



Hebrews - Chapter Four

II Hebrews 3:1-10:18 - Jesus Is Superior to the Mosaic Law (continues)

II.b Hebrews 3:7-4:13 - Warning: a rest for the people of God (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

The writer to the Hebrews indicates there is great privilege and hope for those who have believed the good news of the Gospel and subsequently live their lives for God. However, there is also a warning, based on the example of the exodus generation who also had the same promises of God but failed to come into God's rest due to their apostasy, or lack of faith at least.

The writer refers to three types of God's rest: his Sabbath, when he rested from the work of creation and which he gave as a gift to his people to similarly rest from all their labours; the rest the people received after entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua; and a final rest that is offered for those who persevere in the faith that is theirs through Christ Jesus.

The chapter concludes just as the writer returns to the theme of Jesus as the great high priest who, in his human state, underwent the same type of testing that all other humans do and yet was without sin.

II.b.ii Hebrews 4:1-13 - Entering God's rest

Continuing with his exposition of Psalm 95, the author focuses on the word 'rest'. Although some believe he had in view either an entirely present or an entirely future rest, the following section makes most sense if the rest is understood as already inaugurated but awaiting consummation.

He looks primarily to the future, as indicated by the need to continue striving to enter this rest (v.1, v.11, and v.14), and by the promise of a cessation from the struggles of this life (vv.9-10). Yet there remains a sense in which that future rest touches the experience of this life, hence 'today' in v.7.

¹ Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

Hebrews 4:1

Therefore. Verses 1-13 connect closely with the preceding argument in Hebrews 3:7-11 and Hebrews 3:16-19, and then with vv.2-10. Likewise it links to the previous exhortation Hebrews 3:12-14 and with vv.11-13.

Promises are important in Hebrews, especially those made and secured by God himself, refer to Hebrews 6:12-20; 8:6; 9:15; 10:23, and 11:13. There remains a future, end-time Sabbath rest from God that can be entered in some measure even in this life (vv.3-10), and care must be taken to enter that rest.

Take care is the Greek *phobeomai* that is also translated as fear. Reverential fear before God, here concerning a person's spiritual state: <<***but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him***>> (Acts 10:35), <<***That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe***>> (Romans 11:20), <<***Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor***>> (1 Peter 2:17), <<***And from the throne came a voice saying, Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great***>> (Revelation 19:5).

Should seem to have failed to reach it. The author holds out the possibility that some in his audience lacked acquaintance with this spiritual 'rest' since they did not possess true faith, as will be noted in v.2.

² For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

Hebrews 4:2

Comparisons between the exodus generation and the church continue. Both received the divine proclamation of deliverance, i.e. good news, and both were called to respond by faith. However, the exodus generation did not receive the promised benefit since they failed to respond by faith. Their failure serves to caution the Christian community against unbelief.

The good news of the exodus included God's promised deliverance from Egypt, the covenant he established with his people, and the hope of entering the Promised Land: <<***Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.'*** God also spoke to Moses and said to him: '***I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name "The Lord" I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, "I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord***

your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.” Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery>> (Exodus 6:1-9).

The good news for the church includes the revelation and deliverance found in the Lord Jesus, the new covenant he established through his high priestly sacrifice, and the hope of eternity with him: <<*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs*>> (Hebrews 1:1-4), and: <<*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested*>> (Hebrews 2:14-18).

³ For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

‘As in my anger I swore,
“They shall not enter my rest”’,

though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. ⁴ For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.’ ⁵ And again in this place it says, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’

Hebrews 4:3-5

We who have believed. Faith in God’s good news is necessary to enter into God’s rest: <<*So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief*>> (Hebrews 3:19), and more positively: <<*And we want each one of you to show the same diligence, so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises*>> (Hebrews 6:11-12). Refer also to Hebrews 10:22, Hebrews 10:37-39, Hebrews 11:1-39, and Hebrews 13:7.

As in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest” is taken from Psalm 95:11 and is a demonstration of God’s righteous wrath being applied to those who continually fail to heed his words and refuse to live by his decrees.

The rest of God, they shall not enter my rest, is connected with God’s resting on the seventh day after the six days of creation, quoted from Genesis 2:2, i.e. for in

one place it speaks about the seventh day. The fact that the exodus generation was not allowed to enter that rest proves that God's Sabbath rest, which began in Genesis Chapter 2, is still open. Even 'today', at the time of the writing of Hebrews, this rest could still be entered. The implication is that until Christ returns people throughout the entire age can similarly enter into this rest.

⁶ Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he sets a certain day – 'today' – saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

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

Hebrews 4:6-7

Verse 6 restates the conclusion of vv.2-5 and: <<*As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'* Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief>> (Hebrews 3:15-19).

Good news was discussed in v.2. Here, the argument advances by suggesting that the today of Psalm 95:7-8 holds out to the worshiper the possibility of entering even now, in a partial way, into the end-time 'rest' and blessing that the exodus generation missed. God's rest centred upon recognising that his work of creation was now completed; Christians enter into his rest through recognising that Christ's work of redeeming them from sin has also been completed: <<*When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.'* Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit>> (John 19:30).

Much later refers to David writing the psalm at least 200 years after the event of the Exodus.

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. ⁹ So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; ¹⁰ for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from his.

Hebrews 4:8-10

In the NT, Joshua is named only here and in a reference to the Ark of the Covenant: <<*Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David>> (Acts 7:45).*

Joshua was the leader who succeeded Moses and had the privilege of bringing his people into the Promised Land. He, along with Caleb, were the only two of the exodus generation to enter into the land of Canaan as an inheritance.

In both Hebrew and Greek the name Joshua is the same as Jesus, and some translations insert the name Jesus in v.8, which can cause confusion in understanding what the writer to the Hebrews intended. The author, however, was well aware of the parallel, as well as the difference, between Joshua and Jesus. Joshua gave the people of God their first rest; Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, will provide them with their final rest.

For if Joshua had given them rest. One could conceivably argue that the rest that the exodus generation sought was their entrance into the Promised Land. However, that entrance occurred in the days of Joshua, and Psalm 95, with its promise of 'today' entering into God's rest, is subsequent to Joshua's day, that is referred to as 'much later' in v.7.

God would not speak later about another day. What Psalm 95 and Hebrews indicates is that God speaks of three periods of rest: the Sabbath rest; the period of rest that the Hebrews would know after they had conquered the Promised Land and were settled in it, growing strong and prosperous by the time of David and Solomon; and a final period of rest in an era that was still to come in both the time of the psalmist and of the writer to the Hebrews.

Therefore, the Sabbath rest remains possible for God's people to enter even now, in this life. The promise of entering now into this rest means ceasing from the spiritual strivings that reflect uncertainty about one's final destiny; it means enjoyment of being established in the presence of God, to share in the everlasting joy that God entered when he rested on the seventh day.

The Sabbath rest was fundamental to the Jewish lifestyle, after all it was one of the key commandments of God that it should be observed: <<*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy*>> (Exodus 20:8). Jesus was frequently accused of breaking this commandment but he only ever did so as acts of healing and compassion, such as: <<*And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?*>> (Luke 13:16). It is also noted that: <<*But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working'*>> (John 5:19). The principle of resting at least one day a week has never been rescinded in the NT. However, since Jesus fulfilled the law, it seems it is no longer a formal requirement to observe a particular day on which to rest, also indicated by Paul who wrote: <<*Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds*>> (Romans 14:5).

For those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from his. The concept to cease striving for God's favour is something that Paul argues most strongly as well, for salvation is not by works of the law but by faith in God through Jesus, and entry into his rest remains a free gift of grace and not an obligation as a reward for work undertaken in the name of God.

This is, of course, also a reference to ceasing from earthly labour rather than striving to earn salvation. God had promised those who laboured that they would be rewarded: <<*They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands*>> (Isaiah 65:22), and Paul instructs disciples that they should indeed work for their keep: <<*For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:10). However, there will come a time when those who were faithful to God's call will rest peacefully: <<*Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether they eat little or much*>> (Ecclesiastes 5:12a).

According to Tom Wright: All of us face the challenge to trust God rather than to trust the way we feel or the things we see in front of us. All of us need to keep before our eyes the promise of God's eventual, and eternal, 'rest'.

¹¹ Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

Hebrews 4:11

Therefore, in light of the conclusion from vv.9-10, make every effort to enter that rest. This again emphasises the need for perseverance: <<*Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it*>> (Hebrews 2:1), and: <<*For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end*>> (Hebrews 3:14). It should be remembered, however, that salvation is based not on good works but on Jesus' high priestly sacrifice: <<*Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*>> (Hebrews 5:8-9), <<*And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God', and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.'*>> (Hebrews 10:10-14), and anything believers can do to please God comes from his working in them: <<*Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen*>> (Hebrews 13:20-21).

The opposite of perseverance is disobedience, the sin of the faithless exodus generation: <<*And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient?*>> (Hebrews 3:18), and confirmed in v.6.

¹² Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Hebrews 4:12-13

The warning continues: **faithless disobedience will not go unnoticed.**

The word of God is living and active has been taken by some to refer to Jesus because of: <<*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*>> (John 1:1). However, the following comments will show that it almost certainly refers to the written and spoken words of God.

The Word of God. Usually this phrase in Hebrews refers to the message of salvation: <<*Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*>> (Hebrews 13:7), but here the Word is pictured as God's personal utterance, living, active, sharp, piercing, and discerning, i.e. it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart, with eyes that expose.

The Word of God then acts as God himself, so that one's innermost thoughts and intentions are exposed for before him no creature is hidden: <<*And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve*>> (Revelation 2:23b). This happens consistently in the lives of disciples, although there appears to be too many who have become complacent about what they have read and heard. There are also many who choose not to read or hear it at all. What this passage is saying is that there will come a time when all will be judged by it, and how they responded to its call on their life, i.e. we must render an account.

The Word of God is taken by some to refer to the OT. It cannot refer to the NT as much of it was not written and even that which was in circulation around the early church may or may not have been known to the writer. It is clear though that he means more than just the OT, for his focus is on Jesus. It is best thought of as the OT Scriptures and the message about how they all came to fruition in Jesus. God had spoken through the prophet: <<*Your ancestors, where are they? And the prophets, do they live for ever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your ancestors? So they repented and said, 'The Lord of hosts has dealt with us according to our ways and deeds, just as he planned to do'*>> (Zechariah 1:5-6), and the apostle concurs: <<*For 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures for ever.'* That word is the good news that was announced to you>> (1 Peter 1:24-25).

Sharper than any two-edged sword is an illustration of just how deeply and easily the Word of God can penetrate, for such a weapon was renowned for the way it would pass so easily right through any human body, even those wearing armour. Paul gives further enlightenment: <<*Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*>> (Ephesians 6:17), which is best illustrated in John's vision: <<*In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his*

mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force>> (Revelation 1:16).

This passage may come across as a stark warning to those who are not living a Gospel-centred life. However, the message can also be taken as one of encouragement, for it is never too late in this life to turn to the living Word and respond to its call. Those who accept the challenge of the Gospel message will be richly rewarded. Those who do not will be judged justly.

II.c Hebrews 4:14-10:18 - The high priesthood of Jesus

Jesus' high priestly call is superior to the Mosaic priesthood due to:

1. Jesus' ability to sympathise with human need.
2. His perfect holiness.
3. His eternal call to the priestly order of Melchizedek combined with his eternal sonship.
4. His initiating a new and better covenant.
5. His ministering in the true heavenly tabernacle.
6. His presenting himself as a once-for-all sacrifice for the salvation and perfection of all his followers.

The writer pauses in the middle of this section to warn once more against the danger of apostasy (Hebrews 5:11-6:12), and to express confidence in God's promises (Hebrews 6:13-20).

II.c.i Hebrews 4:14-5:10 - Jesus the great high priest

Using themes announced in Hebrews 2:17-3:12, the author calls for Christian faithfulness based on Jesus' role as the holy and sympathetic high priest, appointed by God his Father to suffer so that others would receive the gift of eternal salvation.

¹⁴ Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

Hebrews 4:14

Jesus' role as high priest is announced in: <<*Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people*>> (Hebrews 2:17), expounded here in Hebrews 4:14-5:10, and further explained in Hebrews 7:1-28.

Passed through the heavens is a reminder that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father, where he acts as mediator for all who come to the Father in prayer and supplication in Christ's name.

The high priest was the only one permitted to enter God's presence behind the veil in the tabernacle or temple, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. Jesus has surpassed the earthly priest for the curtain was torn in

two at the moment of his death and he now sits in an even holier place than that which the priest entered. Therefore, we now have boldness to enter into the holiest place by the blood of Jesus. He is our Advocate and, while he pleads for his people, he pleads with the price in his hand, by which he purchased all that our souls need or could ever desire.

Son of God. Jesus' role as a human high priest, recorded in Hebrews 2:5-18, is united with his position as God's unique Son: <<*So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'; as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek'*>> (Hebrews 5:5-6). This is a status that the writer feels he does not need to explain, showing just how widely it was accepted by the time the letter was written.

Let us hold fast continues the theme of perseverance: <<*Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope*>> (Hebrews 3:6), and: <<*Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end*>> (Hebrews 3:12-14).

Our confession. As previously stated, the Christian confession is extremely important, for all believers are called to openly confess that Jesus is Lord of their lives, that they do believe he is the Son of God who came into the world, was crucified for the sins of mankind and yet was raised back to life by the power of God's Holy Spirit and now acts as a mediator in God's presence for those who call upon his name. Refer also to comments made of Hebrews 3:1.

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

Sympathise. Jesus is able to identify with his people: <<*For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting*>> (Hebrews 10:34), because of his human experience and the sufferings he endured while being tempted. Refer also to Hebrews 2:10-18, especially vv.17-18.

Tested is the Greek *peirazō*, and can refer either to temptation intended to bring one down or to testing designed to build one up; both connotations probably apply here, such as Jesus temptation by Satan in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-11, and Jesus' acknowledgement of his disciples' faithfulness during testing: <<*You are those who have stood by me in my trials*>> (Luke 22:28).

Without sin. Although Jesus was tested in every respect, that is, in every area of his personal life, he remained sinless unlike every other human being: <<*since all*

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>> (Romans 3:23), and thus he is truly the holy high priest: <<He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people>> (Hebrews 5:2-3), and: <<For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever>> (Hebrews 7:26-28). In their temptations, Christians can be comforted with the truth that nothing that entices them is foreign to their Lord. He too has felt the tug of sin, and yet he never gave in to such temptations.

¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16

Approach is the Greek *proserchomai*, which can also be translated as ‘go to’ or ‘draw near to’. It is used consistently in Hebrews to represent a person approaching God: <<Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them>> (Hebrews 7:25), <<And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him>> (Hebrews 11:6), as well as in: <<Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining”’>> (Exodus 16:9), <<Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai>> (Exodus 34:32), <<They brought what Moses commanded to the front of the tent of meeting; and the whole congregation drew near and stood before the Lord>> (Leviticus 9:5), and: <<you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain while the mountain was blazing up to the very heavens, shrouded in dark clouds>> (Deuteronomy 4:11), which is possible only when one’s sins are forgiven through the sacrificial and intercessory ministry of a high priest: <<let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water>> (Hebrews 10:22).

The encouragement to approach God’s throne implies that Christians have the privilege of a personal relationship with God.

Boldness translates the Greek *parrēsia* which means confidence or courage, especially with reference to speaking before someone of great rank or power: <<Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognised them as companions of Jesus>> (Acts 4:13), <<Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus>> (Hebrews 10:19), and: <<Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward>> (Hebrews 10:35). It indicates that Christians may come before God and

Speak plainly and honestly, albeit with appropriate reverence, without fear that they will incur shame or punishment by doing so.

Throne of grace. God the Father, with Jesus at his right hand: <<*Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens*>> (Hebrews 8:1), graciously dispenses help from heaven to those who need forgiveness and strength in times of testing and temptation: <<*Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested*>> (Hebrews 2:18).

Mercy and grace are dispensed on a daily basis on all of mankind, without it we could not exist, but a day is coming when it will be especially needed and it was a prayer of Paul's for the faithful Onesiphorus: <<*may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day!*>> (2 Timothy 1:18). So too the rest of us!