

Prayers

Thoughts on prayer

Pray as you are led today for people you know and for those who are sick. Pray for their healing, and pray they know God's blessing whether this be for direct healing or for sustained endurance through suffering. Pray especially that those who suffer do not lose heart or lose faith.

A prayer for today

Almighty God, Your Spirit moves amongst us like a wind, and we do not always catch on to what He is doing or where He is going. We want to be in control, jumping in and out of the work of God in His Kingdom; the Spirit requires our surrender to His will. So break us down Lord God so that we might be built up and truly responsive to the work of the Spirit within. AMEN

Meditation

(a testimony of faith in God based upon Psalm 49)

Hear this, all you who live in this world;
Both low and high, both rich and poor:

Why should we fear in times of trouble?
Those around us trust in property and wealth;
But all people are the same before God,
And no-one can buy everlasting life!

Do not be afraid when others become rich.
For they take nothing with them to the grave;
Nothing they own follows them down to hell
Whatever has happened to them here on earth!

Remember, wise and wealthy people will die;
All of them will go, fools and animals alike.
But God will ransom my soul from the grave!
And He will receive me in His home for ever!

Praise God forever ... AMEN

Bible Passage

Hebrews 4:1-11

¹ So while the promise of entering into His rest still stands, we are concerned to think any have now failed to find it. ² For the good news has come to us just as

it has to them, but the message they heard did them no good, because they did not share the faith of others who heard it. ³ We are now coming into the rest of those who have believed.

Listen; God said,

'As in my anger I swore, "They will not enter my rest,"'

even though His work was completed at the foundation of the world; ⁴ and in a certain text it says this about the seventh day,

'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works;'

⁵ even though it says in the previous passage,

'They shall not enter my rest.'

⁶ So you see that it must still be open for some to enter; while those who previously received the good news failed to enter it because of disobedience, ⁷ God has once more made it possible, and the time is right now. He announced this a long time after the quote given above through these words of David,

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

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about some other day. ⁹ So a Sabbath rest is still available for the people of God, ¹⁰ and those who enter God's rest should also cease their own work, just as God did from His.

¹¹ Let us therefore spare no effort to enter this rest, and let no one fail by following the same sort of disobedience.

Review

SUMMARY

If you thought God's 'rest' after Creation was His alone to enjoy, think again! While explaining why some can and some cannot 'enter into God's rest', Hebrews reveals that it has always been God's plan for people to enjoy His eternal 'rest' by responding in faith to the Gospel! Remember this as you read this rather awkward passage!

This is an odd passage of Scripture, and you would not be the first to read it and find yourself lost, whatever the merits of your translation. My own, above, attempts to make the passage as clear as possible, but I admit that it is well nigh impossible to convey the meaning of the text without distorting it. I could add comments to the text for explanation, but that would be to play about too much. It is far better to ask the reader to do the study necessary to understand the passage, than expect scripture to put its meaning for us 'on a plate'.

God's 'rest' - coming into the Promised Land?

Clearly, this passage is about what it means to enter God's 'rest', following the use of this idea in chapter 3 (yesterday's passage). In chapter 3, Hebrews appeals to Jewish Christians to let go of Jewish legalism, and likens their stubbornness in this matter to that of Israelites who disobeyed God and consequently died before they could reach the Promised Land. God's 'rest' is clearly likened to claiming this great promise of God. As we begin to read our passage today, however, we realise that Hebrews is using the idea of God's 'rest' more expansively. It seems to mean receiving the promises of God, and more specifically, receiving the Gospel (4:1-3); this at least is clear enough.

We are more bemused, however, when Hebrews subsequently quotes scripture. We read first from Psalm 95:11, '*they will not enter my rest*' (4:3) which is God's curse on those who are disobedient. There is also a quote from Genesis 2:2, '*God rested on the seventh day ...*' (4:4) saying that God's rest has already happened. This is followed by a second quote of Psalm 95:11, which denies rest to the disobedient (4:5)! In the next paragraph we then read, '*so you see that it must be open for some to enter ...*' (4:6), but how can this be? All the other quotes are about failure to find it!

It is hard to read these verses (4:3-7) and find something positive about God's rest. Most people mentally cut out the quotes and skip to verse 9 to read, '*so a Sabbath rest is still available for the people of God ...*'. This is easy enough to understand if we connect the idea of rest and receiving the Gospel. But we should not ignore a passage that is hard to understand, so we will now sort out what the quotes mean!

Some history

To start with we will recall some Biblical history and find some perspective. The first mention of God's rest in the Bible and indeed within history is found in Genesis 2:2, which reports that God finished creating the world and rested on the seventh day. This 'Sabbath' rest was of course holy to the people of Israel, not as a day of formal worship but as a ritual of obedience giving honour to God. Be careful about this; you will find no liturgy for worship on the Sabbath in the Old Testament, and the Sabbath is of course Saturday not Sunday.

Next in time comes the release of Israel from Egypt around 1,400 years before Christ (possibly 1,250 years), and the bitter sweet experience of Israel as she learned obedience to God in the desert; all those who failed died on route to the Promised Land. This key defined Israel and Hebrews speaks of entry into the Promised Land as coming into God's 'rest'. Clearly, the idea of the Promised Land was used by early Christians to symbolise acceptance of the Gospel, with those who rejected it being likened to rebellious Israelites.

Lastly, Hebrews refers to David, who lived around 1,000 years before Christ and was responsible for writing many Psalms, including No 95. This great Psalm is often used in worship and was as well known to Israelites as it is to Christians. Unfortunately, Christians today know the first 7 verses which are purely praise in nature; we tend to leave alone verses 7 to 11, which is all about the sins of Israel in the desert. We don't want to talk about failure; but today, we must!

The argument in Hebrews

We now turn to our passage for today. In the early church Christians were clearly using the term '*they will not enter into my rest*' (4:3,5) to describe people who had not fully received the Gospel, including Jews who held on to Judaism. Doubtless, Jews replied to this criticism by saying that God rested on the seventh day and 'rest' had nothing to do with their beliefs about

the Gospel and Judaism. In reply to this, Hebrews says here, rather obtusely, that if David, in Psalm 95, could speak of Jews who did not make it to the Promised Land with the words *'they shall not exeter my rest'*, a long time after the official 'seventh day' of God's rest recorded in Genesis, then Christians could speak of those who denied key aspects of the faith as failing to *'enter God's rest'*.

Now admittedly, you will have to read verses 3 to 7 several times to get hold of how and why Hebrews says it like this, but I can assure you this is the gist of it. Moreover, Hebrews reinforces the point when it says of God and the Gospel that He, *'announced this a long time after the quote given above through these words ... "today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts"'* (4:7). Hebrews is using Psalm 95 as a prophecy of effectiveness of the Gospel, warning that those who are disobedient to God and the Gospel will not enter His 'rest'.

The Gospel is open for business now!

The highlight of the passage is surely towards its end, where Hebrews says loud and clear, and in a way we can easily use for preaching, *'So a Sabbath rest is still available for the people of God'* (4:9). Having gone through the passage in detail, we can now understand the full force of this text. God's purpose is to draw us to Himself by means of the Gospel so that we can enjoy His rest with Him, the perfection He first enjoyed on the seventh day of Creation! How incredible to know that God had this plan for salvation ready since the beginning of time!

Hebrews adds to this idea when, a few verses later, it says, *'and those who enter should also cease from their own work, just as God did from His.'* (4:10). Of course, this does not mean that Christians should stop working altogether; instead, it means we should stop our efforts to reach God and our works for salvation; a way is provided for us through Christ. This is why Hebrews can speak so reassuringly of entering into *'this rest'* of God. The Gospel does not have to be achieved or worked at, it simply has to be accepted.

Application

Discipleship issues

Entering into God's rest

Frankly, this is not an easy passage to read or enjoy. The way Hebrews puts the point here is not easy to follow and those who read this and understand first time how it all works are rare. Yet it is simple enough when carefully explored. The idea of entering into God's rest is fascinating, because it does not appear to refer to a rest we might enjoy when we die. The rest spoken of here seems to be a rest we can enjoy in this life. It is rather like the lack of worry and the carefree existence spoken of Jesus when he said, *'do not worry about life ... look at the birds of the air ... your heavenly Father feeds them ... are you not of more value than they?'* (Matt 6:25-26).

Of course, Jesus is speaking about the peace of the soul, within which a person can endure all manner of hardships, safe in the knowledge that God is in ultimate control. The promises of Jesus and the idea of inhabiting God's 'rest' is no 'pass card' to human suffering or to some kind of perfect existence in which there is no suffering. Yet it does point towards the intention of God that we find the gift of life to be good, indeed with all the promise eternal life.

'Rest' - and weariness

Despite the clear message of this passage that 'rest' is like entering into the Kingdom of God with our Saviour, there is surely a warning flag to be raised when the church life of Christians becomes a hard and demanding existence. If the end of our life is 'rest', then we are surely to live now in the peace which God can give His servants on earth. If we are busy with services to be run, meetings to be organised, evangelism to be done and needy people to be met, we may well have missed the point of our faith. We are supposed to have peace with God (Romans 5:1). We are to enjoy a rest (Hebrews 4:11) which is both 'spiritual' and also 'physical', in the sense that when we are inwardly at peace, this then shows in our deeds and actions, however busy we are.

Questions for groups

- 1. Read through the text again, and make sure you understand what it says to your satisfaction*
- 2. What are the promises of God within this passage of Scripture, and how can we live them in a meaningful way?*
- 3. As a Christian, how do you respond to the idea of God's 'Promised Rest'? Is it sufficient for you to associate this with eternal life or is this real for you now?*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, when the life of the church to which we belong becomes too much, and we find it hard to understand all that is going on; please give us the grace to persist in encouraging others in the love of Jesus and His saving grace. May we always make this part of our contribution to the church; AMEN