

4. A Sabbath Rest and a Great High Priest for the People of God (Hebrews 4)

The introduction of Hebrews 4 advances the two central meanings of chapters 2 and 3. In Heb 3:1, the first point, among other things, was that Jesus is the high priest of our confession, "1 Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess." We must hold to this confession with confidence until the end. Heb 3:14 states, "14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first." The second point is that the children of Israel could not enter their rest because of unbelief. Heb 3:19 stated, "19 So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief." The stage is set with these ideas: Christians have a Sabbath rest, and Christians have a great high priest, who has gone through the heavens.

A Sabbath-Rest for the People of God (Heb 4:1-11)

Heb 4:1-3a

4:1 Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. 2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. 3 Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

*"So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'"*

Even though the children of Israel could not enter into God's rest in the promised land across the Jordan, the writer here makes certain that the readers understand that the promise of entering into his rest still stands. Following this truth—the promise still stands—are three assertions: do not fall short of the promise; we have heard the gospel preached, but we, as they, must combine it with faith; therefore, we who have believed enter that rest. If we do not believe and obey, for they did not, God's oath, declared in anger, still stands, "They shall never enter my rest.

Heb 4:3b-7

And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. 4 For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." 5 And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

6 It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. 7 Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before:

*"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts."*

The word of God, spoken of in verse 3b, identifies the true rest as a greater rest than the one promised the Israelites who crossed Jordan. It is the rest dictated by God when he finished the creation of the world. When God rested from all his work, it is implicit that no other work remained. Therefore, when he said, "They shall never enter into **my** rest," that rest has been in place since the creation of the world, for His work has been finished since the creation of the world. That rest included the faithful who lived before Christ, and the faithful who have lived since. The rest spoken of is not the seventh day rest of the Jews or the rest in Canaan Land of the Israelites. The rest here is the eternal rest in heaven with Christ Jesus and God the Father. To turn back to a temporal, earthly rest would be foolish, indeed. The revelation of

God's will to man closed, saying it is done, as God describes His rest in Rev 21:6-8

6 He said to me: "**It is done.** I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

Heb 4:8-11

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. 9 There remains, then, a Sabbath – rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. 11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

The logic is clear, God and Joshua were speaking about two very different days. The day God speaks of is the Sabbath-rest for the people of God. The rest of God comes to those who make every effort to enter. When folks, presently call Sunday the Sabbath Day, they are inaccurate and misleading in their false teaching. We do not want to miss out on the Sabbath-rest for the people of God by following their example of unbelief. We must follow the word of God and make every effort to enter that rest.

A Great High Priest Who Has Gone through the Heavens (Heb 4:12-16)

Heb 4:12-13

12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Man cannot ignore God's word as the Israelites did. The extended metaphor that describes God's word shows the futility of disobedience. The metaphor covers the soul and spirit, the body even to its joints and marrow, the thoughts and attitudes of the heart – nothing is hidden from God; therefore, there is no hiding from God. We are exposed. We must give account.

Heb 4:14-16

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Amidst such exposure by God's word, how can we survive the account that we must give? We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. *Since* in this passage is more appropriate *seeing*, which makes this clause a premise to the conclusion that follows. The translators achieve this meaning by the inclusion of *therefore*. The strong conclusion is, "Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess." In the weakness of our lives, we have the help of a high priest who is able to sympathize with us and help us. The assistance that we need is ever-present, the writer concludes, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

That we have a greater rest and that we have a greater high priest show the superiority of the New Covenant with God over the Law of Moses. The remaining chapters of Hebrews describe the great and enduring benefits of this priesthood and covenant.