

Text: Heb 4.1

Today we turn to Hebrews 4 and will make it all the way into the first verse!

As we work through the book, I find that my understanding is slowly growing. I've often found Hebrews challenging as I've read it over the years, but going slowly through it helps immensely.

Last week, while I was in Iowa, I had lunch with David Saxon, one of the profs at Maranatha Baptist University. He told me that when he was hired many years ago he was asked if there were any books of the Bible he couldn't see himself teaching. He said something like this, "Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hebrews."

This fall he is teaching Hebrews!

We compared notes a bit, and I found some help from what he had to say.

The topics we are dealing with in Heb 3 to 4 are among the most important in the book. We need to carefully get an understanding of our material so we can apply God's truth properly to our lives.

For our reading today, I want to start with Heb 3.14 and run right up to our text in 4.1.

Read Heb 3.14-4.1

You will remember that in v. 14 we said that those who have a "beginning-to-end" faith are the partakers of Christ.

Those with that kind of faith are warned to "not harden your hearts" (15)

We are reminded that those who did harden their hearts "back in the day" were the same who followed Moses out of Egypt

We are reminded that God was angry with them for forty years as they wandered in the wilderness

And we are reminded God swore they would not enter his rest because of their unbelief.

The "therefore" of 4.1 rests on this understanding.

One more thing before we get into the body of the message: one of the most important concepts to grasp in Hebrews 3-4 is "rest."

What does God mean by "rest"? When he says, "they shall not enter my rest" in 3.11 (*cf.* 3.18-19) does he mean the same thing as in 4.1?

Even more importantly, since we are warned of “coming short of it” in our text, just exactly what are we to fear?

Proposition: The believer should never allow himself to falter on the road to the rest that is coming.

I. The meaning of rest

A. Various mentions of “rest” in the context

1. God’s rest on the Sabbath of Creation (4.4)
2. The prohibited rest of the Exodus generation (3.11 et al)
3. The remaining rest belonging to NT believers (4.1 et al)

Does God mean the same thing by each of these? If no, then how are they connected?

B. Interpretations of the “remaining rest” of NT believers¹

1. The Millennium and/or heaven (that is, salvation preserved by works)
 - a. This makes salvation ultimately dependent on works
 - b. This also suggests salvation can be lost by bad works
2. Coming to an elevated Christian experience in this life (Keswick)
3. A future enjoyment of fulness of reward for a faithful life (eschatological)
4. Some particular eschatological aspect (*i.e.*, participation in millennium, our closeness to Christ, rights to worship before Yahweh) rather than full eschatological experience
5. A peaceful life in the present age as a Christian

C. The Biblical record

1. Literal rest from labour or activity (Gen 8.4)
2. The rest of death (Job 3.13)

¹ Adapted from Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Heb 4.1.

3. Psychological relief in life when blessing achieved (Pr 29.17)

Pr 29.17 Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; He will also delight your soul.

4. Physical rest in the Land after conquest (various, will examine shortly)

5. The theology of the Sabbath (Gen 2.2-3) [the root of “rest” in our passage]

Gn 2.2-3 By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

- a. God’s rest undergirds the Sabbath
- b. God’s rest symbolizes the spiritual rest of Israel and the NT believer

D. Israel’s conquering rest

1. Dt 3.20, 12.9, 25.19

Dt 3.20 until the LORD gives rest to your fellow countrymen as to you, and they also possess the land which the LORD your God will give them beyond the Jordan. Then you may return every man to his possession which I have given you.’

2. Josh 11.23, 21.44, 22.4, 23.1

Josh 11.23 So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. Thus the land had rest from war.

E. The NT believer’s rest connected but not the same

1. Heb 4.8

2. It is the same as offered to the soft-hearted: “Today, if you hear his voice...” (3, 15, 4.7 and Ps 95.7)

The rest for the believer is the blessed future life that follows the life lived out for God.

II. The remaining promise

A. The emphatic future aspect of rest

1. "A promise remains"
2. Something yet to "enter" ("entering His rest")

"The promise of entering the 'rest' of God remains open. The meaning of that 'rest' was not exhausted by the earthly Canaan which was entered by the Israelites of the generation which had grown up to manhood in the wilderness; the spiritual counterpart of the earthly Canaan is the goal of the people of God today."²

3. The Canaan rest of Israel becomes an OT type of the future rest to come

B. Present blessing is not future rest

1. The Keswick idea of achieving a "Zen-like" perfection in life is not this rest
 - a. If such a life were possible, it still does not put you past the trials of this life
 - b. The whole context looks forward to something beyond any "this life" sense of rest
2. The same objections apply to the "peaceful life" a Christian might enjoy in this life

C. We are left with the full eschatological rest that comes when the labours of this life are over

1. Our Canaan is overcome
2. Our enemies are defeated
3. Our entrance is secured
4. Our enjoyment is universal

This is what "remains" (Heb 4.9)

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 105.

III. The fear of coming short

A. The exhortation to fear is a present exhortation “let us fear”

1. Should we fear loss of salvation? Coming short of that promised rest?

Rm 10.⁹ that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

1Th 5.¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

2 Tim 2.¹³ If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

1 Pt 1.3-6 ¶ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,⁵ who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials,

2. Rather, our passage is very explicit: we should fear “seeming to come short”

B. Illustrations from Scripture

1. The Exodus generation came short of the rest: “they shall not enter my rest”

a. In Num 1, we have a tally of Israel’s men of war

Num 1.45-46 So all the numbered men of the sons of Israel by their fathers’ households, from twenty years old and upward, whoever *was able to go out to war in Israel*,⁴⁶ even all the numbered men were 603,550.

b. In addition, there were all the Levites

Num 3.39 All the numbered men of the Levites, whom Moses and Aaron numbered at the command of the LORD by their families, every male from a month old and upward, *were* 22,000.

c. Will we suppose that every one of these men were spiritually lost and never entered heaven?

2. Moses did not enter that rest

a. The great leader of Israel

b. The human author of the first five books of the Bible

c. The man who, in a fit of anger, was prevented from entering the land (prevented from that rest)

3. Consider David

a. The man after God's own heart

b. The mighty warrior, defeating many enemies

c. The writer of much Scripture

d. The man who sinned with Bathsheba with the result that "the sword will not depart from your house"

2 Sa 12.10 'Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.'

Were David and Moses prevented from heaven? Will they be kept out of the Millennial kingdom?

But what was their problem? They *seemed* to have come short.

4. Consider Jesus

a. Innocent, sinless, perfect

b. Yet hated and scorned and abused

c. Like a sheep before its shearers is dumb, he opened not his mouth

- d. He submitted to unjust suffering
- e. He died a brutal death
- f. He never wavered

He never seemed to come short, despite much provocation ... He achieved that rest that is the promise that remains

C. The heart of our exhortation

1. What should we fear? The hardened heart that breaks fellowship with God's people
2. We should fear willful indulgence in sin that besmirches a Christian testimony
3. We should fear *seeming* to be one who comes short (just as David did, just as Moses did)
4. After all, there is a rest, but oh, that we would not falter on our way to the rest

Conclusion:

Proposition: The believer should never allow himself to falter on the road to the rest that is coming.

Why do Christians exhort one another to live pure and holy lives? So we can be sure of entering heaven?

No, so we can show heaven to the watching world.