

## What is God’s “Rest” to Which He Invites Us? Hebrews 3–4 John Hepp, Jr

*This paper deals with a difficult subject in a difficult book. It includes some notes by Stanley D. Toussaint, as I revised them for a study course on the Book of Hebrews (see [www.kingdominbible.com](http://www.kingdominbible.com)). Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB). In that version words in all-capital letters are quoted by one Bible book from another. The words the LORD substitute for God’s name. KJV means King James Version. Distinguish “Hebrews” (the New Testament book, written in Greek) from “Hebrew” (the main Old Testament language).*

On the first Sabbath God joyfully rested after completing a marvelous creation (Gen. 1:31; 2:3). He separated His day of rest from the other days. Later He invited human beings to join Him in His rest! One evidence of such an invitation is what He said in Psalm 95:11. This is repeatedly quoted—in whole or in part—in Hebrews 3:11; 4:3; and 4:5:

**“AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH,  
THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.”**

This quotation is the main basis of the argument in Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13. Notice the bolded words, which give the correct sense of the originals in the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Book of Psalms. The original words are literally “if they shall enter my rest” (as the KJV mistakenly translates them in 4:3 and 4:5). But in this case the *if*-clause does not express doubt but certainty. It is a divine oath.<sup>1</sup> By thus vowing that some would not enter His rest, God made it evident that others will indeed enter it (Heb. 4:6). Therefore, Psalm 95 in effect gives an invitation to enter God’s rest. Such a privilege must be great, but what does it mean? This paper offers a meaning that is consistent throughout the Hebrews passage. Along with each explanation below, read the Scripture it refers to.

### **The Context in Hebrews for God’s Invitation**

To properly understand this invitation, it will help to see the train of thought in the Book of Hebrews. Hebrews begins with a Prologue (1:1–4), which (a) states the theme of the book—“God has spoken...in His Son”—and (b) magnifies God’s Son in seven short statements. Read that Prologue.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 95:11 was written in the Hebrew language. The Book of Hebrews quotes that verse in Greek, each time using the same words. KJV translates those words two different ways: (a) In Hebrews 4:3, 5 it correctly says, “they shall not enter.” (b) In 3:11 it translates the same words “if they shall enter.” The latter translation is **literal** but misleading, because the “if” clause for an oath does not express doubt but strong certainty. The same idiom is used in Genesis 21:23, which literally begins, “swear...**if you will deal falsely.**” NASB correctly translates, “swear...**that you will not deal falsely.**” Similarly, Numbers 14:23 literally begins, “**if they shall see**”; but NASB correctly translates, “[they] **shall by no means see.**” (In both passages KJV is equivalent to NASB.) In this idiom the Hebrew “if” implies a missing clause calling for judgment on the one who swears. That clause is occasionally given, as in Ruth 1:17: “**Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse,** if *anything but* death parts you and me.” (See also 1 Sam. 3, where v. 17 expresses that other clause but v. 14 does not.) When that clause is not given, as in Psalm 95:11 and Hebrews 4, the *if*-clause should not be translated as a condition.

The last verse of the Prologue (v. 4) also makes a bridge to the main body of the book. That body consists of two main divisions (I and II below):

- I. The Superiority of the Son, 1:4 to 10:18**
  - A. Superior to the angels, 1:4 to 2:18
  - B. Superior to Moses, 3:1 to 4:13
  - C. Superior to Aaron, 4:14 to 10:18
- II. Our Response, Persevering Faith, 10:19 to 13:17**

The first main division of Hebrews consists of three sections that compare Jesus to outstanding agents of the old covenant. In each case He is shown to be superior (1) in His person and (2) in His work. After each comparison has started, there is a warning to the readers. Consider, for example, section I.A. This shows that Jesus is superior to the angels in His person (1:4–14) and in His work (2:5–18). In the middle of this comparison is the first warning (2:1–4).

Section I.A begins by proving Jesus’ personal superiority to the angels. It does so by quoting seven passages from the Old Testament. Before the first quotation and the last quotation, it asks the same question: “To which of the angels did He ever say?” (1:5, 13). The quotations show His following superiorities in person:

- God has made Him His **Son** (1:4–6, that is, His Heir, as clearly seen in Ps. 2:7, 8; cf. Rom. 8:17) and His **Firstborn** (that is, chief of many heirs, 1:6).
- God has promised Him an eternal kingdom (briefly described in 1:8–12)—for which He is now waiting at God’s right hand (1:13).
- When He again comes to the world, all angels will worship Him (1:6).

Unlike the Son, angels have no fixed condition nor inheritance (1:7). Their work is on behalf of those who will be the Son’s “companions” (that is, co-heirs, 1:9) in His coming kingdom. Angels are “sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation” (1:14) in that kingdom. That is the future and fullest aspect of salvation. Now, read Hebrews 1:4–14, noticing the points just mentioned.

Next follows the book’s first warning (2:1–4). Note its position as seen in Chart 1, then read it.

<i>Chart 1</i> <b>Section I.A: Jesus is Superior to the Angels, Hebrews 1:4 to 2:18</b>		
Superior in His person 1:4–14  <i>(He is Royal Heir—to rule.)</i>	First Warning of Hebrews 2:1–4  <b>The Danger of Drifting</b> <i>(By neglect we can miss salvation.)</i>	Superior in His work 2:5–18  <i>(He leads “many sons” to glory in the “world to come.”)</i>

Among its elements this first warning includes the following:

- It begins with the words “for this reason” (2:1), looking back to Jesus’ personal superiority to the angels (1:4–14).
- It continues with a “much more” argument: If disobeying the angels brought calamity, how much more will disobeying the Son bring calamity!

- It comes to an immediate conclusion—what we should do: “we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away” (2:1).

This warning, like the entire book, is written to people who have heard God’s message through the Son but are in danger of drifting away from Him (2:1, 3). If they drift away, they will miss the “salvation” He announced (2:3). What salvation is that? There is no need to guess. The author himself identifies it as “the world to come, concerning which we are speaking” (2:5). “The world to come” will be the coming kingdom in which the Son will rule with His “companions” (1:9). Then salvation will be full and complete, not partial and incomplete as it is now. Thus, the “salvation” of 2:3 means the same future salvation as in 1:14.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, “the world to come” is an essential point of 2:5–18, which shows the superiority of the Son’s work. That section begins by proving that dominion in “the world to come” is not for angels but for men (2:5–9). It proves it by quoting (in vv. 6–8) Psalm 8 to show that man is destined to be “crowned” with the “glory” of ruling over “all things” in God’s creation. “Not yet” has that happened (v. 8); only one man, Jesus, has so far attained such glory (v. 9). He attained it after suffering and death, which capacitated Him to lead “many sons” to the same glory in the future kingdom (2:10). Leading us to that glory is the Son’s superior work.

Other passages in New Testament books also point to that future world—Messiah’s coming kingdom—as our goal.<sup>3</sup> Missing that kingdom would be a great loss indeed! Read Hebrews 2:5–18, observing what we have just pointed out.

Now let us move from the first section and warning of Hebrews to the second section (3:1 to 4:13; see I.B in the outline given earlier.). This section compares the Son to Moses, in His person (3:1–6) and in His work (4:1–13). Between those two parts is the second warning, which includes God’s vow about His rest (see Chart 2). Read 3:1–6, which shows how the Son is superior in His person to Moses. You will notice that both are faithful to God. The Son, however, is (a) over (not “in”) the house He built, (b) “Son” (not “servant”), and (c) the fulfiller of Moses’ ministry.

<b>Chart 2 Section I.B: Jesus is Superior to Moses, Hebrews 3:1 to 4:13</b>		
Superior in His person 3:1–6  <i>(He is Son over His house.)</i>	Second Warning of Hebrews 3:7–19  <b>The Danger of Disbelief</b> <i>(By disbelief we can miss God’s rest.)</i>	Superior in His work 4:1–13  <i>(He brings His people into God’s rest.)</i>

<sup>2</sup> Some other references to this future phase of salvation (glorification in the future kingdom) are Matt. 10:22; 19:25; 24:13; Mark 10:26; 13:13; Luke 9:24; 18:26; Acts 15:11; Rom. 5:9, 10; 13:11; 1 Cor. 3:15; 5:5; 1 Thess. 5:8, 9; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:10; 4:18; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5; 4:18; and Rev. 12:10.

<sup>3</sup> Several scriptures call the coming kingdom the goal for all believers. For example, James 2:5 speaks of “the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him.” Acts 14:22 says that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” That kingdom will not be heaven in heaven but heaven on earth. Jesus made it clear. When He “comes [to earth] in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne” (Matt. 25:31). Then He will say to His “sheep,” “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). Whoever inherits that kingdom will “be saved” (Matt. 19:25) and “shall inherit eternal life” (Matt. 19:29; 25:46).

The second warning (3:7-19) is directed to the same people in the same danger as the first warning. Besides its relative position, it has other similarities to the first one.

- It begins similarly. The first word, “therefore” (3:7), looks back to Jesus’ personal superiority to Moses (3:1-6).
- It also continues with a “much more” argument.
- It has a similar conclusion. This conclusion, however, is not given immediately—not until verse 12: “take care ...lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart.” Between “therefore” and the conclusion is a parenthetical section (3:7b-11) that quotes some of King David’s words from Psalm 95. Study Chart 3, then read the passage below.

Chart 3 Parenthetical Quotation in Hebrews 3:7b-11		
v. 7a	(vv. 7b-11)	v. 12
Therefore	(as the Spirit said in Psalm 95)	Take care

**Some Cannot Enter God’s Rest, Hebrews 3:7-19**

[Verses 5-6 are included to show the context.]

- 5 Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later;  
 6 but Christ *was faithful* as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

7 Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says,

"TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, 8 DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS, 9 WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED *Me* BY TESTING *Me*, AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS. 10 "THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION, AND SAID, 'THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART; AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS'; 11 AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, 'THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.'" [Ps. 95:7b-11]

- 12 Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.  
 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.  
 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end;  
 15 while it is said, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME."  
 16 For who provoked *Him* when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt *led* by Moses?  
 17 And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?  
 18 And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?

19 And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

We can call this second warning “The Danger of Disbelief.” As you see in 3:12–15, it is primarily based on God’s vow about His rest, quoted (in v. 11) from Psalm 95. That psalm had looked back to Moses’ time and warned against repeating the same sin. Because of the disbelief of his people in the desert, Moses could not bring them into the Promised Land (3:16). But Jesus is the new Moses who, as chapter 4 shows, does (will) bring His people into rest. Yet, some may miss out on this rest.

Psalm 95 is in two parts. The first part is a call to worship (95:1–7a). The second part (95:7b–11), the part quoted in Hebrews 3, is a warning against disobeying God. The psalmist warned his readers not to repeat what had happened to Israel centuries earlier, in the “provocation...in the wilderness” (95:8, KJV). He mentioned two events. The first, related in Exodus 17, took place at Meribah (meaning “quarrel”) and Massah (meaning “test”) soon after the Exodus. The second event, described in Numbers 14, took place at Kadesh Barnea, where the wilderness sojourn should have ended. Everything was ready for them to enter the Promised Land. Instead, there followed forty years of wandering, as a result of Israel’s provoking and testing God, and their own hardness of heart. Because of their rebellion, God swore that they would not enter His rest (95:11). This clearly referred to the Promised Land: The rebellious generation, God said, “shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers” (Num. 14:23; cf. vv. 30–31).

Psalm 95:7b–11 was addressed to a much later generation—over four centuries later—with a similar danger. After the psalm was written, ten more centuries passed before Hebrews 3 quoted that psalm. Yet, after such a long time, Hebrews took that warning as pertaining to us! By doing so, it implied the following:

- The “Today” of Psalm 95 is now.  
     Hebrews 3:13, “as long as it is still called ‘Today’”  
     Hebrews 3:15, “while it is said, ‘Today...do not harden your hearts’”
- The invitation is the same as before.  
     Hebrews 4:1, “A promise remains of entering His rest.”  
     Hebrews 4:6–7, Since God intends “for some to enter it,” but those invited before “failed to enter,” God has made a new offer “Today.”

After the quotation from Psalm 95, Hebrews finally gets to the specific warning in 3:12. Reread that warning, noticing the following: (1) “Any one” refers to individuals in the group (see also 3:13). Among the “brethren” some individuals are in danger of not entering the promised rest. (2) The danger is that of “departing” (KJV). The NASB has “falling away,” but the Greek verb implies stronger action. This verb, used in 1 Timothy 4:1, is built on the same stem from which the noun *apostasy* is derived. It describes a deliberate, decisive departure. (3) The departure is “from the living God.” The danger, in short, is apostasy and not just unworthiness—not just missing the Lord’s high standards but giving up one’s profession of Christ.

Instead of “falling away” or departing from the living God, the body of professing believers is to “encourage one another” (3:13, the same command as in 10:25). We should do this “as long as it is still called ‘Today,’” which is the present time of opportunity, of invitation to enter God’s “rest.”

Verse 14 explains the need for the warning: “For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” This is the same teaching as in verse

6: We show that God has chosen us when we continue in the faith.<sup>4</sup> The elect will endure (see Rom. 8:29–30). Although the elect are eternally secure, the only absolutely certain human evidence of who are elect is their perseverance.

Notice that verse 14 switches to a synonym for entering God's rest: being "**partakers** of Christ." The Greek word for "partakers" means His "companions," as it did when used in 1:9. These are people who share with Messiah in His coming kingdom. In 1:14 they were called "those who will inherit salvation." In 2:10 they were the "many sons" whom God will bring to the "glory" of "the world to come" (2:5).

Three questions in verses 16–18 point out three reasons why the endurance of faith is needed: (1) A good beginning does not guarantee success (v. 16). (2) Unbelief angers God (v. 17). (3) Disobedience results in judgment (v. 18).

Verse 19 is a summary statement: Israel's disobedience was caused by unbelief. They started with God but didn't really believe in Him. In unbelief they looked back longingly to Egypt (Num. 14:3–4; Acts 7:39; Heb. 11:15) and looked ahead fearfully to the difficulties before them (Num. 13:31 to 14:20). God brought them to the door, but they would not enter His rest.

So Israel didn't believe. Yet, other passages say that they did. For example, Exodus 4:29–31 says that Moses' generation "believed" when Moses and Aaron brought them the LORD's promise of rescue from bondage. Exodus 12:28,50 says that they believed and obeyed when He commanded them to keep the Passover. Hebrews 11:29 says that "by faith they passed through the Red Sea." Repeatedly we are told that "the LORD saved Israel" and "the people...believed in the LORD" (Exod. 14:30–31; 15:2; Ps. 106:10, 12). But just as often we are told that "they forgot God their Savior...did not believe in His word," and worshipped idols (Ps. 106:19, 24). Quoting the prophet Amos, Stephen described Moses' generation as idolaters (Acts 7:42–43).

How do we reconcile such statements? First, we must not deny the fact that "believing" God is the only way to salvation: "As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). But second, we must realize that not all belief saves. Saving faith is **continuing** faith, not a single or short-lived act. "Those on the rocky soil," the Lord warned, "when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13). In Acts 8:13 "Simon himself believed"; yet Peter later told him, "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore, repent...you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity" (Acts 8:21–23). Even in the "Gospel of Belief" we read of people who "believed in" Jesus but apparently were not saved (John 2:23; 8:31–59; 12:42–43). Was there something else they should have done for salvation? Nothing but continue (see John 8:31; Heb. 6:12; 10:36).

### **Some Will Enter God's Rest, Hebrews 4:1–13**

- 1 Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it.
- 2 For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.

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<sup>4</sup> Some other statements of perseverance as evidence of election are Col. 1:23; 1 John 2:19; Matt. 13:3–9, 18–23; Luke 8:13.

- 3 For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, "AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST," although His works were finished from the foundation of the world.
- 4 For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, "AND GOD RESTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY FROM ALL HIS WORKS";
- 5 and again in this passage, "THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST."
- 6 Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience,
- 7 He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS."
- 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that.
- 9 There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God.
- 10 For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.
  
- 11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through *following* the same example of disobedience.
- 12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
- 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

In 4:1–13 Hebrews resumes the contrast of Jesus with Moses. It shows that He will give the rest Moses could not give.

In verses 1–3 this section moves from the negative to the positive. It begins by reiterating the warning based on Psalm 95: Some individuals might miss the promised rest (v. 1) because entering requires faith (v. 2). But there is a glorious corollary—the certainty that “we who have believed enter that rest” (v. 3). In verse 3 “enter,” though present tense, refers to what is sure to happen in the future. This is called “futuristic present.” For other examples see the present-tense references to the future resurrection in Luke 20:35–36 and the future judgment in Romans 2:2.

Notice that in verses 1–3 “the good news preached to us” (of entering God’s rest) is essentially the same as “the word they heard” in Moses’ day (4:2; compare v. 6). Since the good news is the same, the goal should be the same. Since God’s rest for them would have been the Promised Land, that land in some sense will be God’s rest for us.

Verses 4–10 further define the promised rest. It is related to God’s rest in Genesis 2:2 and is, in fact, an extension of it.

Verse 4 quotes Genesis 2:2 to show that God rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath, from His works of creation. Verse 5 again quotes Psalm 95:11 to show that He refused to let Moses’ generation enter His rest. The very fact that He excluded them implies that from the beginning He intended for man to enter (v. 6; see Matt. 25:34). Otherwise, He would have said nothing about entering. Therefore, He long afterward (in David’s time, v. 7) mentions another day of opportunity: “Today.”

Didn’t Moses’ successor Joshua give Israel that rest? Verse 8, by saying “if Joshua had” (NASB, NIV; a “contrary-to-fact condition,” not an oath), makes it clear that he did not. Joshua

did lead Israel in the conquest of the Promised Land, but it was no longer God's rest. That opportunity had passed. When Israel had refused, God had withdrawn His offer. This means that the Promised Land could be God's rest only under certain conditions, only as the center of His eternal kingdom. In Joshua's day it was still a picture of that rest (Josh. 1:13, 15; 11:23; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1; Deut. 12:10) but was not the rest itself. Neither was the promise fulfilled in David's day. David's appeal in Psalm 95 was for his people to enter a future rest.

The conclusion to this paragraph is in verses 9–10. Verse 9 says that the promised rest still "remains" today; that is, it still exists as our hope (see the same verb in 10:26). That rest is a promise for the future, though we can prepare for it now (see Heb. 11:39–40).

The word translated literally as "Sabbath rest" (NASB) in verse 9 is the Greek word *sabbatismos*, used only here in the New Testament. This word reflects a view held by many Jews at that time, that the Sabbath will come to fulfillment in the kingdom age. Human history will correspond to God's creation week: After "six days" (in this view symbolizing six thousand years) of labor there will be "one day" (that is, one thousand years—a millennium) of rest.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that His kingdom-rest will come to an end. In the creation account (Gen. 1–2) each day has an ending except the seventh; so that future Sabbath will not end but will introduce God's eternal day.

This same interpretation of the Sabbath and the rest is found in Christian literature written as early as the beginning of the second century (see examples in the appendix). In fact, for the first two centuries of church history, most if not all Christians shared the Jewish belief just described. They looked forward to a literal Millennium, during which the Promised Land will be the center of Messiah's worldwide government. They took at face value such prophecies as Isaiah 2:1–4. Can we blame those who held this "Jewish" view of *sabbatismos* when the apostle Paul himself said that "sabbath days...are a shadow of things to come" (Col. 2:16–17)?

Verse 10 concludes the argument of verses 4–10 by showing why "sabbath-rest" is a good name for what "remains" for God's people. It does this by comparing thoughts from the two Old Testament passages being considered: (1) Psalm 95:11, used in most of this section (chs. 3–4) about the Son and Moses; and (2) Genesis 2:2, used in the current paragraph (4:4–10). By adapt-

ing key words from Psalm 95:11 it pictures a person: "he who enters God's rest" (NIV). Then, by quoting from Genesis 2:2, it gives, in effect, a definition of that rest: "rests from his own work," just as God did" (NIV). See Chart 4.

"He who enters God's rest" does not refer to any definite person or time; the Greek form is indefinite (see the same form in John 16:2 and Matt. 23:20–22). But when such a person does exist, it can

<b>Chart 4 Hebrews 4:10's Description of Christian Hope</b>	
The Person	What That Person Does
<b><i>He who enters God's rest</i></b> (words adapted from Ps. 95:11)	<b><i>"rests from his own work" just as God did.</i></b> (words quoted from Gen. 2:2)

<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, on page 79 of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, 1964), quotes from *The Fourth Book of Ezra*, 8:52, written between AD 70 and AD 100: "It is for you that paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is prepared, plenty is provided, a city is built, rest is appointed, goodness is established and wisdom perfected beforehand." On page 72 Bruce lists Septuagint occurrences of the verb from which *sabbatismos* comes.



be said that he has rested as God did on the first Sabbath.

What kind of works did God rest from on that first Sabbath? Good and productive works, works of creation. So God's rest cannot picture a sinner's ceasing from wickedness—or even from his own “good works”—in order to find justification. Instead, it pictures what awaits the saints (the “people of God,” v. 9) in the coming kingdom. If so, the “rest” is the same as the future salvation (1:14), the glory of the world to come (2:5, 10). Today we must continue to “labor” (6:10) and “strive” (12:4), but the promised rest will come.

It is evident that none of us has yet rested in the way God did at the end of creation week (Gen. 2:2). But as surely as He finished His work, then rested and rejoiced in it, so shall we at the end of this age. Let us be diligent to enter “that [future] rest” (Heb. 4:11).

What will happen to true believers who died when this rest was not being offered? God will raise them from the dead so that they can take part, too.

In 4:11–13 the warning of 3:12–13 and 4:1 is repeated. Once again the emphasis is on individuals (“anyone”) in the group who, like the Israelites of Kadesh Barnea, were so close and yet so far. Verse 12 explains the need for the warning of verse 11. Those who reject God's rest will face His judgment.

### Meaning of the “Rest” in Hebrews 3–4

Because of the difficulty of this subject, let us restate our understanding of the “rest” referred to in these chapters. On the surface it might appear that three “rests” are in view:

1. Canaan rest, that is, the “rest” that Moses' generation missed (see Heb. 3:11, 18–19). The following generation entered the land under Joshua and obtained “rest” (Deut. 12:9; Josh. 11:23; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1) but not the rest promised to the earlier generation (see Heb. 4:8).
2. Sabbath rest, which was God's rest on the seventh day after creating everything (see Heb. 4:4, 10; Gen. 2:2–3; Exod. 20:11).
3. The rest promised to believers today (see Heb. 4:1, 3, 6, 8–11).

But though these three may look different, Hebrews 3–4 considers them basically the same. The good news about entering was preached both to Moses' generation and to us (4:2). Hebrews 4:4–10 specifically identifies our rest and Canaan rest as God's Sabbath rest. Israel missed the opportunity to enter that rest—even under Joshua (4:8)—but “after so long a time” (4:7) there is “another day” of invitation (4:8).

What is this promised rest to which we are invited? Many take it to be eternal blessing in heaven. This may be the “rest from their labor” enjoyed by martyrs (Rev. 14:13; cf. 6:11). But that view cannot explain (1) how our promised rest is related to the one Israel missed nor (2) why sometimes the rest has not even been offered. Hebrews refers to two times of invitation with a long gap between them: one in Moses' day and another “after so long a time” (4:7).

A second view is that the promised rest is the present experience of rest and peace available to Christians who attain it. Advocates of this view often call this experience “faith/rest,” in which believers rest from fleshly labors. This may be the “rest for your souls” promised in Matthew 11:29. But again, (1) how is this related to the rest Israel missed? And (2) how does this view fit with the strong danger implied in 4:11–13? Does failure to enjoy faith/rest condemn a

Christian to serious punishment? Also, (3) how is our resting from fleshly labors similar to God's resting from His works of creation?

The best view says that the rest being discussed in Hebrews describes the Lord's coming kingdom centered in the Holy Land. This is the "relief...when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven" (2 Thess. 1:7), the "times of refreshing" (Acts 3:19). Consider some of the many evidences supporting this interpretation. Most of them we have already discussed.

1. Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13 sees Psalm 95 in detail, including its warning, as directed to us. This shows that the "rest" is the same in both passages. Since the "rest" it says Israel missed in Moses' generation involved the Holy Land, so does ours. The same good news about entering was, much later, preached to us as well as to them (Heb. 4:2).
2. The invitation to enter God's "rest" ceased and was later renewed (on "another day"). This shows that the "rest" must be a goal of history rather than a continuous condition. This point is discussed in Hebrews 4:7–8 and involves the following facts: (a) Those first invited did not enter; (b) there passed "so long a time"; then (c) David spoke of "another day," that is, a second distinct period of invitation.<sup>6</sup> Neither Moses nor Joshua (4:8) had given such rest. It was not something always available and always offered, like justification or going to heaven. Rather, it is something long-anticipated, like the coming kingdom.
3. By identifying this "rest" with God's Sabbath rest (especially in 4:4–10), Hebrews points directly to the kingdom. The Sabbath is a shadow of what is to come (Col. 2:16–17). In fact, there was a Jewish, New Testament, and Early Church view that the Sabbath will be fulfilled in the kingdom (see the appendix.) This view is reflected in the special Greek term in Hebrews 4:9, *sabbatismos*.
4. Entering the "rest" is the same as to "become partakers of Messiah" (3:14), that is, to become participants with Him." Hebrews here echoes what it said earlier about the kingdom. The same word for participants is used in 1:9 for Messiah's "companions" who will share with Him in His kingdom. They are the same people called "heirs of salvation" (1:14; 2:10) and "many sons" that God brings to the "glory" (2:10) of "the world to come" (2:5).
5. The description in 4:10 of the person "who enters God's rest" has not been fulfilled yet. Only in the coming kingdom will there be a person who "rests from his own work just as God did."
6. The Old Testament describes the kingdom in terms of a glorious rest (see Ps. 132:12–14; Isa. 11:10; 14:3; 32:18; Ezek. 34:15).
7. Psalm 95, the Old Testament basis for Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13, is an Enthronement Psalm. Such psalms (e.g., Psalms 95–100) look ahead to Messiah's reign.
8. Hebrews 4:1 says that a "promise" is left to enter that rest. A promise refers to the future (see 4:8; 11:39).
9. Hebrews 4:9 says that this rest "remains," which also refers to the future.

**"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest" (Heb. 4:11)**

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<sup>6</sup> Whether that new invitation began in David's time or later, it was still distinct from the first invitation.

## APPENDIX

### Early Christian View of the Coming Sabbath-Keeping

#### A. From *Epistle of Barnabas* (AD 80–120), chapter XV.—The False and the True Sabbath

Further, also, it is written concerning the Sabbath in the Decalogue which [the Lord] spoke, face to face, to Moses on Mount Sinai, “And sanctify ye the Sabbath of the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart.” And He says in another place, “If my sons keep the Sabbath, then will I cause my mercy to rest upon them.” The Sabbath is mentioned at the beginning of the creation [thus]: “And God made in six days the works of His hands, and made an end on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it.” Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, “He finished in six days.” This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying, “Behold, to-day will be as a thousand years.” Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. “And He rested on the seventh day.” This meaneth: when His Son, coming [again], shall destroy the time of the wicked man, and judge the ungodly, and change the-sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day. Moreover, He says, “Thou shalt sanctify it with pure hands and a pure heart.” If, therefore, any one can now sanctify the day which God hath sanctified, except he is pure in heart in all things, we are deceived. Behold, therefore: certainly then one properly resting sanctifies it, when we ourselves, having received the promise, wickedness no longer existing, and all things having been made new by the Lord, shall be able to work righteousness. Then we shall be able to sanctify it, having been first sanctified ourselves. Further, He says to them, “Your new moons and your Sabbath I cannot endure.” Ye perceive how He speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this, ] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when He had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens.

#### B. From Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* Book 5 (AD 180). In chapters XXXII to XXXVI Irenaeus says a lot about the future inheritance for the saints after they rise from the dead and the kingdom is established on earth. In chapter XXXIII.2, he quotes the Lord Jesus’ promise:

And again He says, “Whosoever shall have left lands, or houses, or parents, or brethren, or children because of Me, he shall receive in this world an hundred-fold, and in that to come he shall inherit eternal life.” For what are the hundred-fold [rewards] in this word, the entertainments given to the poor, and the suppers for which a return is made? These are [to take place] in the times of the kingdom, that is, upon the seventh day, which has been sanctified, in which God rested from all the works which He created, which is the true Sabbath of the righteous, which they shall not be engaged in any earthly occupation; but shall have a table at hand prepared for them by God, supplying them with all sorts of dishes.

C. From Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* (AD 150–160), chapter LXXX

But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.

D. From Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 130 #518—Apr 73—148–149

One can hardly do better than to view this “rest of God” in a way that involves a corporate solidarity of the whole rest with all its parts or as a collective single program which purposely embraces several related aspects realized in marked and progressive stages. From the initial divine rest inaugurated at creation to its final realization once again in that millennial reign of the world’s new sabbath with the intervening periods of proleptical entrance by faith and the momentary inheritance of Canaan by Israel, it is all one piece; a single divine rest with related aspects. This is the thesis championed by George N. H. Peters:

The land of Canaan is called “rest,” and it is God’s “rest”... It is not typical of something else, for that would overthrow the covenant and its promises....After a res[urrection] from the dead, an entrance into this “rest” is to be obtained. Thus e.g. Ps. 116 has “return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord dealt bountifully with thee....I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.” The identical “rest” promised is the one obtained after a res[urrection]. The Jews thus understood the “rest” to denote the land, and the making of this rest glorious, etc., to mean that under the Messiah it would be renewed and beautified. Paul in writing to Jews does not contradict, but positively confirms this idea of the future inheritance, for instead of calling this rest the third heaven (as many unwarrantedly add), he (Heb 3 and 4 ) quotes Ps. 95, and designates the same “rest” the Psalmist does into which certain ones could not enter, but fell in the wilderness. He argues that through unbelief we too shall be cut off, but through faith in Christ, and by the power of Jesus, we too shall enter in “His rest” according to the promise....As the unity of the Spirit and Divine Plan required, [Paul] employs the reasoning *best calculated* to establish them in the *only true idea* of the inheritance promised to the Patriarchs and to all God’s people.

[Geo. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (New York and London, 1884), II, 441–42; see also pp. 448–60, 463, 467, 469, 470–71. Peters will later refer to such works as Barnabas *Epistle* xv; Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* v; Justin Martyr *Questions and Answers* 71; *Dialogue with Trypho*; Papias as seen in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* iii. 39; Tertullian *Adversus Marcionem* iii. 24, etc.]