

Hebrews 4

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One of the strange things to me about modern-day America is the way that prominent atheists fairly regularly stand up and take potshots at organized religion. It's not enough for them to go their atheistic way and leave us alone; instead, they feel some need to express their contempt for the supposed foolishness of those who believe in God.

A couple of weeks ago, this need revealed itself in the comments of the physicist Stephen Hawking. Even though Hawking is a scientist, and so could reasonably be expected to limit his discussion to things for which he has evidence, that's not what he did. Instead, he confidently stated that there is no such thing as life after death. To be honest, that makes me wonder how he knows. I mean, it's not like Hawking has been to the nonexistent afterlife and reported back. However, he continued on to say that religion is "a fairy story for people who are afraid of the dark." He claimed that he himself does not fear death, so he feels no need to believe. If that's his attitude, he should be very afraid indeed.

Of course, the Bible tells a very different story than Stephen Hawking. If evidence is what we want, God's word tells us about heaven based on the testimony of those who have actually seen it, or who have been taught about it by God Himself. In Scripture, heaven is described in a number of ways, as a glorious city of gold and gemstones in Revelation, as the eternal presence of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians, and, in the book of Hebrews, as an eternal rest.

This description of heaven as a place of rest doesn't have the pizzazz of the golden street and the pearly gates, but the more we think about it, the more appealing that becomes. Life is a very wearying thing to experience. Day by day, each one of us is worn down, until we reach the point where we can't go on anymore. We can only find the cure for this in the blessing of heaven, where we can enjoy eternal peace. Let's learn about this rest in Hebrews 4.

Fear and Rest

The main discussion of this chapter picks up right where we left off in Hebrews 3, with a continuing discussion of a quotation from Psalm 95. At this point, though, the Hebrews writer has explored the quotation thoroughly, except for its final part. We learn what he has to say about this in Hebrews 4:1-2. If you recall, the way that the passage from Psalm 95 ends is with God swearing that the rebellious Israelites shall not enter His rest. Even though we aren't bound for Canaan, the Hebrews writer says that we have a promise of entering God's rest also, and he's going to spend the next several verses proving that. However, even though that promise is very good news, there's a downside to it as well. The very fact that the rest exists means that we need to be afraid of missing out on it.

The writer explains that this is possible by referring once again to the example of the Israelites who perished in the wilderness. We can rejoice that we have heard God's word, but they heard the same word too. We can be excited about the promise we have of eternal blessing, but they had a promise too. However, neither the word nor the promise did them any good, because they didn't believe and govern their lives accordingly. It's all too easy for us to make the same deadly mistake. It's not enough for us to show up here at church and listen attentively to the sermons and nod approvingly at the points we like. If we want the gospel to benefit us, we must believe it and we must do it.

We learn more about the rest that is promised to the obedient, though, from Hebrews 4:3-5. As I look at this text, I'm amazed at the logical way that the writer extracts so much information from one small passage. He argues not just from what the text says on its face, but from what the text logically implies. His first observation is that if the Israelites were unbelieving and as a result did not enter into God's rest, then those who do believe can expect that they will enter it. It wouldn't have been much of a punishment for God to turn the Israelites away unless they could have gained the rest through their faith and obedience. If we do believe and obey, we can look forward to God's rest.

Second, the writer points out that God's rest must be for more than just God. We learn from Genesis 2 that God rested on the seventh day of creation. That was thousands of years ago, even when the Hebrews writer was first writing. However, in reference to the Israelites, God still speaks of them not entering His rest. It's not like they were going to go back in time and hang out with God on the seventh day. Instead, God had prepared a similar rest for them.

The Hebrews writer finishes his elaboration of all of these concepts in Hebrews 4:6-10. The first point that he makes in this context is that God's rest is still waiting for someone to enter it. Here's how he reaches that conclusion: God had already prepared a rest for the Israelites. He told them about their rest and how they could enter into it. However, they blew it. They failed to enter that rest because of their disobedience. The Israelites' failure, though, did not demolish the promises of God. They didn't enter the rest, but the rest is still there, waiting for someone to claim it. The implication is plain: if we don't repeat the mistakes that the Israelites made, we can be the ones who claim it.

That's why, all the way back in Psalm 95, God said through David, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." God was appealing to the righteous people of David's time, and to the righteous people of all time, to listen

and believe. This wasn't just for Moses' first followers. This was for everybody, and because it was for everybody, this promise of rest revealed something critically important about what the nature of that rest was.

In its most immediate sense, the promise of rest that God made to the Israelites at Mount Sinai concerned the land of Canaan. They had to obey God if they wanted Him to help them conquer Canaan and allow them to live peacefully in it. When the Israelites disobeyed, they died in the wilderness and never entered the promised land.

However, that physical promised land could not be all of the rest that God was talking about. The Israelites under Moses failed to enter Canaan, but their sons and grandsons under Joshua succeeded. They were more righteous than their fathers had been, they obeyed God's word, and God gave the promised land into their hand. 500 years later, the descendants of those people were still in the promised land. In a physical sense, they had entered the rest already.

The very fact that David, 500 years after Joshua, is still warning God's people that they won't enter the rest if they disobey shows that David is speaking of a more than merely physical rest. There was no earthly promised land that the Israelites were still trekking toward, and yet, David still says, "Be careful, or you won't enter the rest." The implication is clear. David isn't talking about a physical rest at all. He's talking about a spiritual rest, a final, Sabbath rest, in which God's people can rest as fully and completely from their work as God did from the work of creation.

This is important to us for several different reasons. First, it establishes that the Old Testament speaks of an afterlife and the resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees of Jesus' time missed out on this. They denied the resurrection, and in response, Jesus told them that they understood neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. Psalm 95 was one of the Scriptures they should have paid attention to. If they'd logically worked their way through it like the Hebrews writer did, they too would have seen that there was life after death. Certainly, the Old Testament doesn't discuss eternity and the life to come in the same detail as the New Testament, but the concept has been there all along.

Second, whatever Stephen Hawking may say, this is more than just a concept. This is reality. As we've discussed many times, obedience to God brings us great advantages in this life, but those blessings pale in comparison to the blessings of the life to come. After all the labors and trials that our lives on earth contain, we can go to a place where we will never labor nor suffer again. We won't be unhappy, we won't be bored. Instead, we will relish perfect contentment forever. We can look forward to this rest with expectation and joy, provided only that we believe and obey.

Responses to the Rest

Once we recognize how great the promise of God's rest is, there are two ways we should logically react to that promise. We see the first described in Hebrews 4:11-13. If we want to enter the rest, we have to strive to enter the rest. If we imitate the Israelites instead of learning from their mistakes, we will be destroyed just like they were.

This destruction of the wicked is certain for two main reasons, God's word and God's vision. In one of the most famous passages in the book of Hebrews, the writer tells us what the word is like. It's not a pillow. It's a sword, and it will cut every one of us open and reveal what we're really like inside. As Jesus says in John 12:48, the word is the standard of judgment. If there is any evil in our character, the word will expose that evil and use it to condemn us.

If we're going to face that kind of scrutiny from the word on the day of judgment, we should be wise and expose ourselves to its scrutiny here. We should look into the mirror of the word and be honest about what we see. We must identify every flaw, every failing, and strive to correct them. This is not a pleasant process, but it is a necessary one. If we don't do it to ourselves, God will do it for us on the day of judgment, and we will have no opportunity for correction.

The word, then, is the perfect standard of judgment, and God comes to that judgment with perfect knowledge of who we are. We might be able to hide from everyone else, but we are never able to hide from Him. Every secret sin that we commit is going to be dragged into the light and measured against the standard of the word. We can't hope for a flawed judgment or an incomplete one. Our only hope is in complete and sincere obedience.

In many ways, this is an intimidating thought. I know that I'm not perfect, but the Scripture tells me that if I have no help, all of my imperfections are going to be exposed to a perfect, merciless judgment. Should I just give up now, because I'm already doomed? The Hebrews writer says not in Hebrews 4:14-16. I should hold on and do my best to serve God because I do have help in Jesus. Even though I am imperfect, Jesus is perfect. Despite His perfection, He still understands me and even sympathizes with me in my sin. Nor is that sympathy unmatched by action. Because Jesus is the high priest, what he does is make intercession for the sins of the people, for me and my sin. Stephen Hawking, in his professed unbelief, can expect to receive no help from the Savior, but in my professed belief, I can.

The point, then, is that the cure for our spiritual inadequacy, our only hope of entering the rest that God promises to the righteous, is Jesus. Because Jesus is both supremely capable and supremely compassionate, we can come prayerfully before His throne with confidence, assured that He is both able and willing to help us. How often can we do this? Not once a year, nor once a month, nor once a day, but constantly, whenever we have a need. We don't deserve this help, nor is it possible for us to deserve it. Instead, it represents the outpouring of the grace and mercy of Jesus, so that through Him, we can gain the eternal rest that we could never possess on our own.