

Sermon Preparation Notes - Hebrews Chapter 4

The Structure of the Chapter:

- (vv1-2) The Sabbath rest of God and the danger of falling short of it.
- (vv3-5) The Sabbath rest of God and the danger of being excluded from it.
- (vv6-11) The open invitation that remains to enter the Sabbath rest of God.
- (vv12-13) An exhortation to enter into the Sabbath rest of God, but with a reminder that our response must be authentic, God cannot be deceived.
- (vv14-16) The comforting thought that Jesus himself acts as our High Priest, mediating between us and God. Having shared our human existence he is sensitive to our difficulties and gracious and merciful about our failures.

General Comments:

The author of Hebrews continues the theme introduced in 3v11, where the entry into the Promised Land was likened to entering into God's Sabbath rest. The author develops this theme and goes on to prove that this pointed far beyond the people of Israel's entry into Canaan. Rather it indicated something far deeper and far more significant, in effect it referred to a new way of existing. A sharing in the kind of life that God himself enjoys.

Having outlined what he means the author then explains what kind of people can enter into that new way of existing and what kind of people can't. He also shows that as it speaks of something beyond the entry into Canaan, the promise of God remains an open invitation, addressed to all.

The author exhorts the Hebrew Christians to respond to this invitation and to enter into this new kind of existence, but he also warns them of the absolute necessity of authenticity. God cannot be bluffed, or fooled with a half-hearted, insincere response.

However, he concludes with the encouraging and comforting thought that it is Jesus himself who mediates between us and God. Someone who has shared fully our human existence, and who therefore appreciates fully our difficulties and problems. Therefore we can count on his mercy and grace towards us.

Verse by Verse Analysis:

(vv1-2) **The Sabbath rest of God and the danger of falling short of it?**

The promise still stands - Hope is still held out to man. Israel's disobedience has not thwarted the plans of God. Another people will enter into God's rest. All men are now offered this possibility of the Sabbath rest of God.

Let us be careful - The author seeks to motivate his hearers to enter into this rest through a sense of fear of failure. We have seen previously that Christians are freed from the fear of death (2v15), we will see later that Christians are thus also free from the fear of rulers (11vv23, 27; 13v6). So for the Christian the most debilitating kinds of fear are removed. However, in particular circumstances, fear can be positive and a motivating force in our lives e.g. the fear of fire which protects us. Notice also the communal nature of the response required. It is not individuals that are the focus, but communities.

Found to have fallen short - The author reminds the Hebrew Christians of the high stakes involved in their response to the gospel. There is always a possibility of failure. The term «fall short» implies failure through lack of effort. Thus the key thought is that here there is something well within their capacity to attain, but they must expend effort in order to attain it.

He again refers back to the wilderness generation who failed to enter the Promised Land - his key example of followers of God who yet fail to attain all that God offers them. He ties this example from the O.T. into the contemporary Hebrew Christian's situation by referring to the revelation of God to the O.T. believers as «the gospel». Thus he makes the case that both groups have heard the gospel. Both have had to decide what response to make to it. The wilderness generation failed to respond with faith and so missed out on all that God was offering to them. The question remains, how will the Hebrew Christians respond?

It might seem odd to us that the O.T. revelation is referred to as the «gospel». The author compounds this oddness by saying that we have had the same «gospel» preached to us as they did. He therefore

draws no distinction between the O.T. gospel and the N.T. gospel. He indicates that they are one and the same thing. How can he make this claim?

The author is in fact expressing his conviction that Jesus and the Christian gospel are totally rooted in the O.T. They cannot therefore contradict each other. Jesus comes only to fulfil the O.T. gospel. Thus the O.T. message was always a salvific message for those who met it with faith - which is always the key test.

[Discussion - This poses an interesting question. If O.T. Jewish believers were saved through a faith response to the O.T. gospel, can they still be saved in this way? Certainly all salvation is only possible because of Christ. O.T. salvation was only ever possible in looking forward to Christ (however dimly perceived), and salvation now is only possible in looking back to Christ and his finished work. I recommend the book "Who Can be Saved" by Terence Tiessen for a discussion of this issue.]

The gospel minus faith equals nothing - He defines the cause of the failure of the wilderness generation as a defective response to the message, «the gospel» which they received from God. They heard it. They understood it. But they couldn't really bring themselves to believe it. There was nothing defective about the message, merely about their response to it.

This is a salutary warning. The chosen people of God failed to enter in to all that God had promised them because of a flawed, half-hearted response to God's message. This should motivate all Christians to be whole-hearted in our response to the gospel (c.f. Romans 11vv17-21, for a similar type of exhortation).

As the author will state later, «*Without faith it is impossible to please God*» (11v6).

(vv3-5) The Sabbath rest of God and the danger of being excluded from it.

Only the faithful enter - Whilst faithlessness has been linked with failure to enter into God's Sabbath rest, now faith is linked to the experience of entering into it. We who have faith are entering into that rest. This rest is not a physical destination, like Canaan, but rather a spiritual destination, the experience of God's own power and presence.

We can see clearly that membership of Israel was never the criterion for entering into the promises of God. A whole generation of Israelites who perished in the desert proves that. Faith and obedience are required to activate the promises, to bring us into the experience of them.

When we respond with faith to the gospel message something mystical and profound happens. We enter into a new kind of existence, a new world. A world where God is active and present around us and where we participate in the activities of the angelic spiritual powers working to build the kingdom of God. A world in which we are opposed at every turn by spiritual powers opposed to every aspect of the coming of that kingdom. This is the hidden reality of the Christian life.

God is at rest - Verses 3 to 5 pose a profound question. How can God be «at rest» if he is at the centre of this massive work of sustaining the creation (1v3, Psalm 104vv10-30) and if he is working towards the redemption of the universe and of the establishment of the kingdom of God? Similarly, how can we be at «rest», if we are also implicated and involved in this activity of God?

The first thing to note is that the rest is intrinsically linked to God himself - «*his rest, my rest, God rested, my rest*». The rest that is intended is therefore something that involves God himself. Another clue about this rest is given through a Genesis passage which speaks of God resting after the creation. The author also refers back to his previous quote from Psalms, where God states that faithless Israel shall not enter his rest. Both these texts indicate that God is at rest, but that man is not. However, God is offering his rest to man.

What then is the nature of God's rest? We find a clue in the text of the Genesis creation account. There is a difference in the account of the seventh day as compared to the previous six. After each of the six days of creation there is always this statement to bring each day to an end -- *And there was evening and there was morning -- the fourth day, etc.* This statement is omitted following the description of the seventh day. The seventh day was therefore given no end point. On this seventh day, following the six days of a completed creation, God rested. God is therefore still at rest. The word «rest» therefore describes God's current state of existence and his relationship to his creation. Thus God worked in the act of creating, then he rested in the enjoyment of his creation.

Man is not at rest - In Genesis Adam and Eve are also pictured as being in a state of rest. They shared the rest of God after the work of creation. A rest which speaks of an enjoyment of and a pleasure in, all the beauty of that which God has made. Something which God invited man to share with him. Therefore man's «work» in Eden was also his «rest». If you will, we can express this as man joining with God in «playing» with the creation. There is no striving against the creation. Man is free to joyfully express his creativity in his management and development of an obedient creation in loving partnership with his God.

Mankind has activity to carry out. Man has a function to perform. But in the context of the enjoyment of a never-ending, personal relationship with God and a creation submitted willingly to man's rule and reign over it. God's will for man was that this «resting» in his presence would continue for eternity.

Creation longs for God's rest - Sin brought separation from God and therefore man could no longer experience the rest of God. Man was driven out from the garden. This changed the nature of man's existence, the nature of the creation and also of man's relationship to the creation. Tending and developing the creation and having a family (Gen. 1v28-29, 2v15) which were to have been pure pleasure and delight - «God's rest» - now become man's hard labour and difficult work (c.f. Gen. 3v16-19).

Thus man is no longer at rest, only God is. Man struggles and toils and labours. Man has to fight and battle to make his way in a world that refuses his authority, that seeks to thwart his plans, that is hostile to him. (We see here the awful truth of the words of St. Paul in Romans 8v19-22 where he speaks of the groaning of the creation as it experiences the desperate effects of sin and longs to be released from this torment and restored to its harmonic state). The Sabbath rest of God is therefore not a state of inactivity, but an absence of the struggles of earthly life and the doing of God's service only.

(vv6-11) The open invitation that remains to enter the Sabbath rest of God.

Who will enter God's rest? - God seeks to bring man back to his original state of rest. God wishes to restore man to the relationship with himself that will bring man into that Sabbath rest. God wills that man's existence might be to him once again a simple joy and a pure delight, not a rude struggle and a hard fight. This is the glorious and wonderful opportunity held out to man in the gospel message.

Our response is however crucial. Disobedience to God, the lack of faith to take him at his word and to do what he tells us to do, can prevent us from entering into that glorious rest of God.

Verse 6 tells us clearly that some will enter that rest, and yet there were others that failed to enter it. Both destinies remain a real possibility for mankind. Which will the Hebrew Christians choose? Which will we choose?

The invitation is still open - Verse 7 makes the point that the opportunity to enter God's rest is very much an invitation that is still open. He quotes Psalm 95v7-8, where David talks about their being a day «today» where the opportunity of entering into God's rest still exists. Thus 500 years after the exodus and Joshua's leading the people of Israel into Canaan, David can say that there is still a promise of «rest» that has yet to be entered into.

This proves that the rest of God was a promise that pointed to a deeper, spiritual reality beyond the experience of the Promised Land. That deeper, spiritual reality is still held out as an offer from God to men. Thus the Promised Land was not the ultimate fulfilment of the promise, merely a step along the way.

The two Jesuses - It is important to note that «Joshua» is the O.T. form of the name «Jesus». Thus we have a contrast between the O.T. «Jesus» who finally brought the Israelites into Canaan but not into the true rest of God and the N.T. Jesus who can bring us into the fullness of the Sabbath rest of God. A rest which is not merely a material possession, nor merely a rest from warfare but which is an entirely new way of existing. A new restored relationship with God and a sharing in the divine life which has immense consequences in every domain (c.f. John 17v3). A rest that is not fully realised in this life, but will be in the life to come (c.f. Revelation 14v13).

Let us make every effort - Whenever the author of Hebrews makes reference to the opportunity for salvation, he nearly always follows it with a warning about not responding correctly to this opportunity. We have this again in verse 11. It is incumbent upon every hearer of the gospel to make every effort to respond correctly to that gospel message. Hearing is not the same as believing. Only believing - evidenced by obedience - actualises the promise of salvation.

We must note also the communal nature of this experience. Let us make every effort to enter in. A generation failed to enter into the Promised Land. A fellowship of Hebrew Christians may fail to enter into the salvation of God. God's goal is never the salvation of individuals, but rather that the whole people of God should reach their destination. This is why a vision of the wider reality of the people of God is an essential part of the Christian experience. Whilst we are saved within a local fellowship, we are saved into the universal Church. A body that exists beyond the boundaries of ecclesiastical identity, beyond the boundaries of theological conviction, even beyond the boundary of time itself. It is to this Church that we truly belong. It is this Church that is truly the Bride of Christ.

(vv12-13) The penetrating word of God which excludes all possibility of an inauthentic response.

The nature of God's word - There now follows a section where the author of Hebrews refers to the characteristics of God's word. God's speech is personified as representing God himself. There is possibly here a reference to Christ, who is often spoken of in scripture as the word of God (c.f. John 1v1).

The main point of this section is to remind the hearers / readers that God - through his word - has the ability to lay open what is in the most hidden parts of a man.

It is not at first evident why this section follows the previous one. However, in the previous section we have seen that disobedience to the word of God is fatal for those wishing to enter into God's rest. This section shows why disobedience to God's word is fatal. It is fatal because God's word is not merely a dead letter, but an active, living entity - it does things. It has the capacity to discern the authenticity of our response to the message that it conveys to us.

Thus tying into the previous verse's warning about disobedience to God's word (the gospel message), there is here a reminder that as we encounter God's word it has the ability to lay open before us the reality of our response to that gospel message.

What then is the nature of God's word?

1. It is called strong and active - the word used in the Greek is normally used in reference to medicine i.e. something that has power and effectiveness.
2. It is likened to a sword - the instrument of justice. It is sharper than any human instrument and can penetrate to those places where human knowledge cannot.
3. It is the instrument of judgement - God knows things from within, whereas all other creatures can only know them from without. There is therefore a different level of understanding open only to God.

God's word (and this symbolises in Scripture God himself, or even sometimes Christ) has the ability to penetrate to the very heart of things. This idea is reinforced in the following two verses which talk about God's gaze and his ability to perceive the inner reality of everything in creation. All created beings, therefore, lie open and vulnerable before the gaze and scrutiny of God. We cannot hoodwink God, or bluff him about the true nature of our response to his gospel invitation. Total authenticity is therefore the only option to us.

Not only do we have this worrying picture of the open-ness of our souls before God's word, we are also reminded that one day we will each have to give an account, before this word of God, of how we have responded to it.

(vv14-16) The comforting thought that Jesus himself acts as our High Priest.

Let us hold firmly to the faith - Given the previous section we might imagine that the author of Hebrews will tell us that we should tremble and cower, knowing that our faults and failures are continually exposed by God's word and that we will one day have to give account for each of these faults and failures.

However, nothing of the sort follows. Instead he shares a word of encouragement and comfort. Whilst God's word lays open the inner truth about us and our often poor response to its revelation, there is also another «word of God» involved in our situation. Jesus, God's final word to man, stands between us and God. He mediates between us and the God whose standards and demands we cannot keep. Therefore, whilst one word condemns our faults and failures, there is another «word» who speaks mercy and forgiveness.

Let us approach with confidence - This is why the author can exhort the Hebrew Christians to approach the throne of grace with confidence. The word translated «confidence» speaks of boldness, frankness, freedom of speech. They can have such confidence because they will not receive the judgement and condemnation which they deserve but rather mercy and forgiveness won for them by Christ.

This recalls the statement made in 2v10 that Christ's mission was «*to bring many sons to glory*». This verse speaks of the fulfilment of that mission. This is why he tells them to hold firmly to their faith. It is possible because of Christ. It is not impossible for them to be and to remain faithful. It will just take effort and perseverance on their part. They still have to approach the throne of grace. They still have to respond to the word of God in their lives. But they can do so with confidence and in hope because of Christ.

Note that both «*holding firmly to the faith*» and «*approaching the throne of grace*» are described as communal acts. There is no Western 20th century individualism here. We are saved in community or not at all.

We have a High Priest - For the Hebrew Christian's, formerly followers of the Jewish faith, these words have a powerful resonance. Excluded from the Temple, the synagogue and hence the public worship of Israel, they can no longer participate in and enjoy the rich heritage and liturgical beauty of that tradition. It may well be that this is one of the major temptations to return to the Jewish faith. At this time primitive Christian worship had little that could compete with the beauty and depth of liturgical Judaism. For these Jewish believers there may well be the fear that they have somehow 'lost out' in coming to Christ.

The author explodes this idea in showing them how Christ goes beyond anything that Judaism could offer. They still do have a High Priest mediating between them and God, but a High Priest who excels in every way the human High Priests of Judaism:

*Not on earth in the Temple but before God's throne in heaven.
Not a man but God himself.
Not judgmental but sympathetic.
Not condemning but merciful.
Not unhelpful but gracious.*

Christ can undertake his office of mediation because he has perfect knowledge of both parties. He has perfect knowledge of God through his participation in the trinity. He has perfect knowledge of man through his having experienced every aspect of human life in his incarnation.

In the previous section we saw that «God's word» knows us from the inside. Here we are reminded that Jesus «God's word» also knows us from the inside. He himself has had to fight and to resist the temptation of sin. He knows how hard it is. In fact, as temptation grows in force only when resisted, no-one has experienced the full force and terrible power of temptation like Christ. For no-one else has ever resisted it completely from birth to death. One can also argue that, being God - whose nature is the very antithesis of sin - no-one can have felt the horror and rankness of the temptation to sin as much as Christ did. Jesus' sinlessness was therefore not easy, but hard won.

Ultimately sin is simply disobedience to the will of God. To be disobedient we need to know what God wants us to do. Sin is therefore a case of hearing but not responding to God's word. Jesus, as he was without sin, must therefore have been completely attuned to hearing and doing the will of God.

Mercy and grace await us - We need mercy because we fail so often. We need grace because we have acts of service to perform which we cannot accomplish without God's empowering grace. Both of these are held out to us in Christ, our High Priest.

In our time of need - There is a quality of timeliness about the mercy and help that are held out to us in Christ. Just when we need them we will find them made available. This reminds us of the verse about the nature of a Christian's experience of temptation;

«*And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*» (1 Corinthians 10v13).

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