coming short* of God's rest doesn't refer to Christians losing heavenly reward, but failing to obtain the promised inheritance altogether. Again, the writer's use of Israel's experience makes this perfectly clear. There were only those who entered God's rest in Canaan and those who didn't. There was no such thing as some who entered the land, but with a lesser reward or inheritance.
- b. Again, the writer insisted that *faith* is the criterion for one's entrance into God's rest; that was the case for the people of Israel, and so it remained for his Christian readers. Furthermore, he identified this "faith" in terms of a proper response to "good news" (4:2). *Faith* involves truly owning and persevering in God's "good news"; anything short of this is *unbelief* (3:19, cf. 3:7-13, 4:3).

The *obligation* of hearing being united to faith has always been the same. The children of Israel were bound by it, so were the recipients of the Hebrews epistle, and so are all Christians in every time and place. *Indeed, every human being ultimately shares this obligation*, because hearing-with-faith is inherent to man, the image-son, as God's created and destined him to be. Thus it was required of Israel, God's elect "son," but even the faithful in Israel came short of it. This is because the ultimate reality of hearing and faith unto sharing God's rest was realized in Jesus, the true Image-Son. So it marks those who share in Him (3:14).

And so, Jesus' disciples share the same *obligation* of faith that was central to Israel's life with God. They also enjoy the same *promise* that their faith/faithfulness grants them entrance into God's rest. God's demand and promise continue, but now in a new form and manner: ***Word, hearing, faith and rest have each attained their true substance in relation to Jesus the Messiah.***

The people of Israel had "good news" preached to them, but this must not be confused with the message these Hebrew Christians had heard. This is an easy and natural conclusion, especially for those who see an essential sameness between the Old and New Covenant communities. And the expression "good news" only strengthens this tendency, since Christians typically associate it with what they know as "the gospel." In fact, some English versions translate the Greek term just that way (KJV, NKJV).

The result is that many are left with the impression that the writer was saying that the people of Israel had the "gospel" of personal salvation preached to them, just like his readers had, but most refused to believe it and so be "saved." There are all sorts of problems with this interpretation, not least that it reads a New Testament concept into an Old Testament context. (Some may point to Galatians 3:8 to support the idea of a "gospel" of salvation by grace through faith being preached to individuals who preceded Jesus, but the "good news" Paul was referring to was God's word to Abraham of His determination to bless the nations through him. It wasn't a message telling him how he could be "saved.")

And as it was with Abraham, so it was with the house of Israel: As Abraham's covenant offspring, the "good news" preached to them was the same message preached to him. It was the covenant truths – promises and obligations – that God had disclosed to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the truths that were to be enacted and fulfilled in and through them, the covenant children (cf. Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-21, 26:1-5, 28:10-14 with Exodus 2:23-3:8, 6:1-8). Thus the covenant at Sinai was the heart of this "good news," because, by it, God ratified with Abraham's "seed" the covenant relationship He'd first established with their father.

Israel's covenant relationship with God, grounded in and oriented toward His future redemptive designs for His creation, obviously implicated the coming messianic person – the one whom Paul recognized as the ultimate "seed" God promised to Abraham in His covenant with him (Galatians 3:16). In this sense, the "good news" Israel heard in the wilderness pertained to Messiah (the "Christ"), and this is the sense in which the "gospel" of the Messiah was preached to Abraham (cf. John 8:56).

Thus the "good news" Israel heard *corresponded* with the gospel that had been set before these Hebrew believers, but the two messages are far from the same thing. The former was a matter of *promise*, whereas the latter declares the *fulfillment* of that ancient promise. This promise-fulfillment correlation disallows reading modern notions of "the gospel" into the "good news" proclaimed to Israel, but even more, it shows that these notions are, at best, distorted over-simplifications of the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and His witnesses.

Personal salvation by grace through faith in Jesus is an *implication* of the biblical gospel, but it is not the substance of it. The gospel that Jesus proclaimed – and which He associated with His person and ministration – was that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom was at hand (Mark 1:14-15): God was now entering upon His reign by accomplishing all that He'd promised and prepared for during Israel's long history. The people of Israel were not seeking an answer to the question of how they could be saved and assured of heaven; indeed, such a "gospel" would have been incoherent to them. The good news they were waiting and longing for was the news that Yahweh had returned to Zion to liberate and regather His people, and again take His throne in his sanctuary and commence His reign over all the earth (Isaiah 52:7-10). This epiphany would involve cleansing and forgiveness, but in the sense promised by their prophets (cf. Psalms 96-99; Isaiah 9:1-7, 45:1-25, 49:1-55:13, 59:1-60:3; Jeremiah 31-33; Zechariah 2; etc.).

The "good news" preached to Israel, then, was the *promise* whose fulfillment was preached to these Jewish Christians. The message they heard was that the God who'd promised had now shown Himself faithful in Jesus the Messiah. This "gospel" surpasses the word preached to their fathers, and so does the obligation to embrace it in *faith*. Indeed, the faith this news calls for is itself the fulfillment of what God required of Israel (cf. 11:39-40 with Luke 10:1-24; 1 Peter 1:3-12).

And so it is with the concept of God's *rest* and one's entrance into it: The rest held out to the children of Israel was merely a physical foretaste of the true rest God had ordained and promised. This is why even the Israelites who entered God's sanctuary-land and lived with His sanctuary in their midst still came short of His rest. What they experienced in Canaan (even at its best) simply affirmed that God would remain true to His promise; there was yet a rest to be realized by His people. Rest as *promise* – which began on the day that God completed His work of creation – continued on in the sure hope of realized rest (vv. 3-5). One day God's image-bearer would enter His rest as true image-son, and the sovereign Lord would at last see His creational reign fully realized in man, the king-priest. That was the rest the writer held before his readers, the one that is "yes and amen" in Jesus, and is entered through faith in Him (vv. 6-9).

- c. All that's been considered thus far provides a framework for interpreting the writer's assertions that a "Sabbath rest remains for the people of God," and that "the one who has entered God's rest has himself rested from his works, just as God did from His" (vv. 9-10). These two statements form a unit that provides a summary inference drawn from the preceding instruction. Verse 9 is the actual inference ("therefore"), while verse 10 elaborates on that inference ("for").

The first thing that stands out in verse 9 is that it introduces the language of *sabbath* to the epistle. Though the writer has repeatedly referred to God's rest, he's consistently used a generic term that has no specific relation to the sabbath idea. His instruction clearly *suggests* a sabbath rest, especially his references to God's rest in Genesis 2:2-3 (4:4, 10), but here (and only here) he employed a unique term best rendered *sabbath-rest*. And he did so as bringing his argument to a head, which shows that rest as *sabbath* was what he had in mind all along.

It's also important to note that the writer introduced the sabbath idea, not in terms of Israel's various sabbatical ordinances (including the weekly sabbath), but *God's creation rest*. This links his argument with the original sabbath phenomenon that all subsequent sabbatical observances presupposed and reflected. *In this way the writer was making clear that the sabbath rest he was challenging his readers with – the sabbath rest they might come short of – is the rest God Himself enjoys, the rest for which He created His human image-bearer.* This is the sabbath rest that all subsequent sabbath ordinances and observances pointed to: the ultimate rest that is man's everlasting administration of God's wise and benevolent rule over His creation; the rest that the Creator Himself entered into when He'd completed His creative activity.

This, then, informs the idea of "resting from our *works*" (v. 10). This rest corresponds to God's rest, and He rested from the works of creation (4:3). But human beings have no role in God's creative works; indeed, those "works" were completed "at the foundation of the world," so the Hebrews writer clearly didn't have the works of creation in mind. In the end, how a person perceives this *rest* will largely determine how he understands the *works* from which he rests.

A common understanding reflects the idea that “entering God’s rest” is a *present* phenomenon that occurs when a person comes to Christ. This rest is said to describe personal salvation, so that the “works” from which the individual “rests” are his labors in trying to measure up to God’s demands for human beings. From this perspective, the writer was saying that those who enter God’s rest through faith in Christ are able to leave off their efforts to conform to their Creator’s just requirements. Jesus met those requirements on their behalf by His perfect obedience, and so they can “rest” from their own good works by finding His “righteousness” reckoned to them through their faith in Him.

The most obvious problem with this view is that it doesn’t seem to fit with the writer’s correlation of these human works with God’s creative works: “The one who has entered into his rest has rested from his works *even as* God has rested from His own” (4:10). *In what sense does resting from one’s efforts at personal righteousness correspond with God resting from His labor in creation?* It’s certainly true that coming to Christ grants a person rest from his own “works of righteousness,” but this is a foreign idea in this particular context.

Those who maintain that this promised rest pertains to the *future* tend to view the writer’s point differently. While acknowledging the fact of “works” by which people seek to please God and earn His saving favor, many argue that the writer had in mind the works of Christian *sanctification* – that is, the “working out” of one’s salvation with a view to departing this present life to enter God’s everlasting rest (ref. Hebrews 10:32-39, 12:1-3, 13:1-4; cf. also Philippians 1:19-24, 2:12-13, 3:1-15; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Revelation 14:13).

The writer does seem here to have in mind the Christian’s *consummative* rest (ref. 9-11), which points toward these “works” being labors and deeds done in the context of one’s faith in Christ – that is, in the context of one’s *inaugurated* rest. But the context also suggests that these “works” should be understood in a slightly different way, as exertions *framed by the reality and promise of rest*, not the pursuit of greater personal sanctity (as commonly understood). The summary exhortation the writer drew from his statement about resting from one’s works makes this clear: “***Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest...***” (v. 11).

The promise of rest is a proper motivation to diligence and perseverance in faith, but the writer recognized another motivation, which he seems to suggest by his language and grammar in verse 10: “*For the one that entered into his rest, also himself rested from his works, just as God from His own.*” This statement stands out in the writer’s argument, for it asserts a *completed* work and rest corresponding to God’s creative work and rest, rather than *ongoing* work in view of *future* rest. And viewed in terms of where he was taking his argument (vv. 14-16), it seems that verse 10 has Jesus in mind: In accord with God’s creative rest, He’s rested from His work of *re-creation*, and has now entered into God’s everlasting rest as enthroned High Priest – i.e., true Image-Son. *That* rest, and the Christian’s share and hope in it, is the supreme motivation to abiding faithfulness.