

The Book Of Hebrews

Part I

Jesus, The Incarnate Son Of God 1:1-4:13

Lesson 3 (3:1-4:13)

Outline thus far.

I. God's Final Word Spoken Through His Son (1:1-2:18)

- A. The Son, God's ultimate spokesman (1:1-4).
- B. The more excellent name of the Son (1:5-14).
- C. The conclusion to be drawn - we must give the more earnest heed to the things heard (2:1-4).

II. The need for the incarnation explained To Make Available The Great Salvation Through Suffering And Death (2:5-18)

- A. The great salvation as it relates to man's dominion over the world (2:5-8).
- B. Man's appointed destiny realised through Jesus (2:9-13).
- C. Further explanations of the incarnation and death (2:14-18).

III. Exhortation To "Hold Fast" And Warning Against Unbelief (3:1-4:13)

Introductory notes.

Consistent with the earlier observation that Hebrews is made up of doctrinal teaching interspersed with warnings against apostasy, 3:1-4:13 constitutes the opening caution.

The writer in this section provides the first robust incentive to encourage his readers to "hold fast" - the danger of falling away (3:1-4:13). Next he discussed the blessings enjoyed in Jesus as our High Priest (4:14-5:10), thus a negative reason is followed by a positive to keep a firm grip and remain faithful.

This phrase (or something very similar) appears twice in this section (3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23). It has the idea of holding tightly or securely; maintaining a firm grip.

A. Jesus Greater Than Moses (3:1-6)

A call to give careful attention to Christ (1).

The book opens with the uncompromising declaration that God has spoken in these last days by His son (1:1-2). Better than the angels, "He has obtained by inheritance a more excellent name than they" (1:3-4). The writer now sets out a comparison of the Messiah with Moses.

(katanoeo) denotes "to consider attentively, fix one's eyes or mind upon" (Thayer). Attention is directed to two aspects which should be carefully thought about.

"Apostle (apostolos)": means literally "one sent forth" (Vine). It is used of Christ in His relationship to God (1:2; Jn 17:3), the twelve chosen, trained and sent out by Jesus (Lk 6:13), Paul (Gal 1:1, 17) and then more widely of Barnabas and others in fulfilment of missions assigned by local churches (Ac 13:1-3; 14:4, 14; Phil 2:25; 2 Cor 8:23). An allusion has already been made to His role as High Priest (1:3; 2:17-18). The "High priest of our confession" probably carries the idea of "the High Priest whom we have confessed". And so these descriptives build upon concepts previously introduced.

Things to be considered in the comparison (2-6).

Each was faithful to the one who appointed him (2). "Faithful in all His house" is taken from Num 12:7. As the OT passage makes clear, the house belonged to God "mine house" and Moses served faithfully as a servant within it.

The reason why close attention should be focussed upon Jesus (3). He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses – by how much? He is better than the angels in that He has a more excellent name than they (1:4). He is more glorious than Moses "inasmuch as He who built the house has more honour than the house." In any building project, a house possesses whatever glory it has through the skill of the builder and it reflects that glory on to the one who built it (cf. Psa 19:1). He was faithful as Moses was faithful but more glorious than Moses.

The roles within the figure specified (4-6). Jesus is identified with the builder and Moses as a part of the house (4). Continuing, the house being built Moses functioned as a servant within it but Christ as a son over His own house (5-6; cf. Dt 18:15). In the figure the "house" represented the nation of Israel but it became the spiritual nation as the writer made his application – "whose house we are if..."

B. Warnings Drawn From Psalm 95 (3:7-11; 95:7-11)

The connection with the figure made (7a).

"Therefore".

1. Moses' inferiority to Christ having been established, attention is drawn to the anger provoked in the Lord by the rebellion of the wilderness generation who hardened their hearts against His leadership exercised through Moses.
2. The original admonition was spoken by the Spirit "in David" when He warned David's contemporaries not to be like-minded.

The quotation (7b-11).

The reference is to the occasion when the children of Israel accepted the unfavourable report of the ten spies in preference to the positive testimony of Caleb and Joshua, and then determined to return to Egypt under a captain of their own choice (Num 14:1-35; esp. 32-35). In their lack of faith they refused to carry on and take the land and so God swore an oath saying, "They shall not enter My rest".

C. The Passage Re-Applied By The Hebrew Writer (3:12-15)

The warning (12).

1. "Beware" lest the same heart of unbelief exhibited by them in departing from the living God be in you.
2. Observe that the reasoning used to establish God's displeasure at disobedience is the same as that previously deployed to warn the Jewish Christians what they must expect if they let slip the word heard from the Son (2:1-4).
3. This is not dealing with a situation in which a brother is seeking to serve God to the best of his ability yet nonetheless trips up.
4. Strongly implied is the possibility of apostasy. Those addressed are not only brethren (12) but "holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling" (1) and members of the house of God (6) and it is possible that such as these could develop evil hearts and depart from the living God.

The precaution to be taken against unbelief and falling away (13-15).

"Today" (13). It does not refer to a twenty-four hour period but the window of opportunity while the Spirit continues to call and plead; it is still the day of grace when it is not too late to take advantage of the blessings being offered. And so conscious of the danger of apostasy, brethren are admonished to exhort one another on a daily basis lest any be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

The incentive to do this (14; Rom 8:16-17). We are partakers of Christ on a conditional basis i.e., if we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

There is an urgency to the situation – "While it is said" (15). The same message of the Spirit rings out now as it did during the time of David and the Hebrew writer. A time will come when this opportunity will cease to exist. The offer must be accepted "today" while the Spirit is still speaking.

D. Questions Designed To Drive Home The Lesson (3:16-19)

"For who having heard, rebelled" (16)?

"Now with whom was He angry forty years" (17)?

"And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest..." (18-19)?

Note on v. 16. The KJV renders the text here as a statement. However many other versions (NKJV, ASV, NASV, ESV) translate the text as a question which is consistent both with the general context and the questions that follow (see Barnes for an explanation of the Greek grammar).

E. A Call For Diligence To Enter The Promised Rest (4:1-13)

Introductory remarks.

Psalm 95 remains the background text under discussion, the passage furnishing a more complete explanation of God's rest (95:11).

Whilst in the wilderness Israel was promised that after they had crossed the Jordan, entered the land and conquered the Canaanite nations, God would give them rest in Canaan (Ex 33:14; Dt 3:18-20; 12:8-11; 25:19; Josh 1:10-15). They had been given this rest (Josh 21:43-45; 22:4; 23:1) though the vast majority had fallen in the wilderness and had not entered (Psa 95:7-11). Hebrews 3 warned "don't be like them" - they had not been able to enter because of unbelief (3:19).

The writer proceeds to argue that a promise of rest is available to God's people but the obtaining of it is not guaranteed/cannot be taken for granted.

A promise of rest remains (1).

Assuming that a promise of entering is left to the Christian, the writer admonishes, "Let us fear lest any of you seem to come short of it".

In this verse the assumption is made; in the following verses the proof is provided.

Argumentation proving that today God's people are called to enter (2-10).

The rest in question is only profitable to the believer (2-3). The gospel/good tidings of this rest was presented to them even as it had been to the Israelites but it was not beneficial to them because the hearing was not mixed with faith (2). In contrast "we who believe" do enter that rest (3a) whereas those who in consequence of God's oath "shall not enter" (3b). The reason for non-admittance was not because there was no rest as God had finished His works since the foundation of the world (3c).

The type of rest in the writer's mind defined (4-5). He is not thinking only of a rest in Canaan but a rest with God. The last phrase of verse 3 hints at this. The combination of two OT passages (4; Gen 2:4) "and again in this place (the passage already under discussion [Psa 95:11])..." completes the definition (5). It is an entering into an eternal rest with God which He entered after He had worked for six days.

Another day designated (6-8).

1. Seeing some must enter that rest and the wilderness Israelites failed to do so because of disobedience (6), He defined another day (7).
2. If the promise of rest had been exhausted by the entrance into Canaan under Joshua, then God several centuries later would not have spoken to people already living in Canaan of another day urging them to enter into His rest (8). The psalmist must have been thinking of God's eternal rest as the ultimate fulfilment.

Conclusion of argumentation (9-10). The assumption was asserted in verse 1, the supporting evidence presented (2-8) and the author now summarises the position. There remains a rest for God's people, that self-same rest into which God has entered. Those who go in will cease from their works as God has from His. Points to notice:

1. The Grk. word rendered rest (sabbatismos) in the KJV and NKJV and "Sabbath rest" in v. 9 is different to that (katapausis – or its verb form) in the surrounding verses (3:11, 18; 4:1, 3 [twice], 4, 8, 10, 11).
2. Sabbatismos (appearing only this once in the NT) means "a keeping Sabbath" whereas katapausis "a resting place and "metaphorically the heavenly blessedness in which God dwells, and of which he has promised to make persevering believers in Christ partakers after the toils and trials of life on earth are ended" (Thayer).
3. Why is sabbatismos chosen in preference to katapausis by the writer in v.9? They mean essentially the same thing since the two words are used interchangeably in vs. 9 and 10. Perhaps it is to hint at a symbolic character in the Sabbath as argued in the Word Study Dictionary – "A rest as on the Sabbath. In the NT used only of an eternal rest with God (Heb 4:9). Therefore, the intimation is that the Sabbath was instituted as a symbol of that eternal rest at the completion of God's work. This rest remains with the people of God and is also called katapausis, a cessation from work or causing to cease work, putting to rest, repose... This idea of rest as freedom from further work finds expression in Rev 14:13; 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow.'"

Diligence is needed (11-13).

The call (11). The section opened "let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it" (1) and closes with the admonition to "be diligent (spoudazo)... lest anyone fall". Spoudazo signifies "to hasten to do a thing, to exert oneself, endeavour, give diligence" (Vine).

The reason why – the nature of God's word (12).

1. It is not a dead entity - "it is living and powerful" (cf. Isa 55:10-11). When God swore in His wrath that the Israelites would not enter His rest that pronouncement took effect.
2. By it our deepest thoughts and intents are open to God's scrutiny. The comparison combines both figurative and literal statements. As the sword is able to separate bone and marrow so His word has the capacity to divide soul (psyche) and spirit (pneuma) – expose the innermost being of man.

The effect of its activity – "all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (13).

Additional notes

1. The Seven Day Adventists teach that God's law "requires the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest, worship, and ministry in harmony with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath" and cite Heb 4:1-11 as a supportive text. This cannot be so:
2. The contention is far removed from the reasoning of the writer whose purpose was to urge faithfulness among Jewish Christians. Their ancestors could not enter God's "rest" because of disobedience (3:7-11). David's Psalm 95 was cited to demonstrate that Joshua had not led Israel into God's rest in the fullest sense (4:4-9).
 - Consistency in God would not allow it. The "rest" under discussion in 4:1-3 is the rest that God had sworn the wilderness generation would not enter. Would God prevent His people keeping an observance that He had previously commanded?
 - The characteristics of the rest in the author's mind would preclude it.
 - The rest which remains for the people of God is a promise left to us and not an ordinance carried over from a previous covenant (4:1).
 - It is to be entered and not observed (4:1, 10).
 - It is a rest that can be denied if we are not found pleasing to God (3:19; 4:1).
 - It is entered by believers, 4:3, who are to fear, 4:1, and give diligence to possess it (4:11).