

Chapter 4

Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, 'As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest:' although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, 'And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.' And in this place again, 'If they shall enter into my rest.' Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief: Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, 'To day', after so long a time; as it is said, 'To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.' For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.

There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For

we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Commentary

{1} - Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.

The first generation of Israel to leave Egypt had their bones strewn in the desert, so the author admonished his readers to learn a valuable lesson. Just as God was faithful to guide them all the way to the Promised Land, which destination they missed through unbelief, God continues to hold out the promise of rest both to Israel and to individual believers.

So then, we ought to “fear” – the Greek “*phobeo*,” from which we get the English term “phobia” – that the promise of entering into God’s rest is still active, and failing to trust Him can have catastrophic consequences. In fact, the promise of rest continued throughout the Old Testament and continued into the New, finding its culmination in the ministry of Christ –

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30)

So, the author is about to embark on a short proof from the Hebrew Scriptures that the promise of rest was not negated just because one faithless generation failed to attain it. God remains faithful to His Word and He continues to offer rest to everyone who will believe Him.

{2} - For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

There’s a bit of controversy surrounding this verse because of its use of the term “gospel.” The Greek phrase rendered “was the gospel preached” is the single Greek word “*euaggelizo*.” In the active voice, “*euaggelizo*” means, “to evangelize, or proclaim the good news concerning the Son of God.” But, in this verse, it is in the middle voice. In other words, it designates the particular matters that are being proclaimed as “good news” and/or the people to whom the good news has been preached.

The content of the "good news" would be the same whether it was preached during the Exodus or after the Resurrection. However, both the audience and the method of preaching were different. The gospel that was preached to the children of Israel during their 40-year trek was demonstrated in types and shadows. The rock from which the water flowed, Aaron's budding rod, the second set of tablets, the manna from Heaven, and the Ark that led them through the Jordan river all spoke of Christ. The "glad tidings" of Israel's redeemer are interwoven throughout the Exodus story. The gospel preached to the first century audience was the finished redemptive work of Christ on the cross.

The primary difference between the audiences, however, was that one accepted the Word of God by faith and the other refused. One profited greatly, receiving the promise of eternal life. But, the other heard the news and profited nothing. They were promised an inheritance and God's own protective hand of mercy and blessing, but they failed to believe in His deliverance. Meanwhile, the believers of the church age hear the promise of an eternal inheritance and God's sovereign power to bring them to Himself as a result of Christ's finished atonement.

But, what's the defining factor which separates the profitable from the unprofitable?

Faith - plain and simple.

When the gospel message is mixed with faith it results in new life. On the contrary, when the faithless hearer comes in contact with the gospel, it is "the savour of death unto death" (2 Cor.2:16). But, God is faithful in all ages to foretell and preach the "good news" about His saving purpose.

{3} - For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.

The faithful are guaranteed an entrance into God's rest. We will rest from our works and rest completely in the finished work of Christ. That's our promised inheritance. We are assured that God is ever faithful to His promises. Plus, we've been indwelt by the Holy Spirit to seal our redemption. So, with great confidence the author states, "We which have believed do enter into rest."

God will not allow His Word to return to him void (Is.55:11). He will see to it that someone is the recipient of His grace. It is certain that someone will enter in to His rest. The decree of God is not left to chance. The Sovereign power of God will providentially guarantee the foreordained outcome - " the works were finished from the foundation of the world."

If God were to leave the possibility of someone claiming His promises up to the variable will and changeable opinions of men, no one would ever make it in. So, from the very foundations of the world God declared that His elect would enter into the promise.

You have to admire the way Bible writers were not afraid to juxtapose God's absolute sovereignty and man's utter responsibility in the same passage. Things that seem contradictory to us are no problem to God. For instance, right on the heels of this great declaration of God's unchanging, predetermined plan, in a few verses we will be instructed to "labor" to enter into this rest. The author, in essence, says, "Work hard to enter the place of ceasing from work...although the works were finished from the foundation of the world."

And God, Himself, is our example. He worked so that He could rest –

{4} - For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise,
And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.

That's a reference to Gen. 2:2, where God made the universe, the Earth, the animals and the people in six days –

"And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made."

The point the author made is that a Godly rest did surely exist. He drives the point home in the next verse.

{5} - And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest.

We saw that in the Exodus account. What the author is doing is building his case. He is referencing several Old Testament accounts of God declaring His own rest and offering that rest to the faithful. He has systematically shown that God worked and then rested. And, that the possibility exists for others to "enter into my rest".

{6,7} - Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief: Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, 'To day', after so long a time; as it is said, 'To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.'

The language in the King James is a little convoluted here, but the point is simple: as we already mentioned, the promise of rest was offered by God and He will not be defeated or undermined in His desire to fulfill that offer.

Hence, the author concluded, "Some must enter therein." But, the Israelites to whom the promise was first revealed did not enter in because of their lack of faith. Their children entered the Promised Land with Joshua, and they had limited periods of rest. But, during the time of the Judges –

“In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 17:6)

So, God brought Israel’s enemies down on them, and they even fought among themselves, tribe against tribe. So, there was no lasting rest. Later, however, God dangled the promise again when David was inspired to write –

"To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." (Ps. 95:7)

So, if the promise of rest still existed during the Davidic reign, then that first faithless generation had not sealed the door of opportunity shut. It's as if God fixed a new starting point, a new day, a new offer to hear His Word and respond.

{8} - For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.

Logic prevails. If the Israelites had become the final recipients of this promise of rest, then it would be fulfilled and there would be no need of a new offer. But, they resisted. Nevertheless, the counsel of God - knowing the works from the beginning - retained that promise for another time and a New Covenant.

By the way, the word translated "Jesus" in this verse is simply an English translation of the Greek cognate name. It's more accurately "Joshua." After Moses' death, Joshua led the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, as the type of Christ leading His people into the Heavenly land of promise. So, the contrast is between the type and archetype, the shadow and the substance. Joshua did, in fact, lead some people into the parcel of earth that was promised to Abraham. But, the rest they achieved was only temporary and their enemies overcame them. So, "If Joshua had given Israel a final, complete rest then God would not have spoken through David of yet another day."

Now, to the two audiences who read this letter (the first century Hebrews and the New Covenant church of the last 2,000 years), this promise of rest means two different things. They are not opposed to each other, but they compliment each other. To a Hebrew who is looking for the restoration of Israel in the land of Canaan, and the fulfillment of the promise that they would be re-gathered to live in peace and safety (Ezek. 34:28-30), this promise of rest has a decidedly physical tone. To the Gentile church, the promise of rest speaks of our Heavenly destiny and the final rest from our sinful flesh and the struggle of faith. Both interpretations are true. Both promises are legitimate. Both will be fulfilled to the last detail.

But, to focus in on the point at hand - it's a new day. That means that there is still a standing promise of Christ available for us, today, to lay hold of. And remember the warning - "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it."

{9} - There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.

There's an intriguing bit of word play occurring here. The word translated "rest" in this verse is the Greek "*sabbatismos*," a derivative of "*sabbaton*," or "*Sabbath*." In fact, the NAS and NIV render this verse –

"There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God."

A vital part of the Old Covenant, a sign of the agreement between God and His chosen people was that every seventh day they would rest from all their work. And, every seventh year they would let the land rest. The Israelites' failure to keep this "Sabbath-rest" resulted in the Babylonian captivity.

So, the author brought this notion of Sabbath rest into the New Covenant and stated that there is still a "rest from all your works" available to us, today.

{10} - For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.

One of the basic tenets of Christianity is the realization that our best efforts and righteous works are of no value at all (Is. 64:6, Rom. 3:12). Christ's works, on the other hand, are of eternal value. So, we should halt our every attempt to obligate God - attempting to gain Heaven based on our own "righteousnesses" (Is. 64:6) - and rest in the finished work of Him who bore our sin and imputes His perfect righteousness to us. Just as God finished His work, saw that it was good and rested in its perfect completion, we can drop our burden and rely on Christ's good and perfect completed work.

{11} - Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.

Here's that seeming paradox to which I alluded earlier. We have before us an example of unbelieving faithlessness on the part of Israel when they failed to enter Canaan. Given that poignant example, we should give all diligence to make sure the same thing doesn't happen to us.

But, here's the intriguing part - how do we implement this labor?

We rest.

We pick up the promise of God that an entrance is still available. And, we enter via our perfect Deliverer's completed labor on the cross. Yes, there will be work for us to do –

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:10)

But, that work is a reaction to Christ's finished work, not an effort to push God into a corner and require Him to save us based on the quality of our labor. I'll say it again. The best way to work toward entering into the eternal Sabbath is to rest in His ability to get us there.

Have faith.

Believe.

"Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." (John 6:28-29)

{12} - For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

God's words stand firm in the Heavens, unshakable and unmoved. Every person will be held accountable for his or her reaction to this monument of blessing and cursing. And, the Word of God cuts to the heart of it, dividing the sheep from the goats. It is "quick," an Old English word for "alive," "powerful" or "active." The most potent weapon in the hand of an Israelite soldier was a two-edged sword, sharpened on both sides so it could cut either way it was thrust. The Word of God is just such a weapon.

Men have argued, and even developed rather complex theologies, about the relative relationship of the human soul and spirit. The common line of reasoning is that the soul is the internal life of every living creature, that essence of being which leaves when an organic life form dies. The spirit, on the other hand, is the eternal nature of humans only, seeing they are the only creatures spoken of in Scripture as continuing to live in a spiritual form after their physical demise.

But, we'd be hard pressed to tell the difference between the soul and spirit of an individual. A physically alive Christian is also spiritually alive. When he's physically dead, he continues to be spiritually alive. So, does the eternal nature of the Spirit quicken the human soul, the very essence and nature of the individual, so that he retains his "personhood" in Heaven?

Apparently so –

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." (1Cor. 13:12)

Paul wrote of being known as an individual, not just part of some cosmic spiritual conglomerate.

Cool, Jimbo, but what's your point? Just this - it's an impossible task to accurately discern and divide the soul and spirit of an individual. But, know what? The Word of God does just that. It "divides asunder," or cuts them in two. God knows exactly what is of you and what is of Him. He knows whether you are resting in your work --- or His.

Doctors, particularly those specializing in osteopathy, know that bones have marrow at their center. In that marrow, red blood cells are created. Those cells are vital for life; they carry oxygen and nutrition to every nook and cranny of our bodies. A version of that marrow keeps our joints lubricated enough to move without pain. Now, the interrelationship of those bones and that marrow is such that at the place where they meet it's hard to tell exactly where the bone starts and the marrow ends...or vice versa. But, know what? The Word of God is sharp enough to cut clean through our physical form, hacking away those things that would destroy us and healing our mortal wounds.

And, the Word of God lays bare our every thought and intent. Let me offer an example: Let's say a "legalist" and I come across a hungry fellow. We both stop at the local McDonald's and buy this poor soul a Big Mac and fries. We might even Super Size it. To the outside observer we've both accomplished the exact same deed. But, the legalist did it because he was trying to obligate God to save him on the basis of his string of good deeds. ("And in thy name done many wonderful works?" (Mat.7:22) However, I would have been motivated by the fact that my Savior had already secured my position with the Father. And, because He first loved me and saved me as an act of charity, I would respond by being charitable to this hungry person.

Again, we both accomplished the same action, but the Word of God would cut through to discern our innermost thoughts and intent of our hearts. God is no fool. He can see right through our activity and get straight to our intent. He knows if we are performing for His glory, or our own.

That Word is alive and active.

{13} - Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

Everybody - absolutely everybody - is held accountable. And, they are laid open before His sovereign knowledge. That's why we use words like "omniscient," or "all knowing" when describing God's attributes. There are no secrets that God will not uncover. He knows His own and He knows how to deal with the rest. They will stand naked and exposed before the piercing gaze of Him who cuts to the thoughts and intent.

Frightening. Who could stand before such a court? Who could be found guiltless under such complete scrutiny? We need an advocate. We need atonement. We need a worthy High Priest to completely cover our desperate state and naked unworthiness.

Good news...there is such a one –

{14} - Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.

Amen, hallelujah, and hooray! He's done it! He is it! He's even called by name –

Jesus the Son of God!

Hold on to that! Grab hold and hang on tight, your eternity depends on it! Declare His name, profess His salvation, have faith in His redemption...and, follow our promised Deliverer into our Heavenly Canaan, the Promised Land of Eternal Rest.

It may be a long journey, but it's a magnificent destination!

But, I must go back for a moment in order to build up speed as we hit this verse –

In verse 12 "the word of God" was introduced. In many instances, interpreters understand that phrase to be a reference to the Scriptures, themselves. However, in verse 13, which is the continuation of the same thought, we read, "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in HIS sight." That "His" may be a reference back to God, whose word it is, or it may be a reference to the Word, itself...or, Himself.

The Living ("quick") Word is a person, not merely a collection of writings and sayings. Of course, that idea will lead any Bible student to John 1-

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-5,14)

With that notion in mind, then "all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do" would be a reference to Christ. And, that idea carries through right into verse 14, where Jesus is called by name.

Meanwhile, back in chapter 2, verse 17; Jesus is first called "a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people." One of the qualifications of His high priestly station was the fact that he was "made like unto his brethren." Later, in Chapter 3, verse 1, Jesus was called "the Apostle and High Priest of our profession."

Now the author adds to the accomplishments of this, our "great High Priest."

For nearly 1200 years, the sons of Aaron - the lineage of high priests - had entered yearly into the Holy of Holies to sacrifice for the sins of the people. But, they were merely a foreshadow of the reality of Christ's passing into Heaven, once for all. And, just as the High Priest had to present God with an acceptable blood offering, Christ sealed His ministry with His own blood. These ideas will be explored at length in chapter 9, but here's the important conclusion - knowing that our High Priest has accomplished our reconciliation with God by His sacrifice and ascent to His throne, we should be all the more diligent to fasten our hope and faith securely to Him.

There is no act, no work, and no force of will, which can accomplish the one thing we most need - reconciliation with the Sovereign God. None of us is powerful enough, righteous enough, complete enough or holy enough to approach the "great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them" (Rev.20:11). We are in need of someone to bridge the gap and make peace between us and the One who sits on the judgment throne.

But, there is one who has died, risen and is taken up to Heaven. And, He is declared to be both our Elder Brother and our High Priest. Hold on tight to that knowledge. Find your rest, your hope, and your assurance in Him - "let us hold fast our profession."

{15} - For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

When Jesus was answering against the Jews who sought to slay Him, He declared His absolute authority over the lives of men. After stating that the Son "quickeneth whom He will" (John 5:21), He shocked them with –

"For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him." (John 5:22-23)

Iterating that declaration, Jesus explained –

"And, [the Father] hath given him [the Son] authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man." (v.27)

Did you catch that? All judgment has been assigned to the Son not because He is the Son of God, but because He is the offspring of mankind. I believe this is more than just a reference to Daniel's messianic designation, it is a point of identification between God and His creatures; Christ has known what it is to be flesh and blood.

No one will be able to stand before the Great White Throne and say, "But, you're God, you can't possibly know what it's like! You've never known pain, loneliness, anxiety, separation, weariness...you've never had to withstand the myriad temptations of being human!" No, the One on the throne will be able to respond, "I know exactly what it's like." He is a fair and righteous judge, knowing (and triumphing over) the trials of the flesh. Notice Isaiah's description of His ministry -

"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and, we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." (Is. 53:3-4)

But, there's a flip side to that coin. For those of us to whom He is a High Priest, He considers our weak frames, knowing we are but dust. He holds us up by His faithful power, knowing our infirmities, our fears and our failings. He has suffered more than any of us, or all of us combined, will ever suffer –

"But He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned

every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Is. 53:5-6)

He is more than simply one of the continuing line of fleshly priests. Unlike the sons of Aaron who had to sacrifice for their own sins before they could sacrifice for the people, our High Priest - though subjected to every temptation we are - remained unspotted.

There is also an intrinsic truth we can glean from this passage. Knowing that Christ was tempted - even tempted of Satan directly - and yet without sin, we can conclude that there is no sin in being tempted. James picked up on this truth when he said –

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him." (Ja.1:12)

Temptations come. That's a fact. This life is full of temptations. And, our flesh would willingly give in to each and every one if it were not for the preserving power of the Spirit that indwells us. Now, I don't believe that we ever reach the point of perfection where we live above every temptation - only Christ ever achieved that - but we can endure temptation and come out with our faith intact. Far too many "good-hearted" saints have succumbed to depression in the face of temptation. They feel defeated instead of looking to our Substitute who endured and excelled despite fleshly trials.

So, I'll say it again - temptation is not, in and of itself, sin.

"But, every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren." (James 1:14-16)

Do not err. Face the trial. Pray for strength in the face of temptation. Don't give in to the lusts of the flesh. Plus, (good news!) there's a fail-safe built into the plan –

"If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (1 John 2:1)

So, lift up your head, shake off your defeated attitude, look toward the High Priest who has paved a sure way into the Promised Land, who has guaranteed your rest, and...

{ 16 } - Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

There's a concept that I've tried to teach my children. I call it "press close." When they are in trouble, when they know they've let me down and there's going to be a price to pay, the worse thing they can do is run and hide. The safest place to be is wrapped in the arms of the one that can punish or forgive. "So," I tell them, "Come tell the truth. Let's get it over. And, press close. I love you and we'll get through the problem together. Don't stay out there at arm's distance where I can swing at you. Press close to my heart and count on your father's love and mercy."

I've learned a great deal about our Heavenly Father through having my own kids to raise. And, He's not sitting on the throne of judgment waiting to pounce on His beloved children. He is merciful, patient, slow to anger, and full of grace. The best thing we can do when we slip, when we err, when we sin, is to press close. Come boldly (quickly, confidently) to the throne of grace.

Personally, I think it honors God when we approach Him that way. It's what He prefers, because it's what His Son has accomplished. We are in no fear of judgment. We are safest wrapped in the arms of the One who bought us and redeemed us. He paid a heavy price to get us. He's not going to suddenly turn His back when His children run to Him - believing, counting on, and depending on Him to be gracious. That honors Him. It honors His promises to us. It honors His Son.

Press close.

Seeing the example of the Exodus generation of Israelites who lost their inheritance to lack of faith, it is of utmost importance and necessity that we "hold fast our profession" of Christ and His complete deliverance. And, it can be done! In chapter 11 the Hebrews' author will list the Old Testament "heroes of faith." There is always a remnant according to the election of grace who will cling to God's faithful promises.

And, that faith gives us entrance to the very throne of God, which we are exhorted to take full advantage of. Run - don't linger, don't lag - to the place of grace and mercy. And, know that you are welcome there. Like the father who watched for his prodigal son to return, the Heavenly Father celebrates every time an erring son or daughter returns to Him in confidence and trust.

In the time of trouble, in the time of pain, in the time of frustration or confusion, come boldly and find sufficient grace to carry you through your time of need.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1)

I'll repeat myself - press close.