

## HEBREWS CHAPTER 4

### [II] THE TRUE HOME (REST) OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD (4:1 - 4:16)

#### **3. The true home or rest of God may be forfeited (4:1-10).**

**4:1.** The promise of entering his rest still 'stands' in the sense of 'is left open' (Greek: καταλειπομένης <καταλειπομαι>(participle present passive). The 'rest' (cf. 3:11) was not exhausted by 'the earthly Canaan'. Then the goal of the people of God was to enter the earthly Canaan. Today the goal of the people of God is to enter the spiritual counterpart of the earthly Canaan (cf. 4:9-10). Believers are urged to press on, not miss that goal, but attain that goal!

**4:2.** We have been evangelised as they were. 'Evangelised' (Greek: εσμεν ευαγγελισμενοι)(participle perfect passive). The perfect emphasizes the completeness of the evangelisation that has taken place. It leaves no room for people to make any excuse to the effect that evangelisation had been inadequate or deficient.

The Israelites had the gospel preached to them (cf. Gal 2:8). The good news consisted of Exodus 19:3-6, 23:20-33. It told the Israelites that the God of their fathers, who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, would bring them safely to the promised land and give them possession of it. He would make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to himself.

But they did not combine 'hearing' with 'faith'! The condition was that they would obey God's voice and keep God's covenant. However, the good news did them no good, because they did not obey God's Word and did not keep God's covenant. The practical implication is: Not the hearing of the gospel, but the appropriation of the gospel by faith brings salvation! Such faith is genuine faith, will be persistent faith and is the kind of faith that saves!

#### **4:3-5. Twice God spoke of a rest.**

i) The 'rest' on the seventh day after he had completed his creation (Gen 2:1-4)(4:4). The Hebrew text uses the verb 'shabat' (to rest) and the Greek text uses the verb 'katapauo' (to rest). The seventh creation day has no end formula (like the other 6 creation days: "It was evening and it was morning, the .... day"). Therefore God's rest *began* on the seventh creation day, but has *never ended*! It has been available throughout the Old Testament period and is still available during the New Testament period. His rest continues and may be shared by anyone who responds with faith and obedience. Jesus repeats this truth: "My father works until now, and I work". Although God's rest began after the work of creation was finished and is still going on, God continues to work! - And therefore Christ continues to work! (Jn 5:17). Thus 'God's rest' does not mean that God ceased to work! The Sabbath day celebrates God's rest, but never celebrates doing nothing (cf. Mark 3:4)!

[Another interpretation of Hebrews 4:3-4 came from *The Epistle of Barnabas* (15:4f,8). "Pay attention, children, to the meaning of the words: 'He finished it in six days'. It means that in 6000 years the Lord will bring everything to completion. For 'the day' with him is a thousand years, of which he himself bears me witness when he says, 'Behold, the day of the Lord shall be as a thousand years'. Therefore, children, in six days - that is in 6000 years - everything will be brought to completion. 'And he rested the seventh day'. This means: when his Son comes and brings to nought the period of the Lawless One and judges the ungodly and changes the sun and moon and stars, then he will rest properly on the seventh day ... Finally he says to them: 'Your new moons and sabbaths I cannot endure'. See what he means: it is not your present sabbaths that are acceptable, but the sabbath that I have made, in which, when I have put everything to rest, I will make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, the beginning of a new world."

The sabbath of God is here the seventh millennium of the present creation, which is to be followed by the eternal age of the new creation. *Barnabas has confused the issue* by superimposing on the Jewish scheme of the millennial sabbath or seventh 'day' the Christian concept of the eighth millennium corresponding to the resurrection day. Thus the seventh day is a type of the seventh age of righteousness which is to follow six ages of sin's domination. The mistaken Jewish millennial thinking is the root of the modern mistaken Christian millennial thinking.]

ii) The 'rest' of entering the promised land, Canaan (Psalm 95:11)(4:5). The Hebrew text uses the substantive 'menuchah' and the Greek text uses the substantive 'katapausis'. Verse 5 follows immediately on verse 4 and shows that they speak of the same 'rest'. God's rest remained open to his people since his work of the creation was finished, but it will be forfeited by disobedience.

The writer of Hebrews concludes that the 'rest' of God, called 'the Sabbath-rest', is still open for the people of God (4:9-10)! The Greek text uses the substantive 'sabbatismos' (a Sabbath-rest). The 'rest' has nothing to do with the mistaken notion that Christians are commanded to keep the Saturday as a Sabbath day. The 'rest' is not the rest which God enforces on others or even bestows on others, but it is the rest which God himself enjoys.

**4:6-7.** The Israelites, "who had formerly been evangelised" failed to enter God's rest (not only in a physical sense: Canaan, but in a spiritual sense: the heavenly Jerusalem) because of their lack of faith and obedience. They heard the gospel, but were not saved. They were lost instead.

Every time God speaks it is 'Today' for the hearers! 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'.

"In David" (4:7) means "in the Psalter" (Ps 95:7-8) and does not imply that David actually composed Psalm 95. What is important is that GOD speaks 'in David' (cf. 2 Tim 3:16)! God's word remains 'alive' and 'effective' long after it was spoken and speaks to the heart and conscience of the hearers in the New Testament period. The divine warning is as applicable to them as it was in the days of Moses or David. If the New Testament readers treat God's Word lightly, if they 'tempt' God by trying to see how far they can presume upon his patience, they in turn will forfeit God's rest!

**4:8. Joshua.** The parallel between the Old Testament 'Jesus' (Joshua also means 'Saviour'), who led his followers into the earthly Canaan, and the New Testament Jesus, who leads the heirs of the new covenant into their heavenly inheritance, is a prominent theme of early Christian typology (The Epistle of Barnabas 6:8f; Justin's Dialogue with Trypho 113,132. Jesus is not only the antitype of the earlier Joshua, but also of the later Joshua, the first post-exilic high priest (Ezra 3:20; Hag 1:1; Zech 3:1; 6:11f).

The writer does not make this typology, but contrasts the temporal rest, which Israel entered under Joshua, and the true rest, which is still reserved for the people of God. It is plain that the 'rest' spoken of in Psalm 95:11 is not the earthly Canaan. The land of rest was occupied under Joshua by the second generation of Israelites and they enjoyed "rest from all their enemies round about" (Josh 23:1; cf. 21:44). The Israelites addressed in Psalm 95 already lived in the land of Canaan for generations and were warned that they could forfeit the 'rest' of God, which must be different than the rest of their enemies round about.

**4:9-10. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.** The rest of God is called 'a sabbath rest' or 'a sabbath keeping' (Greek: σαββατισμος)(sabbatismos), because it is a participation in God's own rest! When God completed his work of creation, he rested. So his people, when they have completed their work of service on earth in accordance with God's will, they will enter into God's rest; they will enjoy 'the completed work of salvation in the presence of God in the heavenly Jerusalem' (cf. Rev 14:13)!

Christians do not yet enjoy the experience of that rest in their present mortal bodies on this present earth, but it is their heritage and by faith they live in the assured hope (cf. 11:1) here and now that it will be a complete reality in the future. Hebrews chapter 11 speaks of people who had such 'faith'. They looked forward to 'the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (11:10). They were longing for 'a better country' - 'a heavenly one' (11:16). They were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain 'a better resurrection' (11:35).

Do believers enter this 'rest' at the time of their own death or only at the time of their resurrection?

The author of Hebrews gives no explicit answer. On the one hand, he says that the Old Testament saints would only receive what had been promised (the heavenly country) together with Christians of the New Testament period (11:39-40). On the other hand, he says that the New Testament Christians enjoy the reality of the heavenly Jerusalem at the time of their death (12:22-24).

The key is Hebrews 11:39-40, "None of the Old Testament believers received what had been promised; they would only be made perfect", 'be made complete' or 'be brought to the goal' (Greek: τελειωθωσιν <τελειωω)(subjunctive aorist passive) together with the New Testament believers (11:40).

The true Old Testament Israel is never a perfect reality by itself - it must be continued and extended worldwide to include the believers from all the other nations *in order to reach its perfect goal*, the New Testament Church consisting of believing Jews and believing non-Jews (Rom 2:28-29; 4:11-17; Gal 6:12-16; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Rev 5:9-10) on its way to 'the new Jerusalem on the new earth'.

It does not seem likely that the words 'what has been promised' refers to 'the enjoyment of salvation in the presence of God in the heavenly Jerusalem', because Old Testament believers like Abraham are alive in the presence of God (cf. Mt 22:32) and likewise New Testament believers are alive in the presence of God in the heavenly Jerusalem (2 Cor 5:1-9; Phil 1:21-23; Heb 12:22-24). It seems more likely that the words 'what has been promised' refers to 'the reality of the people of God consisting of believers from every nation on the present earth on its way to be the Bride of the Lamb on the new earth' (Rev 21:1-2,9-10,12-14).

Believers during the Old Testament period were already THEN and believers during the New Testament period are already NOW citizens of that 'rest', that heavenly city and that heavenly country (Phil 2:20), even when they will only exercise their civic rights in the future: at the time of their death in the heavenly Jerusalem and at the time of their resurrection in the new Jerusalem on the new earth (cf. Phil 2:21).

One way or the other, God's New Testament people are urged to press forward towards this 'rest' in unbroken fellowship with God.

#### **4. Exhortation to persevere and attain God's rest (4:11-13).**

**4:11.** Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest. In view of the glory that is accessible to faith and in view of the disaster that follows upon unbelief, Christians must 'make haste', 'make it their earnest endeavour', 'concentrate their energies to achieve that goal' (Greek: σπουδασωμεν)(subjunctive aorist active). Their goal is the eternal home of the people of God. God is not to be trifled with. God's Word cannot be ignored with impunity, but must be received in faith and obeyed in daily life. Whenever God speaks, his 'today' has arrived. Let all hearers take God's Word seriously and make haste to enter God's rest.

**4:12.** The word of God is not like the word of man.

i) The word of God is 'living' - it speaks as a living person to you and it brings life to every kind of death in you.

ii) The word of God is 'active', 'energetic' and 'productive' (Greek: ενεργης). It produces effective results. It is self-fulfilling and speeds to fulfil the purpose for which it has been uttered (Isa 55:10-11; Jer 23:29).

iii) The word of God is sharper than any double-edged sword, it 'penetrates', 'pierces', or 'passes through' (Greek: διικνουμενος) even to dividing (Greek: μερισμου) soul and spirit, joints and marrow, that is, to the very core of our human being, personality and character. The word of God 'judges' (Greek: κριτικος) the 'reflections', 'thoughts' or 'ideas' (Greek: ενθυμησεων) and 'attitudes' or 'thoughts', 'insights' and 'knowledge' (Greek: εννοιων) of the heart (of especially philosophers). The word of God diagnoses the attitudes and condition of the human heart, showing what is lacking and what needs to be improved. It brings blessings to those who receive it in faith, but pronounces judgement on those who disregard it. The word of God is 'double-edged' or 'two-mouthed' (Greek: δι-στομος) - it cuts both ways - like the long 'sword' used by the barbaric people (Greek: ρομφαια), which Christ wields in judgement (Rev 1:16; 2:12). Here it is the short 'sword' of the Romans or 'sacrificial knife' (Greek: μαχαιρα), which the Holy Spirit wields in spiritual warfare (Eph 6:17).

The rhetorical accumulation of related words: soul, spirit, joints and marrow does not intend to give a teaching on the psychological make-up of the human being, but rather expresses the inmost recesses of the spiritual human being, bringing subconscious thoughts and motives light (1 Cor 4:5). God knows the human heart (Jn 1:25; Act 1:24;15:8).

**4:13.** Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. People can hide things from their neighbours and even deceive themselves, but they cannot hide anything from God (Ps 33:13-15)! Everything is 'naked', 'stripped', 'bare', 'uncovered' (Greek: γυμνα) and 'laid bare', rather (every argument of defence will be 'powerless' (Greek: τετραηλισμενα)(participle perfect passive) before the eyes of God. The word 'τραξηλιζω' means 'to twist the neck' (Greek: τραχηλος) and the word 'τραχηλισμος' was a wrestler's grip around the neck of his opponent, rendering or revealing him limp, powerless and helpless. When people face God in the final judgement they will be likewise completely revealed and powerless. Stripped of every disguise and protection, people will be at the complete mercy of God, the Judge of all, when they give an account of their lives.

### **[III] CHRIST QUALIFIES FOR THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD (4:14 - 5:10)**

#### **1. Christians have a great high priest. They should approach him with bold confidence (4:14-16).**

**4:14.** Christians have a high priest. He is a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17).

He is transcendent. He has gone through the heavens. The plural does not refer to the three heavens in 2 Corinthians 12:2, but reflects the plural used in the Hebrew word 'shamajim' (cf. Gen 1:1). What is emphasized is his transcendence: "he is made higher than the heavens" (7:26). He ascended "far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:10; cf. 1:21).

**4:15.** His transcendence has made no difference to his humanity. He sympathizes with us in every temptation or trial. He helps us in every weakness and in every difficult situation. He himself has suffered these temptations and trials (2:17). Christians have a High Priest that identified himself with humans. He endured human temptations and trials, but he endured them triumphantly. 'Sympathy' with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin, but on the experience of the strength of the temptation to sin, which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. Every human being, who falls before a temptation or trial, yields before the last strain. But Jesus Christ remained without sin; he did not yield to the temptations of sin.

**4:16.** Let us approach the throne of grace with 'confidence', 'boldness' (Greek: παρησια), in contrast to all the restrictions placed on the Old Testament priesthood and believers when they entered into God's presence.

'The throne of grace' is the throne of God, where Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father as the exalted King, prophet and High priest. It is the antitype of the 'mercy seat' in the holy of holies in the earthly temple (9:5). During the Old Testament period, atonement of sins was done in token before this mercy seat or throne of grace once a year on the Great Atonement Day. But now during the New Testament period, atonement of sins has been made, *not in*

*token but in fact, and not once a year, but constantly available* to assure the Christian that his sins have really been forgiven.

The throne of grace in heaven is constantly 'open' and 'accessible' so that Christians may receive mercy and grace to help them just when they need it. At the moment of the temptation or trial Christ's mercy and grace to help is immediately available.