

Hebrews 4:1-11  
*“Entering the Promised Rest”*

Introduction:

In the preceding chapter the author had quoted a portion of Psalm 95 and wrote to his readers about how they were faced with a choice that was fundamentally similar to that of the wilderness generation of Israel. That generation had failed to enter the rest that God had set forth before them, and the author warned these believers that they needed to beware lest unbelief and disobedience led them to depart from the living God. In this passage, the author focuses his attention on the idea of the rest that is prominent in the quote of Psalm 95. He will clarify what that “*rest*” is, and that it is something which New Testament believers can lose; he then urged them to make sure they didn’t lose their rest the way their ancient ancestors had.

I. How One Enters this Rest: (vs.1-3a)

The passage opens up with the words “*therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest*” (vs.1a). This opening makes it clear that the author was not beginning a new subject but was continuing the train of thought of the previous passage. The closing words of chapter three are “*so we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief*” (vs.19). According to the previous verse (vs.18), what the Israelites could not enter into, was the rest that God had provided. The author’s transition from the previous chapter into this one centered in the inability of the wilderness generation to enter into God’s rest. From this fact, the author drew the conclusion that the promise for God’s people remains unfulfilled, and thus it can still be entered by those who are not guilty of unbelief.

The author then gave the following exhortation in light of this remaining promise, “*let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it*” (vs.1b). The implication was that it was possible for professing Christians to fail to enter this promised rest. Otherwise, there would be no need to fear such an eventuality. This is something the modern reader must also take to heart; for since this letter was written to a group professing to be Christians, it is a message that is applicable to all those who claim to be followers of Christ. The fear the author referred to here is not a terror that leaves one panic-stricken; it is the healthy fear that leads one to be careful and deliberate in what one does in order to avoid the potential danger about which one has been warned. The idea of coming short of the rest is taken from the example of the wilderness generation. The expression means to travel in the direction of a place, to come close to it, but to never make it all the way there. This was precisely what happened to the wilderness generation of Israelites. They came close to the Land (to the very border of it in fact) but never entered it.

Then the author explained why the Israelites had come short of entering the land, “*for indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them*” (vs.2a). The question of course is in what way was the “*Gospel*” preached to the Israelites at the time of the exodus from Egypt? The NT Gospel of Christ cannot be found in the books of Moses; so, the word “*gospel*” is not to be thought of as being used in the

technical sense that it has often in the NT. Rather the term is used in its general sense, referring to “*good news*” from God. For the Israelites of Moses’ day, the good news was the revelation from God that He would redeem them from Egypt, that they would be made God’s people, and that He would take them to a promised place of rest. Therefore, the author’s point was that it was unbelief in regard to their good news that caused the Israelites not to enter the land, just as it could be unbelief that would keep these professed Christians from entering into the rest that God had promised to them. The author continued by noting “*but the word which they heard did not profit them*” (vs.2b). The “*word*” that the author had in mind here was the good news about God’s redemptive purposes for them; and the author pointed out that in the end, hearing God’s redemptive truth didn’t gain them anything. The author then went on to explain why the Israelites hadn’t gained anything from the redemptive truth God had revealed to them through Moses. It was because what they heard was “*not being mixed with faith in those who heard it*” (vs.2c). In other words, simply hearing truth benefits no one; it is only when one hears truth with a heart that is receptive to and believes that truth that one benefits from it. The author’s point was that intellectual or emotional familiarity with the Gospel does not save; it is only when one genuinely believes the Gospel that it provides the promised benefit (in the case of those to whom this letter was written, “*salvation*”). This is hardly unique to spiritual things. Any warning that one is given, if not believed, will be useless to the one who hears it; whether it relates to physical dangers, political instability, diplomatic tension, or medical issues. Only the information that one believes will benefit the one who hears it. Genuine faith always results in one acting or choosing in accordance with what they believe. The wilderness generation did not believe in the promise of God; that is why they were afraid to enter into the Land. In the same way if these Hebrew Christians retreated into Judaism and turned away from Christ, they too would be demonstrating that they did not believe that salvation was only available through Christ, which is the heart of the Gospel.

The author then repeated his point that genuine faith is what makes the crucial difference by writing, “*for we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: ‘So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest’*” (vs.3a). Those Christians who truly believe will enter the promised rest, while those who remain in unbelief like the wilderness generation of Israel, will not.

## **II. Defining this Rest: (3b-10)**

The author then turned to elaborate upon the theme of the “*rest*” that still awaits those who will believe. The author began this section of the passage with the words, “*although the works were finished from the foundation of the world*” (vs.3b). To understand the author’s flow of thought it is important to see that this clause relates to the quotation of Psalm 95 in the previous portion of the verse. Therefore the “*works*” he refers to here as being “*finished since the foundation of the world*”, are God’s works. The works that God performed at the time of creation. That these are the works that the author had in mind, is made clear in the next verse.

The author next noted that *“for He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works’* (vs.4). The author was quoting Genesis 2:2; and thus, he was explaining that God’s rest began on the seventh day when the creation was complete. This helps us further refine our understanding of the nature of the rest the author was speaking about. When we are told that God rested on the seventh day, and that He has rested ever since (see verse 10), this does not mean that God has done nothing since then. For Jesus Himself stated that *“My Father has been working until now”* (Jn.5:17), making it clear that God had been active throughout human history. So, this raises the question about the nature of the *“rest”* that God engaged in at the end of creation. The Greek word translated as *“rest”* does not mean to relax or be rejuvenated; it refers to ceasing from activity (and it is always used in regard to certain specific activities that are in view in the context, rather than as a reference to being completely idle). We know that God has not been idle since creation, because God’s providential and sustaining work continues, as well as many other works He is engaged in. The idea in the creation account was that with the creation complete, God ceased from the work of creation; because He had finished the job.

Having made that point, the author returns once again to David’s words in Psalm 95, *“and again in this place: ‘They shall not enter My rest’* (vs.5). The author’s point in this statement was to enable his readers to understand that the *“rest”* that the wilderness generation had failed to enter into, was ultimately God’s own rest, a rest He had enjoyed since the completion of creation. It should be noted that this cannot be any sort of reference to Sabbath observance, because that was a *“rest”* which that generation of Israelites had experienced. Instead, the *“rest”* that the author was writing about here related to enjoying the completion of God’s work within the sphere which He had created for those who are His. This is consistent with one of the aspects of rest from a Hebraic perspective, a situation or place that is secure and peaceful.

Next, the author wrote *“since therefore it remains that some must enter it”* (vs.6a). The point here is that God, by resting after creation, was establishing a state into which His creatures were intended to enter. However, since the people of God failed to enter it; one must conclude that the time of that entering was still future. This is because God’s promises to His people will not come to nothing, they will definitely be fulfilled in His sovereign providence.

The author then repeated something he had already written (the repetition was necessary because he was about to express a key idea, one which his readers needed to recognize). He explained why the people did not enter into God’s promised rest during Moses’ time, *“those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience”* (vs.6b). This time the reason is not said to be unbelief (as in 3:19), but rather disobedience. The Greek word translated as *“disobedience”* literally means to refuse to be persuaded, and thus to be obstinate and resistant to instruction. This is a condition that results from unbelief. Therefore, disobedience naturally follows unbelief, just as obedience naturally follows faith. The core idea

being once again that what a person does or doesn't believe determines their choices, attitudes, actions, and behavior.

The author continued explaining that God's rest, which the Israelites failed to enter, was still available. He wrote "*again He designates a certain day, saying in David, 'Today', after such a long time, as it has been said: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts'*" (vs.7). The author once again quoted Psalm 95 and noted that David referred to "*today*" as the day his readers were to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and not harden their hearts. "*Today*" of course referred to David's own time. When the author wrote that David composed these words "*after such a long time*", he was referring to the fact that David wrote this Psalm somewhere around 1,000 B.C., which was over 400 years after the Israelites' rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. Then the author continued this same point by observing that "*if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day*" (vs.8). The reference to Joshua is an important one. This is because the generation after the one that failed at Kadesh Barnea did enter the Promised Land with Joshua as their leader. It might be assumed that not entering into Canaan was equivalent to not entering into God's rest. If that were the case then, Joshua's entrance into Canaan, a generation later, would have constituted an entrance into God's rest. However, the author points out that this is impossible, for if Joshua had led them into this rest, then it would no longer have been possible for David to speak of this as something that still had yet to be done during his time. It is also helpful to keep in mind that Joshua and Jesus are the same name in both Hebrew and Greek. Therefore for the original readers of the epistle, it would have been easier to see the typology the author uses here. The first Joshua led the people of God into the Promised Land, but it is the second Joshua (Jesus) who leads the people of God into God's rest. Therefore, this means that the rest is something beyond and greater than entrance into Canaan or ceasing from travel.

The author then made the point that the "*rest*" that is in view here is also something more significant than ceasing from one's daily labors on the seventh day of the week. For the author next wrote, "*there remains therefore a rest for the people of God*" (vs.9). For the first time in this chapter the author used a different term for "*rest*"; this time it is a form of the Greek word normally rendered as "*Sabbath*". This Greek word is neither identical in meaning with nor interchangeable with the Greek term "*katapausis*" that has been used throughout this chapter to convey the idea of "*rest*". Interestingly, this is the only occurrence of this term in Scripture, and the first known use of it anywhere in literature. It is likely that the author of Hebrews coined this term because he wanted to convey a unique meaning through it. He wanted to further reinforce the connection he had made between the promised rest and the rest that God enjoyed after creation, and to differentiate the spiritual rest that he had in mind, from the secession of travelling that was experienced in Joshua's time.

Then the author summed up his discussion about the nature of God's rest by observing that "*he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His*" (vs.10). There is some debate as to whom the author had in

mind when he used the pronoun “*he*”. Some think it refers to Jesus. However, in these immediate verses the flow of thought is not about the work of Christ, but about the choice before the readers as to whether or not they will continue to believe and obey. Therefore, the best conclusion is that the pronoun was used to represent all those confronted with this choice (a generic reference to professing Christians). The idea of the “*rest*” spoken of here is that one has come to the completion of one’s work, in a way that is similar to how God has completed His work. The implication is clear; the “*rest*” that the author had in mind was both a place and a state. It is where the labors of the Christian life (i.e. belief and obedience) are finished and complete forever. Therefore the “*rest*” is the believer’s future home in heaven, not the arrival into Canaan, which merely acted as a picture of the ultimate form of God’s promise to His people. Later in Hebrews, the author will return to the idea that heaven is the ultimate Promised Land that the ancient saints were actually looking toward in terms of their place of rest (11:8-10, 13-16, 39-40; 12:22).

### **III. Pursuing this Rest: (vs.11)**

The writer brought this portion of his letter to a conclusion in the final verse of this passage, “*let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.*” The readers were exhorted that in light of Israel’s failure; they were to focus all their energy on entering the ultimate rest of God (heaven). In light of the possibility that one might fail to enter that rest; the readers were exhorted to make that entrance the priority of their lives. The author warned his readers to make sure they did not repeat the pattern of unbelief and disobedience that was illustrated in the wilderness generation; but instead to continually seek to cultivate their faith and grow in their obedience to God.

### **Conclusion:**

Just as it was necessary for first century Jewish Christians to heed this warning, so it is necessary for contemporary Christians to heed it as well. We must not allow hardship, sorrow, indifference to spiritual things, or anything else to rise up in our hearts so that our faith is eclipsed. This is what all true believers will do, because it is their nature as regenerate children of God to do so.