

4. Chapter three ends on a note that punctuates the warning of verse 14: The great danger of a wayward heart that wanders from the living God is that the one who possesses it might find himself ultimately failing to enter God's rest, just as unbelieving Israel experienced in its pursuit of the promised land (3:19). This statement serves to transition into the writer's next exhortation – "*Therefore, let us fear...*" (4:1), which effectively reiterates the warning fleshed out in 3:12-19, but in a way that explicitly connects the ideas of persevering in Christ with entering God's rest, both of which are jeopardized by unbelief.

And so chapter four doesn't initiate a new topic, but continues the same one. The writer was still speaking to the issue of rest, but now made clear what he'd already implied, which is that the obligation to enter God's rest didn't end with Israel's wilderness experience. The same obligation continued on throughout Israel's history, even up to the present day in the case of his readers. And so the experience recounted in Psalm 95 wasn't just a remote illustration of a tragic situation; it was deeply significant for these Hebrew Christians (and all who claim Christ). For unbelief continues to shut the door to God's rest, but now in the ultimate sense: Israel's rest in God's sanctuary-land has become the *true* rest of dwelling in God's true sanctuary, which is Christ Jesus (3:14-19).

Although the writer's basic point is clear – *which is that unbelief precludes entrance into God's rest*, his perspective and the meaning of his specific arguments have long been debated. In particular, scholars and Christians of different theological persuasions disagree regarding what it means to "enter God's rest," how that phenomenon relates to one's personal faith, and when it is that the believer enters this rest. Though the details are variously understood, there are three general perspectives on this context:

- 1) The first is that the writer was speaking of *rest* as roughly synonymous with *personal salvation*. In that way, one "enters God's rest" at the moment he embraces Jesus in faith. A significant argument in favor of this view is the fact that unbelief precludes this entrance, whereas faith secures it. Some also point to the writer's assertion that the one who has entered God's rest has "rested from his own works" (4:10), the idea being that these "works" represent all of the human exertions by which people try to meet God's standard and obtain His favor.
- 2) A second view is that this *rest* refers to the consummate rest of the *eternal state*. It is the rest that the whole creation enjoys when all has been renewed and God is "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). This view finds primary support in the writer's correlation of this rest with the "rest" set before the sons of Israel. Israel's liberation from bondage initiated a difficult wilderness journey – a journey to be marked by faith and obedience – whose goal was the final "rest" of dwelling with God in His sanctuary-land. This dynamic is said to correspond with the Christian experience in this life: Christians, too, are set free in Christ to walk a difficult path of faith and obedience in a hostile world, but with the full assurance of final rest in God's presence. This view finds further support in the writer's emphasis on *perseverance*; it is those who "hold fast the beginning of their assurance firm until the end" who are truly partakers of Christ; such ones don't "fall away from the living God" so as to "come short" of His rest (3:12-14, 4:1).

- 3) The final view results from interacting with the contextual arguments through the lens of the *fulfillment* that has come in Jesus the Messiah. This view argues that the writer spoke out of his understanding of the “Christ event,” how it related to the prior salvation history (centered in the Hebrew people), and its role in God’s ultimate purpose for His creation. Put simply, it seeks to interpret the details of the writer’s instruction in terms of the overall perspective of the Scriptures – the perspective that the writer shared, if indeed his epistle was “God-breathed.”

That perspective sees the Old Testament scriptures presenting God’s progressive disclosure of and preparation for His all-encompassing triumph in His Messiah. In turn, that triumph and its effects and ultimate outcome are the grand subject of the New Testament scriptures. The New Testament, then, shows how all of the scriptures (Old Testament) point to and have their meaning in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. This was Jesus’ own perspective (Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 5:39-40), which He imparted to His witnesses by His Spirit (Acts 2:5-36, 3:17-18, 6:8-7:53, 13:14-35, 17:1-3, 18:24-28, 26:1-27; Romans 16:25-26; etc.). And this was certainly the perspective of the Hebrews writer, whose wide-ranging scriptural references and allusions are all interpreted in terms of Jesus’ person and work – even those passages that aren’t directly messianic in their own context.

The author of Hebrews shared the apostolic conviction of the Christ-centeredness of all the scriptures, but also their understanding of the “already-but-not-yet” nature of Jesus’ triumph and the kingdom He inaugurated (cf. 1:3, 2:5-8, 9:1-28, 10:35-37, 12:18-29, 13:14, etc.). That being the case, it makes sense that he would have viewed the concept of rest in the same way.

- He’d have understood that the regal rest introduced in the creation account and later depicted in God’s presence and rule in His sanctuary-land was realized in Jesus’ person and work. Jesus is the true sanctuary – sacred space where heaven and earth converge – as the embodiment of Israel’s God on the one hand, and of Israel itself as God’s elect image-son. He is thus the realization of God’s rest (i.e., God’s immanent rule over His creation), but also the realization of man’s participation in that rest.

For this reason, one cannot speak of partaking in Christ (3:14) without acknowledging that that involves entering God’s rest. To be “in Christ” is to be “seated in the heavenly realm in Him”; it is to share in His rest as He administers God’s regal rest as the Father’s true Image-Son. To view the Christian’s rest solely as a future inheritance is to alter the reality and outcome of the incarnation, resurrection, and enthronement of the Son.

- At the same time, the rest appointed for the children of God *does* involve and look to a consummate fullness. The most obvious proof of this is the fact that the Christian’s participation in the resurrected and enthroned Messiah is not yet fully realized. He shares in Jesus’ glorification in the inner man, but his physical body is still given over to mortality and decay.

The Christian shares in the life and likeness of Jesus, the singular Image-Son, so that he is as truly an image-son of the Father as he will ever be. Christians *are* sons in the Son, and yet “it does not presently appear what they shall be”; their conformity to the Last Adam awaits its consummate fullness in the resurrection of the last day (cf. 1 John 3:1-2 with 1 Corinthians 13:12, 15:20-28, 35-58; Philippians 3:1-21; etc.).

And so, while it is true that the Christian enters God’s rest at the point of his union with Christ – *the nature of his sonship demands it*, it is equally true that he awaits the full expression of that rest which will come on the last day when the sons of God are revealed in glory (Romans 8:18-23; Colossians 3:1-4) and all things are summed up in the superlative Son (Ephesians 1:9-10). Like every aspect of Jesus’ fulfillment and the kingdom He inaugurated, man’s relationship with God’s rest is “already-but-not-yet.” This understanding perfectly accords with the New Testament’s perspective and message, and it also does justice to the Hebrews writer’s argumentation. For, while insisting that faith in Jesus ushers men into God’s rest (3:19-4:3), he also recognized a future consummative rest as the reward of a life of faithful perseverance (3:12-14, 4:9-11).

Another general interpretive consideration concerns the difference between *correspondence* and *identity*. The writer constructed his argument by comparing Israel’s historical obligation and circumstance with that of his readers (and so also all who profess faith in Jesus the Messiah). It’s clear that he saw very real and significant correspondence between the two, and yet he didn’t regard them as *identical*. Indeed, viewing them as essentially the same flattens out the salvation history and minimizes the impact of Christ’s person and work. The Old and New covenant households must be properly distinguished, but while recognizing the crucial continuity between them.

*The relationship between Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Church is one of **promise and fulfillment** centered in Jesus the Messiah, which denies essential sameness between them (a view held by some Reformed traditions), but also their entire distinction and separation in God’s purposes as Dispensationalism teaches.*

The reason this is important to mention is that a person’s perspective and presuppositions determine the way he reads and interprets the Scripture. Hence a person who approaches this chapter from a Reformed and sabbatarian perspective will interpret the writer’s instruction differently than a person who brings to it a dispensational perspective. And this isn’t the case only with this particular passage, but with virtually any scriptural context. Thus every reader is obligated to come to the Scripture with conscious awareness of his biases and presuppositions, and with a sincere intent and commitment to let the text inform him – and not just from the passage at hand, but from the Bible’s overall perspective, orientation, message and manner of presentation.

All of this points to one final consideration, namely the *nature* and *scope* of the correspondence the writer perceived between Old Covenant Israel and Christian followers of Jesus. It’s clear that he saw Israel’s experience as an *example* and not merely an illustration, which shows that he recognized a very real connection between the two.

But this correspondence wasn't in any way tied to his readers' Jewish history or ethnicity, but their relationship with God as His covenant people: *Israel was obliged to relate to her covenant God in faith and faithfulness, and so it is for those – Gentile and Jew alike – who know Him in and through His Messiah-Son.*

The line of connection the writer was drawing involves the dynamic of *hearing* and *faith* as the basis for entering God's rest (4:1-3). This dynamic applies in the "fullness of the times" just as much as it did for Old Covenant Israel. But again, it's crucial to recognize that correspondence doesn't imply *sameness*, except where things correspond at every point in exactly the same way. And so Christians err when they view the writer's instruction as suggesting that their relationship to hearing, faith and rest is identical with that of the Jews who preceded Christ's coming. *Indeed, grasping his meaning depends on recognizing the very real distinctions between the Old and New Covenant communities, specifically as those distinctions are grounded in Jesus' person and work* (ref. 3:1-6). It depends on rightly discerning the biblical phenomenon of promise and fulfillment.

While recognizing the inherent dangers in generalization, it is nonetheless true that both Reformed and Dispensational believers tend to stumble in this arena – the former because of *minimizing* the distinctions, and the latter because of *misjudging* them.

- Traditional Covenant Theology substantially conflates the Old and New Covenants by its central doctrine of a single "covenant of grace." This one covenant (which is a theological construct, and not an explicit biblical covenant) is said to subsume *all* of the scriptural covenants enacted after the fall. Thus God's covenant with Israel at Sinai and the New Covenant in Jesus are simply two administrations of the one "covenant of grace." The result of conflating the Old and New Covenants in this way is that the *communities* and *relationship with God* that these two covenants governed are also conflated. This conflation lies behind the Puritan practice of referring to Israel as the *Church*, as well as the Reformed emphasis on the Decalogue as the marrow of God's covenant relation with human beings, regardless of the particular covenant "administration."
- Whereas Covenant Theology tends to blur the distinctions between Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Church and their respective relationships with God, Dispensationalism tends to diminish the very real and critical *continuity* between them. Israel is viewed as related to God through a "law" covenant governing a "law" dispensation, while the Church exists in a "grace" dispensation governed by a "grace" covenant. And beyond this distinction, Dispensationalism further maintains that Jewish Israel and the (largely Gentile) Church are distinguished by separate and distinct "programs" in God's redemptive scheme.

Some have quipped that Covenant Theology struggles to separate Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Church, while Dispensationalism cannot bring them together. Each brings different premises and perspectives to the issues, but both fail at the point of fully recognizing the nature and fruit of the "Christ event" – what it means that Jesus came to fulfill the Law, Prophets and Writings.