

## STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 8

Hebrews 4:1-13

June 16, 2002

### Text Comment

Remember where we are. We are in the midst of an argument that was begun at 3:7 with the citation of Psalm 95. The preacher is reminding his hearers of the history of Israel in the wilderness, of her failing to enter the rest of God because of her unbelief, and warning them that if they turn away from God they must expect the same result. Chapter 3 concluded with that thought: “So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.”

- v.1 This congregation of Jewish Christians stands poised before the rest of God just as Israel did in the days of the wilderness. He is going to make this clarifying point later, but already it is obvious that “entering the rest of God” did not mean for Israel and does not mean for us entering the promised land, taking possession of a piece of this earth. Israel eventually did that under Joshua, but that isn’t what is meant by “God’s rest.”

This is the first use of “promise” in Hebrews. It is an important term and is used in Hebrews to designate the world to come, eternal life, salvation in its consummation. The faithful receive it, though not in this world; the unfaithful forfeit it. The word occurs 14 times in Hebrews and serves again and again to indicate the force of the author’s argument. There is a promise of the world to come. That promise was made to believers in the ancient epoch and is still being made to us today. That promise will be fulfilled in the next world for those and those only who have followed the Lord Jesus with persevering faith all the way to the end of their lives. People in the church whose faith flags and who turn away from following the Lord forfeit that promise.

- v.2 It is not only here in the NT that the message of the OT is called “the gospel.” Paul says the same thing in Galatians 3 and Romans 10. But it is striking how it is put here. We would expect him to say that *they*, that is the wilderness generation of Israel, had the gospel preached to them as we have had; but, instead, he says that *we* have had the gospel preached to us just as they did, as if no one would doubt that Israel heard the gospel, but someone might doubt that these people had. Nothing could more profoundly demonstrate this author’s assumption that the message of salvation in Christ has always been the same and that the requirement of faith in Christ has always been the same.

- v.3 The verse from Psalm 95 is cited simply to remind his readers that “entering the rest” is the issue and the possibility of failing to enter it is real! Now, many go astray at this point and are led astray by the present tense: “now we who have believed *enter* that rest.” People widely assume that what this preacher is saying is that while the OT saints couldn’t enter the rest because the way to it hadn’t yet been opened up by Christ’s death and resurrection, we can enter the rest immediately. They take “rest” then as salvation such as it can be known and experienced in this world and assume that there is some great difference between OT faith and NT faith and what each was able to obtain *in this world*. They were looking for the rest but we have found it. But that, I am fully

persuaded, is a capital mistake of interpretation. The author has just said that the promise Israel forfeited was the promise *we ourselves* must be careful not to forfeit. We don't have it yet, and won't ever have it unless we persevere in faith in Christ. He has just said that the gospel message was always the same and that what in times past made that message profitable was faith and it remains faith now. And, as we have seen already in his argument and will see again and again as we proceed, the promise, the gospel, salvation, *and the rest* all refer to heaven, not to the partial experience of salvation believers enjoy in this world.

In v. 3, therefore, the present tense should be taken either in what grammarians call a gnomic sense, as stating a principle, that is, in the sense of an aphorism, or it should be regarded as what is called a "futuristic present." For example, in Acts 14:22, we read "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." Put "rest" in the place of "kingdom of God," and you have the same thought as here in v. 3. In Acts 14:22 we have also the present tense, but it is laying down a principle that applies to entering the kingdom of God *in the future*. Paul is talking about heaven there just as this preacher is talking about heaven in 3:3. It stands his argument on its head to say that these people have *already* entered the rest of God when his whole urgent admonition is that they continue to persevere in faith *lest they fail to enter the rest!* What is more, you have the future explicitly in v. 6 and the command to enter the rest in v. 11, both of which indicate that this congregation has not already entered the rest of God. The rest is future and the question under discussion is how do we ensure that we will enter it when the time comes.

- v.5 The rest of God is now identified as participation in *God's own* rest that began after the creation of the world. The rest Israel failed to obtain and the rest we have set before us to obtain by patient faith is part and parcel of *this* rest. What is plain, of course, is that Israel *did not fail* to obtain the rest *because the rest was not yet available*; but only because she did not believe.
- v.8 Furthermore, Israel's forfeiture of the rest is what is at issue, not the failure of that wilderness generation to enter Canaan. We are not talking about Canaan, which Israel entered under Joshua; we are talking about entering the rest of God, that is the *better* country, the *enduring* city, the *world to come*, as he elsewhere refers to it. That is proved by the fact that Psalm 95, that urges Israel to enter the rest of God and not forfeit that rest as their forefathers did, was written long after Israel was settled in the Promised Land.
- v.10 As you may know, this chapter is used by some as an argument against the abiding authority of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment and the obligation to keep the Lord's Day holy. The argument is this: this author is telling us that in the ancient epoch they kept one day holy to God, but in the new epoch all of life is holy to God and we have entered that rest of which the OT Sabbath was a type and shadow. Christians, by faith in Christ, have rested from their works. Here the Sabbath rest of Gen. 2 is interpreted in terms of salvation in Christ. Now that Christ has come and we have that salvation, the rest of Gen. 2 has been fulfilled and there is no more need to keep a Sabbath day every week. I find that I struggle to be sympathetic to those who interpret the text this way, it is an interpretation, in my view, so utterly foreign to the actual statements the preacher makes that it is hard to

believe that folk, even biblical scholars, haven't come to the passage already having made up their minds as to what the text must mean.

The term "Sabbath-rest" in v. 9 is a single Greek word, *sabbatismos*, of which there has not been found a use earlier than this one. If this author made up the word, which is a real possibility – it is found nowhere else in the Bible – no doubt it evoked in his mind a connection to the weekly Sabbath. The word is built on the word "Sabbath," and, might be translated something like "Sabbathment." But, if the rest of God is a still-future reality, as it clearly is here, then the weekly Sabbath *still points forward* to a fulfillment in the future, *as it has done ever since the creation*. There is no distinction whatsoever made in this chapter or anywhere else in this sermon between principles and practices that prevailed in the ancient epoch and principles and practices that prevail in our own epoch today. The salvation of Christ was a reality for the believers of the ancient epoch as it is for us today, but for them as for us, it is a reality to be consummated only in the world to come. In this letter and sermon, the distinction is always and everywhere between what is true in *this world and this life* and what is true *in the world to come*. In Revelation 14:13 we read:

"When I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will *rest from their labor*, for their deeds will follow them.'"

There remains a rest into which God's believing people will enter in the world to come. It is the same rest which God began himself in Gen. 2. No one enters this rest in this life; it is rest in the world to come that follows upon this life of work. The Sabbath has all along been a picture, a foretaste of that rest, and, obviously, with the rest still future for us as it has always been for God's people, the Sabbath continues to have that role in our lives as it did in theirs.

Far from being an argument that the Sabbath day has passed away, Hebrews 4 is a demonstration that its ancient purpose is as relevant and necessary in our day as ever it was in Moses'.

And this argument reminds us what the Sabbath day should be for us and in our families: a day of refreshing rest *in anticipation of the rest of God that awaits us in the world to come*. The Sabbath day should keep alive our sense of the world of joy that is to come, should keep us longing for it and looking to it. We had a wonderful Lord's Day last week. Several folk at our table told the wonderful stories of how they came to know Christ and of his transforming work in their lives. It was wonderfully rich fellowship and encouraging fellowship. And, together with good food and drink, we passed the time in deeply interesting and pleasing conversation. And before that and after that, we were in this house, in praise and prayer and the Word of God. That is a foretaste of heaven. And we need that to keep our eyes looking up! Parents you be sure that the Lord's Day is a happy day in your home and that your children look forward to it for all the right reasons and that it really is a refreshment in those very things that we will have in abundance in the heavenly country.

- v.13 Remember, all of this argument was prompted by and drawn out of the citation of Psalm 95. That Word of God is never disobeyed with impunity. It is the living voice of God and goes right down to the bottom of things. You may, he is saying, look fine in the eyes of other human beings, but God's word exposes the true condition of the heart, the real character of one's faith, whether it is genuine or not. Being counted as a member of God's people is not enough; being a true follower of Christ down at the bottom, where only God sees, is what counts.

The phrases *soul and spirit* and *joints and marrow* are simply a way to refer to the inner life of a human being in all of its aspects. The terms no more prove that man is composed of three parts (spirit, soul, and body) than Matthew 22:37 proves that he is composed of four (heart, soul, mind, body).

Now, it is time for us to face the fact that lies at the heart of the urgent exhortation that we find again and again in this sermon. And that fact is this: there have always been as there is today a significant portion of the people of God, of the membership of the Christian church, *who do not have living and saving faith in Jesus Christ*.

The Bible deals with the unbelieving world, to be sure. You remember how often the OT prophets delivered oracles of divine judgment against the nations of the ancient Near East. Chapter after chapter in those prophets is devoted to a description of the sins of Moab or Ammon or Edom or Assyria or Babylon and the punishments that God will bring upon them for their sins. And you have statements regarding the judgment of the nations of the world from time to time in the New Testament as well, especially in the Book of Revelation. This can be very troubling to people – that the nations of the world lie under God's judgment; that the practitioners of other faiths will not be saved, but it is clearly the Bible's teaching *and, what is more, the Scripture is careful to remind us of the justice of God's judgment of the nations*.

Indeed, the Apostle Paul is careful to say in Romans 2:12, in a text where he is discussing the difference between those who belong to the church and those who do not,

“All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.”

That is, a man or woman will be judged according to the light he or she had. No one who knew nothing of Christianity will be held accountable for the lack of that knowledge. Bishop Butler, in his famous defense of the Christian religion, helpfully reminds us:

“All shadow of injustice, and indeed all harsh appearances in the various economy of God, would be lost, if we would keep in mind that every merciful allowance shall be made, and no more shall be required of anyone, than what might have been equitably expected of him from the circumstances in which he was placed; and not what might have been expected from him, had he been placed in other circumstances.” [*Analogy*, II, vi]

The Lord Christ made the same point when he said that some will be beaten with many stripes and some with few and when he taught, in effect, that the worse sinners and those judged most severely, will always be those found in a church, not a prison. Or, as William Tyndale put it, “Antichrist will ever be the best Christian man.” [*Works*, III, 107]

C.S. Lewis says the same thing in a different way:

“If the divine call does not make us better, it will make us very much worse. Of all bad men religious bad men are the worst. Of all created beings, the Wickedest is one who originally stood in the immediate presence of God.”  
[*Reflections on the Psalms*, 32]

So, there is this biblical teaching, from start to finish, that the unbelieving world will be judged and judged in perfect justice according to its measure of knowledge and responsibility and that those who have known the revelation of God will be judged more severely than those who have not. Some of the latter will be beaten with few stripes. I find that a wonderful encouragement and relief don't you?

However, while the Bible does not side-step the question of the judgment of the unbelieving world, *it clearly spends far and away most of its time talking about the judgment of the church and the unbelieving element in the church.*

It is not difficult to know why this is. It is the church that reads the Bible. There is no point in filling up the Bible with messages for people who don't read it! What is more, the Lord cares more directly and immediately for his own house, his own people, his own kingdom. And so he addresses it on this point time and time again.

And, in the Bible, it is a point made in every different way that large multitudes of people who have been numbered among the members of Christ's church were in fact false sons and daughters, did not have living faith in Jesus, and were not saved. Psalm 95 directs our attention to but one generation of such people, the wilderness generation who rebelled against God after the exodus from Egypt. But that is but one generation. It is a choice illustration of the reality of unbelief in the church in part because of the historical significance of that generation and in part because virtually the entirety of it was unsaved. Favored with God's presence and blessing as they were, they died in the desert because of their unbelief.

However, that melancholy history is but a foretaste of what was to come. After the days of Joshua the people of Israel once again descended into unbelief by and large. After the days of David and Solomon they did again. The ten northern tribes almost completely apostatized, with only individuals maintaining the true faith, and the southern two tribes, for several centuries more or less faithful to God, finally descended into outright apostasy as well. After the Jews were restored to the Promised Land they began another gradual descent into unbelief, a process that, by the time Jesus was born, had rendered the church defiantly unwilling to receive the Son of God when he came into her midst. It is not so surprising, after all, that the church that murdered the prophets should finally murder the Messiah also.

But, this is by no means an OT problem. The problem of a declining faith among the new gentile churches is addressed already in the New Testament. In Rev. 3 the problem in Laodicea is precisely the same problem we encountered time and time again in the history of Israel. And, of course, as we know, the history of the church since has been dominated by the reality of unbelief in her midst. For long periods of her history she succumbed to heresy and downright unbelief, and, even when once revived, the nominal portion of her membership almost always increased more quickly than the devout and believing portion.

Over the past several centuries in Europe, it would not be too daring a thing to claim that most people who called themselves Christians were Christians in name only (which is what “nominal” means, in name only, from the Latin word *nomen*, meaning “name”). And, today, of the 2 billion of so people in the world who are classified as Christians, any Bible-believing person must admit that a substantial portion have no living faith in Christ, but are Christians in name only. The proof is that they do not believe what they are taught in the Word of God, they do not live in a manner that demonstrates true faith in Christ, and they do not take seriously the matter of their own salvation as the grace of God always leads a man or woman to do.

But it is not only *other* denominations that have this problem. It is not only the problem of Roman Catholics and Orthodox and Episcopalians, famous for doling out assurance to people that anyone can tell are not followers of Jesus Christ in any meaningful way. It is our problem too. It is our problem as a denomination. Ask faithful PCA pastors in the Southeast, in the Bible belt, and many of them will tell you that their number one pastoral problem is nominalism – they have members, sometimes even church officers, whom they do not believe are really saved. But it is our problem as a congregation and will always be, because the Bible teaches us never to take salvation for granted *precisely because it is so easy for church people to think that they are saved when in fact they are not.*

Now, Hebrews is dealing most specifically with people who are in the church and are being tempted to turn away from the true Christian faith, either to abandon it altogether or to attempt some mixture with another faith, such as first century Judaism. But it matters not the particular form unbelief in the church takes: outright apostasy (or the rejection of Christianity); the embrace of heresy within the church (or the corruption of the faith) or nominalism (the pretence of orthodox belief but without living commitment to Christ). The fact is the church always has people in it who imagine themselves saved who are not truly, genuinely following Christ. This is a matter of frequent teaching, the basis for frequent exhortation in the Bible, and something that all true believer’s take to heart.

We know that the Lord preserves all his elect in the faith he granted them when he called them to new life. But he preserves them in that faith by certain means and one of those means, frequently employed in the Bible, is by warning them of the reality of unbelief in the church, urging them to examine themselves to see if they are truly in the faith, and to take nothing as evidence of true salvation but a life of living commitment to and active love for Jesus Christ.

You remember the account of Paul’s shipwreck in Acts 27. For many days the ship on which he had been embarked as a prisoner was driven before a great storm. People were terrified for their lives. In their desperation, Paul encouraged them with the news that the Lord had revealed to

him that everyone on board was to be saved; not one would be lost. Later, however, the sailors, when they learned that they were near land, attempted to escape from the ship and make their way ashore on the ship's boat. At that point, Paul warned the centurion in charge, "Unless these men stay with the ship you cannot be saved." Taking Paul at his word, the Centurion cut the boat loose, kept the sailors on board, and, as it happened, all made it safely ashore.

You see, someone might have charged Paul with an inconsistency, or a downright dishonesty. If the Lord had said all would be saved, how can he then later say that if the sailors are allowed to go, the people on the ship will be lost? But, the Lord's promise that all would be saved *did come true, and it came true as a result of taking heed to Paul's warning and obeying his instructions.* All were kept alive, but they were kept alive by means of the warning that Paul urged upon the centurion.

Well, in this same way, the Bible is always warning us about the danger of insincere faith and of the fact that many in the church think themselves saved when they are not. And by that warning, God keeps his elect from surrendering or corrupting or merely imitating true faith.

So, when you read this argument in Psalm 95 and then in Hebrews 3 and 4, what is your response? What do you think about it? I can tell you this: if you do not take this seriously, if you do not care to concern yourself with its application to you, if you do not come away from this text more determined to be found always among the *faithful* followers of the Lord Jesus, then there is reason to be concerned. It's not as if there are not uncounted multitudes of people in the church who should have taken this warning very seriously and did not to their spiritual doom.

The Word of God goes down to the bottom and the Lord sees what is really there. You can fool us, but you cannot fool him. He knows how seriously you take the matter of your own salvation, he knows how much you care for Jesus Christ, he knows what you are doing or not doing to be a faithful follower of the Lord Christ. And he has told you in the most solemn terms imaginable that not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of God.

There is no question more important, no question that more determines the answer to every other question, no question that bears so mightily on the happiness and fruitfulness of your life than this question: are you really saved? Are you, in your heart and in your living, following the Lord Jesus and determined to do so the very end of your life?

For you who are parents, this is the greatest issue by far: to get your children to the Promised Land. They are not there yet. And you have much to do to get them and keep them on the narrow road that leads to God's rest.

And, for me and for Pastor DeMass, this is the great issue too: not that you should be happy, necessarily, though we want that; but that you should be saved and should not leave this world thinking you are saved when you are not.

If most of those who walked out of Egypt and through the parted waters of the Sea were not in fact saved, then, surely, you and I should not simply take it for granted that we are!

