

PERSEVERING TO THE PROMISED REST OF GOD:
AN EXAMINATION OF “REST”
IN HEBREWS 3:7-4:11

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The illustration of entering God's rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11 has been for many years an enigmatic and controversial passage.¹ The notoriously obscure description given in Hebrews has discouraged scholarly examination until recently,² and the range of opinions offered over its nature, its relation to Old Testament understandings of rest, and its salvific consequences, has been expansive. Questions arise over whether rest entails possession of land, salvation, heaven, or a present state of being. While this passage has surprisingly little christological reference, it displays continuity with the rest of the sermon with its theme of persevering with a faithful heart toward and entering into an eternal promise. It is by keeping in mind this primary theme of Hebrews that one grasps a better understanding of what rest *is*, as well as what it is *not*. As such, rest is the reward of participating with God in the very rest He Himself enjoys, and is attained in its fullness only after persevering to the very end with a faithful, obedient heart.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The recipients of Hebrews are assumed to be a community of believers, possibly in Rome, who for some time had been experiencing persecution and hardship, to the point where they were exhaustedly wavering in their faith in Christ. Their view of the reward of following Christ was growing dim amidst the great toll persecution was exacting from them. Some were even considering turning away from Christ altogether, possibly in a return to the more recognized religion of Judaism.³ The Author of Hebrews composed this sermon out of a great concern over their doubt in the promises of God and their increasing faintness of heart. Amidst

¹ All scripture citations are from the New International Version (unless otherwise indicated).

² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April, 1973): 135.

³ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 20, 22.

declarations of the superiority of Christ over any venerated Old Testament persona are exhortations to trust in and follow this greatest Leader, through whom is now made available access to glorious promises proclaimed from the beginning. It is imperative, therefore, that they persevere until the end to receive this promise, for “the benefits of honoring God through obedience and dangers of dishonoring God through disobedience outweigh any benefits or dangers society can offer or threaten.”⁴

The Passage’s Setting

Hebrews 3:7-4:11 appears to be almost an aside from the proclamation of Christ’s superiority that surrounds it. Apart from this section, rest is never again mentioned in Hebrews, and it contains but one mention of Christ in the midst of a highly christological sermon.⁵ However, it is really an extended sermon illustration based on the negative example shown in Psalm 95, from which the author extends both warning and exhortation while offering a foretaste of the promise he explores later, and it is implied that the “[fulfillment] of the promise did not, could not have and cannot happen apart from Christ and those who have faith in Christ today”.⁶ It also contains the three significant themes of *entry*, *promise* and *perseverance*⁷ that resonate

⁴ David A. deSilva, “Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994): 450.

⁵ Judith Hoch Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Gospel of Truth: Early Christian Homiletics of Rest*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 85.

⁶ Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor*, 85.

⁷ *Entry*: Within 3:7-4:11 is the repeated command for the people of God to “*enter his rest*”. In the following chapters Christ, our Great High Priest “*entered the Most Holy Place*” (9:11-12), “*heaven itself*” (9:24). Because of his entry and his sacrifice offered on our behalf, we may “*have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place*” (10:19) and the hope offered to us is anchored firmly, “[*entering*] the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf” (6:19-20).

Promise: In this section, the promise is that of “*entering his rest*” (4:1), a promise offered to the Israelites but still available as they had failed to obtain that promise. Abraham waited patiently for (6:15) and received (6:15;

throughout the rest of the sermon. Heb 3:7-4:11 is “bookended” by chiasmic references to Christ as a “great high priest” (3:1; 4:14), on whom the readers should affix their attention and because of whom they should “hold firmly to [their] faith”. The Author sets up his commentary on rest in 3:1-6, where Christ is shown to be greater and more faithful than even Moses: in light of this, the readers are not to harden their hearts against him or the promise he offers.

The Passage’s Basis: Psalm 95

The Author chooses to use Psalm 95:7-11 (94 in the LXX) as the scriptural “backbone” of his exposition on rest,⁸ a choice that proves brilliant in its ability to suit his purpose and provide intriguing parallels to his readers’ present state. His Jewish readers would have been especially familiar with this psalm, as it was used extensively as part of the liturgy of synagogue worship services.⁹ The first half of Psalm 95 consists of praise to God as King, Creator and Shepherd,¹⁰ and in light of the worshipful acknowledgment of God’s power and care, the psalmist extends a stern warning against a hardening of heart against Him like that of the Exodus generation’s. It is likely not circumstantial that the Author of Hebrews also repeatedly uses this format of uplifting instruction followed by grave warnings to not reject such an awesome God.

7:6) his promise. God’s promise is steadfast (6:13, 17), it is an “eternal inheritance” (9:15), and it is this promise that remains open to those who persevere in faith and patience (6:12; 10:36).

Perseverance: In light of the Exodus generation’s failure, the readers are warned to “hold firmly until the end” (3:14), “make every effort to enter” (4:11), and to not turn away (3:12), fall short (4:1), or hold onto a hardened heart (3:8, 12), unbelief (3:19, 4:2), or disobedience (4:11). Similar language is scattered throughout the rest of the book, as the readers are warned to “not drift away” (2:2) or “fall away” (6:6), but to “hold firmly to the faith” (4:14) and “unswervingly to the hope” (10:23) they profess, to persevere (10:36, 12:1) and “show this same diligence to the very end” (6:11).

⁸ Ibid., 62: He uses a negative example “as a ‘proof’ of faithfulness ‘from the opposite’ . . . [This] coincides with a common use of didactic reasoning in which some form of opposite case or circumstances would cinch the positive point.”

⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 90.

¹⁰ Kaiser, “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest,” 142.

The parallels between the situation of the Exodus generation and the readers of Hebrews are obvious. The Exodus generation had been rescued from Egypt, continuously and miraculously provided for within the desert, and skillfully led by God up to the border of the Promise Land. Though witnesses of God's able leadership and provision, they had repeatedly rebelled in unbelief, even to wanting to return to the slavery of Egypt (Num 14:3). Now, on the very border of the Promise Land, God refused them entry. Spiritually, the readers of Hebrews had been rescued from death and provided for and led by Jesus, who has gone before them, to the very threshold of receiving their promise.¹¹ But weariness from the hardships of their spiritual journey was taking its toll, and some desired to turn back (Heb 10:35-38). The Author thus perceives his readers to be the eschatological antitype of the type of the Exodus generation.¹² "The type did not achieve its divinely intended goal because of faithless disobedience. Therefore the antitype must pick up where the type left off, be faithful and obedient to God's will and enter the 'rest'."¹³

Controversy exists over the extent of this typology in reference to soteriology. Some scholars hold that the Exodus generation was fully "saved" and the divine punishment meant physical discipline, a barring from entry and eventual loss of life, but not a loss of salvation.¹⁴ A

¹¹ David A. deSilva, "Entering God's Rest: Eschatology and the Socio-Rhetorical Strategy of Hebrews," *Trinity Journal* 21 (Spring 2000): 32.

¹² Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (Fall 2000): 285. Also, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., NIV Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 99, notes the possibility that this sermon was written nearly 40 years after Jesus' death, prompting the Author to additional urgency in light of the similar 40 years of Israel's wandering.

¹³ Harold W. Attridge, "'Let Us Strive to Enter That Rest': The Logic of Hebrews 4:1-11," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (Spring 1980): 281.

¹⁴ Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11," 288-289, marks the terminology of Israel's "salvation" from Egypt, their periodic faith, obedience and repentance, and the assumption that the giving of the Law "presupposed faith and was given to an already redeemed people". Perhaps most convincing is his argument that Moses and Aaron received the same punishment of inability to enter the Promise

second group believes that the Exodus generation was “saved” but the judgment they received included both physical and spiritual death.¹⁵ Finally, a third group views the Exodus generation as never “saved”, and they did not ever enter into rest physically or spiritually. While much debate is offered on all platforms, the fact remains that the notion of an after-life salvation is largely absent in the Old Testament due to the progressive nature of salvific revelation.¹⁶ As such, it is difficult to impose our eschatological understanding of salvation upon that generation. What we do know is that rebellion and unbelief characterized their existence, as is evidenced by nearly all OT and NT references to them¹⁷ and their punishment was severe. For the Author, the point is that they failed to enter by rebelling in doubt and disobedience against their proven Leader, and this promise of rest remains open to those who take sober heed of their example.

THE NATURE OF REST

What, then, is the nature of this promised rest? The Author uses the rather rare Septuagint word for “rest”, “κατάπαυσις”, instead of the more common NT word “ἀνάπαυσις”. While some scholars, such as Hofius, argue for distinctions between the two words, they are most likely synonymous, and the reason the Author uses the less common word is because of his dependence upon the LXX.¹⁸ *Katapausis* is understood to mean either a “state of rest or a resting

Land, and as no one would argue their redeemed status, the same must be true for the Israelite community. Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, “The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April—June, 1988): 188, is even more emphatic: “the principle is that disobedience by the people of God may result in temporal judgment and loss of future blessing” but not eternal salvation.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 102; Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 113; possibly Kaiser, “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest,” 143.

¹⁶ DeSilva, “Entering God’s Rest,” 37.

¹⁷ Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 92ff.

¹⁸ Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 127; A. T. Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 207.

place”¹⁹—hence the controversy over whether it means a physical locality (Canaan), a spiritual locality (heaven), or a state of being (salvation or peace). Four perspectives on the nature of the rest in Hebrews will be briefly summarized and evaluated prior to an examination of the text itself.

Various Perspectives

The perspective producing the most ink and ire among scholars is the millennial view, which carries the traditional OT understanding of rest as the peaceful possession of the land of Canaan into Hebrews 3-4 as Christ’s peaceful millennial reign over the land of Israel. The goal at hand is not salvation, but rewards and reigning with Christ. Buchanan in particular sees no discontinuity by the Author of the Jewish notion of “national-political-material” rest: “The author spoke of the rest available to his readers as being the same as that offered to the exodus generation. . . . this rest was clearly related to settlement and peace in Canaan.”²⁰ Oberholzer fleshes out the consequences of this rest: “Failure to persevere may result in temporal discipline (12:4-11) along with the loss of future rewards and authority to rule with Jesus in the millennium.”²¹ This view does display continuity in the OT/NT interpretation of rest, and it is a simple solution to the “problem” Hebrews creates in the issue of “eternal security”. However, reinterpretation of Jewish types is a practice consistent within the New Testament,²² starting with Jesus’ own radical upheaval of Jewish Messianic expectations. One would agree heartily with deSilva’s rebuttal: “[This] is not a concept invoked by the author of Hebrews who, rather, calls

¹⁹ Ibid., 208.

²⁰ George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972), 73.

²¹ Oberholtzer, “The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13,” 196.

²² Attridge, “‘Let Us Strive to Enter That Rest’,” 283.

attention consistently away from any such geographic and nationalistic conception of the believers' destiny. He does not show interest in any inheritance in the material world."²³ The entire argument of Hebrews focuses on the "kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:28), and the "city without foundations" (11:10), which is in opposition to the very temporal nature of the millennial, earthly kingdom. At the very least, a millennial view imposes a theology into the book of Hebrews that comes primarily from a revelation received years after its composition.²⁴ And the fact that God Himself partook of this rest after creation discourages any association with land.

A few scholars have interpreted this rest to be that of salvation, in which one rests from "works" of the flesh and enjoys the blessings of a restored relationship with God.²⁵ It is "salvation rest as a present heavenly reality entered by believing and ceasing from one's own works."²⁶ This view takes into account the already/not yet aspect within Hebrews and the emphasis on faith, and offers a definition of the ambiguous resting from one's work (4:10). But the Author already assumes the redeemed status of his readers, and the repeated calls to enter this rest would not speak of something they have already entered.²⁷ Also, "works" would contextually be good works, as were God's in his act of creation. As such, a Christian would definitely not rest from his or her "good" works until the Parousia!²⁸

²³ DeSilva, "Entering God's Rest," 34.

²⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 107

²⁵ R. C. Stedman, *Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 52; quoted in DeSilva, "Entering God's Rest," 32.

²⁶ Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 215

²⁷ DeSilva, "Entering God's Rest," 33.

²⁸ Jon Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest: The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt 11 and Heb 3-4* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 296-297, 307.

A third group of scholars view this rest to be equivalent to heaven. Kasemann notes it is a “purely spatial entity, the name for a heavenly place. . . . the heavenly κόσμος itself.”²⁹ It is, according to his famous motif, the goal of the “wandering people of God”, the place of Sabbath-celebration, the rest from a pilgrim’s toil.³⁰ Laansma describes it as the “future, corporate entrance of God’s people [into the heavenly locale]. . . . an eschatological event”.³¹ This fits the eschatological perspective of Hebrews and the stress on perseverance toward a future entry, and it displays continuity with the typology of the Israelites in Psalm 95, who had not yet “entered” Canaan.

However, a large number of scholars adhere to a modified view of the third perspective, in which this rest speaks of the heavenly rest one physically and spiritually enters after the resurrection, but this does not deny the present benefits one receives as a citizen of heaven, who by faith and obedience tastes of the blessing to come.³² It is to this perspective that the following examination of rest leads.

A “Timeline” of Rest

Hebrews 3-4 portrays rest as existing on the seventh day of creation (4:4), available at points throughout Israel’s history (3:18; 4:7-8), and remaining open at the present time (4:1). When examined in their original contexts, each of these notations of rest appears to speak of

²⁹ Ernst Kasemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House), 1984, 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69

³¹ Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest*, 306-307.

³² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 128; Barrett, “Eschatology,” 372; Ann Hoch Cowdery, Hebrews 4:1-13,” *Interpretation* 48 (Fall 1994): 284; Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 107; Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, 210; possibly also Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11,” 302-303 and Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor*, 91.

different elements, yet the Author conceives of them as a single entity.³³ This has contributed greatly to the widespread opinions on the nature of rest, but it is important to examine each in its own right within the progressive timeline of redemptive history.³⁴

The Author makes it clear that the rest he speaks of is equivalent to the rest God Himself enjoyed (rather than “entered) on the seventh day after completing His work of creation (4:3-4, 9-10), as shown in Genesis 2:2-3. The nature of this rest is not one of inactivity, as God has been actively involved in human history since that time; rather it is the celebratory completion of a particular, goodly work.³⁵ It can also be supposed that the rest the Author is referring to was initiated on that day.³⁶ The question is whether it is a state of rest that comes after completing one’s task or a spatial location like heaven; an examination of the “Sabbath-rest” that follows will suggest the former. At any rate, it is obvious that this rest is qualified as being God’s, is akin to the rest He has experienced since creation, and is offered to those who faithfully complete the task (presumably of life) given to them.

The next point on the timeline of rest comes with the offer of entry into this rest given to the Israelites, who failed to enter (3:15ff). It is quite clear that the original context referred almost entirely to the denial of entrance into the land of Canaan.³⁷ Nearly all references to rest in the Old Testament speak of enjoying rest in the land and experiencing peace from Israel’s

³³ Kaiser, “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest,” 147.

³⁴ Ibid., 138: “Each successive historical step harmoniously combines the beginning step in which the totality was programmatically announced with the end in which that totality shall be unfolded.”

³⁵ Kasemann, *The Wandering People of God*, 108; see also the following discussion of “A Sabbath-Rest.”

³⁶ Ibid., 107.

³⁷ Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, 208.

enemies.³⁸ However, as has already been discussed above, it is clear that Hebrews is not referring to this original, national understanding of rest, but like Paul reads this as a type of the spiritual rest now available in Christ.³⁹ At the least, God cannot be said to have reposed in Canaan after completing his creation work!

To add a final nail in the coffin of a national understanding of rest, the Author announces that Joshua had not given them rest (4:8). Such a statement would have been quite shocking to the original readers for several reasons. Joshua was upheld as one of the greatest military leaders of the Old Testament, and many times it is noted that after his conquests the Israelites experienced rest (Josh 11:23; 21:44; 22:4). If Joshua, who had succeeded where Moses had failed in taking possession of the Promise Land, was not able to give them rest, what rest, then, is being spoken of? A mental shift must take place, from the physical to the spiritual.⁴⁰ Also, the name “Joshua” is the same as “Jesus” in the Greek, and though from the context they would have known he was speaking of Joshua, this word play, and the analogy it brings, would have given them pause. Though Joshua, victorious though he was, was unable to provide entry into this rest, Jesus, his namesake, must then be the new leader who enables entry.⁴¹ It is quite the same logic that the Author uses in his exaltation of Jesus over Moses, Aaron and Melchizedek—this Jesus is far superior to the great leaders that have gone before, and only he can offer entry. Therefore, to rebel against this greatest Leader is to invite great peril.

The Author moves the reader forward “a long time later” (4:7) to the time of David, the period of another great leader who is said to have given rest to Israel (2 Sam 7:1). He attributes

³⁸ Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, 64.

³⁹ 1 Cor 10:1-11; Attridge, “Entering God’s Rest”, 284.

⁴⁰ Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor*, 81.

⁴¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 109.

Psalm 95 to David, and shows God, speaking through David, as again sending forth an invitation to enter this rest, as the rest was still open.⁴² The invitation offered in David’s time is now applied to the Author’s time. This invitation is imperative—it is *Today* that one must listen and respond with a softened heart and an obedient faith.

“Today...today...today”...the refrain cries out time and time again within these two chapters; it “[emphasizes] the immediacy of the concern for faithfulness in the contemporary social context.”⁴³ The Author is hammering home the fact that this rest “still stands” (4:1, 9) and one should “make every effort to enter that rest” (4:1, 11). When God entered it, He invited humans to enter and share it with him, but ours has been a history of failure. The Israelites failed to enter. Joshua and David failed to give them this rest. The promise of this rest is open to the readers, open to all who persevere with obedient, faith-filled hearts. The readers have the best opportunity in history to enter this rest, as they have a Joshua who has gone before them and can lead them there, and it is imperative that they do so. To fail is a “deathly alternative.”⁴⁴

A “Sabbath-Rest”

The best inference of the Author’s present meaning of rest is found in his reference to the “Sabbath-rest for the people of God” (4:9). Interestingly, this is the first recorded use of the word σαββατισμός,⁴⁵ and it is possible that the Author coined it himself.⁴⁶ This “Sabbath-rest” is not synonymous with the word used for “rest,” but rather “explains what takes place in the

⁴² Oberholzer, “The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13,” 193.

⁴³ Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor*, 66.

⁴⁴ Wray, 86, notes the image of falling in 4:11 is the same as that of the bodies falling in the wilderness in 3:17.

⁴⁵ Various defined by Plutarch as a “sabbath festival”, Justin Martyr as the “observance of sabbaths” that is no longer necessary for Christians, and Liddell and Scott as “a keeping of days of rest,” Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor*, 81.

⁴⁶ Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest*, 276.

κατάπαυσις, i.e., a Sabbath celebration.”⁴⁷ This “Sabbath-rest” is also not equivalent to the traditional understanding of the Sabbath of the Old Testament, for he would have then used the common noun for Sabbath. As such, it speaks of something similar to, but greater than, the Sabbath. As previously mentioned, this rest of God’s is akin to the rest He initiated after creation, when he rested from his work.⁴⁸ How, then, is it different from a traditional understanding of the Sabbath, where one also rests from work? Several later uses of this word show it to mean a Sabbath-*celebration* enjoyed by God.⁴⁹ “God lives a perennially joyful Sabbath celebration. . . . It is on account of the permanent nature of God’s rest that the author sees the possibility of entering it open to successive generations.”⁵⁰ If this is so, then one can see a later echo in the heavenly Jerusalem of chapter 12, the place of a *joyful* assembly of angels, faithful saints, Jesus, and God Himself (12:22-24). Hebrews 12:25 adds weight to this echo, as it warns against “[refusing] him who speaks” and reminds again of the destruction of those who refused God—the very warning emphasized in chapters 3-4. To enter into this rest is to celebrate *with* God a job well done.⁵¹ Such terminology would have been welcome to the readers, wearied

⁴⁷ Ibid., 279.

⁴⁸ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 106: “the fact that he is never said to have completed his rest and resumed his work of creation implies that his rest continues still, and may be shared by those who respond to his overtures with faith and obedience”.

⁴⁹ Otfried Hofius, “Katapausis: Die Vorstellung Vom Endzeitlichen Ruheort Im Hebraerbrief,” WUNT 11 (Tubingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1970) views it as the “end-time and eternal sabbath celebration of the people of God, where the priestly people of God will engage in the praise of God, adoration around the throne,” as summarized in Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor*, 82.

⁵⁰ Harold Weiss, “Sabbatismos in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (Winter, 1996): 682.

⁵¹ Cf. the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:21: “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’”

from the cost and toil of living as persecuted followers of Christ. A reward of celebratory refreshment with *God Himself* is awaiting those who finish well the “life-work” given to them.

ENTERING THIS REST

For the Author, the major point of this rest is not its nature, but the necessity of entering it. Ten times in 3:7-4:11 a variant of εἰσέρχομαι found. The Israelites did not enter, and God swore that generation would “never enter my rest” (3:11, 18-19; 4:3, 5) but the promise of entry is still open to the readers. As this is the point of the Author’s entire argument, attention will be given to both the act of entry and the requirements for entry.

Interpretations of “Enter”

The crucial point of the debate over whether rest is entered in the present or the future centers around how one interprets the present tense of the verb “enter”, εἰσερχόμεθα, in 4:3: “Now we who have believed *enter* that rest”. There are two possibilities, with varying degrees of nuance in either.

Laansma, Buchanan, Kasemann and Oberholtzer argue for a *futuristic* present, which is “used to describe a future event, though it typically adds the connotations of immediacy and certainty.”⁵² Laansma holds this aspect on the basis that, in continuity with the typology of the Israelites, this entry is a corporate entrance, i.e., the single entry of saints both past and present at the resurrection.⁵³ Also, the “demand to ‘make every effort’ to enter the rest (4,11) appears to

⁵² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 535.

⁵³ Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest*, 306.

place the reader before rather than in the act of entering”⁵⁴ and as rest is entered by those who complete their works, this would suggest a future event.⁵⁵

A greater number of scholars⁵⁶ see this verb as a *continuous* present, which is the most natural understanding of the Greek present indicative. This verse would then be interpreted, “we who have believed *are entering* that rest.” Believers, while not yet able to obtain rest in its full measure, are in the process of entering and may even now receive a foretaste of this coming rest. It is “a reference to the complex process on which ‘believers’ are even now engaged, although this process will certainly have an eschatological consummation.”⁵⁷ As DeSilva notes, the Author “consistently places the hearers at the threshold of entering their great reward. . . . they are moving across the very threshold, and need only move forward to enter.”⁵⁸ This is the most favorable view, for a number of reasons. First, if the Author had intended a future or perfect meaning, he would have used those tenses, rather than the present tense.⁵⁹ Second, this view fits harmoniously with the strong already/not yet motif of receiving the promise,⁶⁰ particularly

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Oberholtzer, “The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13,” 193.

⁵⁶ Attridge, Cowdery, DeSilva, Kistemaker, Lane, Lincoln, and Toussaint; possibly also Wray.

⁵⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 126.

⁵⁸ DeSilva, “Entering God’s Rest,” 32.

⁵⁹ Ibid.: “It is unlikely that the excellent Greek writer who composed Hebrews would be imprecise in his choice of a verb tense.”

⁶⁰ See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 128: “In the image of the divine rest, as in Hebrews’ soteriological imagery generally, there is the same tension between personal and corporate, between ‘realized’ and ‘future’ eschatology that characterizes much early Christian literature”; also, Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 107: “At the moment—in principle but not yet in full realization—we are entering that rest. As long as we keep our eyes fixed on ‘Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith’ (Heb. 12:2), we enjoy the rest God has promised, and eventually, we shall be with him eternally.”

within chapters 3-4 themselves.⁶¹ Third, this view does not detract from the severity of the warnings; on the contrary, the Author uses this continuous present to emphasize again the great importance for his readers to hold tight to their faith in order for them to not lose the rest they in the very act of receiving.⁶²

On this new day the rest has become a reality for those who believe but remains a promise that some may fail to achieve through disobedience, so that all are exhorted to strive to enter it. Barrett sums up the situation most judiciously. ‘The ‘rest,’ precisely because it is God’s, is both present and future; men enter it, and must strive to enter it. This is paradoxical, but it is a paradox which Hebrews shares with all primitive Christian eschatology.’⁶³

Some scholars, such as Lincoln, Lane and Cowdery, emphasize the “already” aspect more than deSilva or Attridge would, but all are in consensus that entering rest is a process initiated “Today,” and not solely a eschatological event.

Requirements for Entry

How does one enter this rest? The Author emphasizes repeatedly through negative examples and sober warnings that only a faithful, responsive, and obedient heart that persists until the end enters this rest. These qualities are found extensively throughout the rest of the sermon and form the basis of his exhortation.

Faith. Unbelief (or unfaithfulness: ἀπίστεια) makes one unable to enter; therefore, in the reverse, faith (or faithfulness: πίστις) is required for entry. The Israelites were not able to enter because of their unbelief (3:19) and because they did not combine the good news they received

⁶¹ Heb 3:6 “we are his house, if we hold on”; 3:14 “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end”; 10:14 “he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy”; 10:22 “you have come to . . . the city of the living God” but 13:14 “we are looking for the city that *is to come*” (italics mine).

⁶² Hugh A. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Harper, 1964), 83; quoted in deSilva, “Entering God’s Rest,” 32: “The Greek text means neither that they are certain to enter, nor that they will enter, but that they are already in the process of entering.”

⁶³ Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, 212.

with faith (4:2). Similarly, the readers are exhorted to not have an “unbelieving heart” (3:12), and it is “we who have believed [who] enter that rest” (4:3). The requirement of faith to receive the promise echoes strongly throughout this book (6:12; 10:38; all of 11). This faith is a persevering trust in our great Leader, knowing that he is fully able to guide and provide. And it is no timid, hesitant faith. This faith is confident (3:14), and it is with confidence that we draw near to God, enter the Most Holy Place, and persevere toward the coming reward (4:16; 10:19, 35).

A Responsive Heart. While never stated in this positive fashion, it is emphasized repeatedly that a hardened, straying heart keeps one from entering. Speaking of the Israelites whose “hearts are always going astray” (3:10), God warns, “do not harden your hearts” (3:8; 4:7). The readers are warned to not have a “heart that turns away [from God]” (3:11) and to take care that “none of you are hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (3:13). Interestingly, twice the Author later mentions the prophecy of Jeremiah, in which the new covenant is placed within the “heart” (8:10; 10:16), indicating that there is now internal transformation and motivation rather than external obligation. As such, the readers have an advantage the Israelites never possessed—and they must not take that lightly. A heart truly under the new covenant of Christ will not willfully stray. Rather, it draws “near to God [sincerely]” (10:22) and does not “refuse him who speaks” (12:25).

Obedience. Again, the importance of obedience is stressed negatively by the consequences of disobedience. The Israelites rebelled (3:8), tested and tried God (3:9) and disobeyed (3:18); they “did not go in, because of their disobedience” (4:6) and the readers must do everything in their power to keep from “following their example of disobedience” (4:11). When one willfully disobeys, one is not following the Leader, and such disobedience displays a

lack of trust and an unreformed heart. Disobedience was justly and severely punished under the old covenant and is even more so in the new (2:1). Positively, Christ himself learned obedience and he brings salvation to those who obey him (5:8-9).

Perseverance. The parallel of sharing in Christ is dependant upon “[holding] firmly until the end the confidence we had at first” (3:14). The promise of entering the rest must not be “fallen short of” (4:1), implying that they are on the verge and must persevere to reach their goal. “[Every] effort” must be made to enter it (4:11), calling to mind a gritty, sweating push to the very end.⁶⁴ Similar language is scattered throughout the rest of the book, as the readers are warned to “not drift away” (2:2) or “fall away” (6:6), but to “hold firmly to the faith” (4:14) and “unswervingly to the hope” (10:23) they profess, to persevere (10:36, 12:1) and “show this same diligence to the very end” (6:11). Perseverance’s critical importance to the Author cannot be overemphasized.

Mutual Encouragement. Finally, it is only among the community of believers that one can remain faithful, open, obedient and persistent. An introspective accountability (3:12) and daily, mutual encouragement (3:13) holds the community together and strengthens it in its corporate pursuit of this rest. The Author emphasizes this repeatedly throughout his sermon: aid one another to “make your hope sure” (6:11); imitate those who have inherited the promise (6:12, chapter 11; 13:7); “spur one another on” (10:25); meet together and “encourage one another” (10:26). “The preacher allows no illusion that anyone can stand alone and remain faithful.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest*, 296: “ ‘Making every effort to enter that resting place’ (v. 11) is not merely a matter of securing one’s own salvation, but also of working to strengthen the community ‘so that no one may fall (as they did in the desert) through such disobedience as theirs’.

⁶⁵ Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor*, 70.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the rest put forth so eloquently in Hebrews is the very “Sabbath-rest” that God enjoyed after creation and has offered throughout redemptive history to humankind. Though humans have failed in the past to enter this rest through unbelief and disobedience, the offer still stands and is now made possible by Jesus, the great Leader who has gone before us and who urges us to follow. This promise of rest is offered to the disheartened believer as a stimulus for perseverance, for to fall short of it is to receive wrath, but to enter it is to partake of the joyful celebration of a work faithfully completed. The Author did not intend rest to mean a peaceful possession of Canaan, nor is it equivalent to the locale of heaven. Rather, it is the state of rest which God Himself enjoys. By responding “Today” with a renewed determination to trust, obey and follow the Leader who beckons, the believer begins the process of entry that will be consummated when his or her life of service is complete. One may receive a sense of peace and joy as one lives a submitted life of obedient trust in God, but these are but a foretaste of the lavish final rest God offers as a reward for the faithful, persevering heart.

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