

## HEBREWS

### CHAPTER FOUR

About five years ago, my husband was offered a job in another city. After seeking God's guidance, he felt strongly that accepting the job and moving the family was the right thing for many reasons. I did not want to leave my friends, my church, my life and start over – again. I balked. I cried. I sulked. I did my best to make my husband feel as horrible as I felt. Then God clearly showed me that I needed to trust my husband. It was not easy, but I yielded to God's leading through my husband. God blessed the move and our family.

Have you ever had to make a decision that would determine your future? Saying "yes" would require laying aside your own agenda and relying completely on someone else. You may have even feared that choice because success depended solely on the other person. Yet the potential benefits were limitless.

In the third and fourth chapters of Hebrews, the author reminds his readers of a great time of decision faced by their ancestors. This pivotal moment defined the next forty years for the Israelites. God called them to accept His promise and cross over into the Promised Land. But after "considering their options," the Israelites balked. They cried. They sulked. They refused to go in and receive God's promise.

#### **Those who Rejected God's Rest**

**Read Numbers 13:16-33.**

***Briefly describe this event.***

***What did they find? Check all the following that apply. Now underline the things that frightened them.***

***Lush grapes, pomegranates, and figs***

***Large, fortified cities***

***Big, powerful people***

***Reread Hebrews 3:16-19 from last week's lesson. According to verse 19, why were they unable to enter the Promised Land – or "God's rest" as the author of Hebrews calls it?***

God had been working in the lives of the Israelites. He brought them out of Egypt and chose them to be His people. The Israelites heard God's word and experienced His presence and His miracles in the desert. Yet they fell in the desert because of "unbelief." Their unbelief was not a lack of belief in the existence of God. In fact, in Numbers 14:3, they blame God for their "predicament."

The Israelites lacked belief not in God's existence but rather in His nature and character. The peoples of the Promised Land were powerful and their cities were fortified. The Israelites certainly could not overcome them and they failed to trust in the God that could.

***List specific attributes of God in which the Israelites did not believe.***

The Israelites' doubt in the power and faithfulness of God cost them greatly. Their unbelief closed the doors of the Promised Land to an entire generation. Now, more than a millennium and a half later, the author of Hebrews urges his audience to avoid the same fate. God has once again called His people to enter His rest. Would they hear His voice and obey or would they harden their hearts and rebel like their fathers before them?

### **Read Hebrews 4:1-11**

God offered His rest to the Israelites in the desert, to the Christians in the first century, and to us today. However, this promise of rest is conditional. In Hebrews 4:1, the NIV says, "let us be careful" to not fall short of God's rest. The word translated as "let us be careful" is the Greek word *phobeo*. It means to "frighten, to be alarmed; to be in awe of; to revere." Here, the NIV translation does not appropriately communicate the seriousness of the situation. Yes, God's promise stands; but it is possible to miss it.

Our God is loving, merciful, and gracious. But our God is also holy, righteous, and just. We Christians like to emphasize the former and minimize the latter. We need to maintain a proper balance between recognizing God's love and giving Him the reverence and awe He deserves. Chapter four of Hebrews strikes this balance by showing both God's promise and warning. Let's take a short detour from Hebrews for a look into the awesomeness of our holy God.

### **The Need to Fear**

**Read Isaiah 6:1-8.**

***What did Isaiah learn about God in his vision?***

***How did Isaiah respond?***

***Make a list of reasons you should fear God.***

***Would your overall response to God change if you feared Him like you should? If so, how?***

The Bible shows a direct correlation between a proper fear of God and obedience. When we allow ourselves to be impacted by the overwhelming holiness of God, like Isaiah we will submit our lives and our will to God. When we fear God, we will obey God.

***What similarities between the Israelites in the desert and the author's audience do you find in Hebrews 4:2-3? What differences do you see?***

The generation of Israelites poised at the border of Canaan to receive God's promise refused to enter. They feared the giants of the land more than they feared God Almighty, the One who had delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh and his army. Their lack of belief in God's power and character hardened their hearts leading to disobedience, rebellion, and ultimately discipline.

The Jewish Christians who originally received the book of Hebrews stood at the border of a spiritual Promised Land. Would they fear persecution more than they feared God? Would they trust more in the comfort of their old life of Judaism more than they trusted in their Superior Savior? The author of Hebrews warns and encourages them to not turn back to Egypt, but to hold firm to the faith they profess so they can enter into God's rest.

**What is God's Rest?**

***Scan Hebrews 4:1-11. How many times does the author use the word "rest?" \_\_\_\_\_***

***The author uses the concept of rest to refer to different times and different people. Below, list all these you can find.***

What is God's "rest?" The author of Hebrews refers both to the Israelites' loss of the Promised Land and to God's own "ceasing of exertion" in Genesis 2:2 Both the Greek word translated as "rest" in Hebrews 4 and the Hebrew word used in Psalm 95 (quoted in verses 3&7), implies an absence of movement or stopping of work. The Hebrew word translated as "rest" in Psalm 95:11 includes overtones of finality, or (when speaking abstractly) of victory and salvation. It is clear in Hebrews four that the author is referring to more than merely a physical or emotional state, though these may be included.

Is God's rest for His people a present or future reality? The use in Scripture indicates it is both. We enter God's rest at the time of salvation; taste its benefits in a glorious, yet partial way now; and then experience it fully in eternity.

***Based on the author's usage and his Old Testament references, write your own understanding of the meaning of God's "rest." Consider how it applies to your salvation and your ongoing walk God.***

## **God's Word Leads to Rest**

### **Read Hebrews 4:12-13**

The Israelites in the desert rejected God's Word and never entered the Promised Land. The original hearers of Hebrews had heard the message of Christ and had accepted it with joy. However, some were floundering, in danger of falling and also missing God's rest. The author of Hebrews called them to perseverance, to fix their eyes on Jesus so they would not drift away. Like the Israelites and the original hearers of Hebrews, God has revealed His Word to us. We have heard it through Christ and the Scriptures.

If the Israelites rebelled against God's word and therefore were not allowed to enter His rest, it follows that a proper response to God's work would lead an individual into God's rest. The proper response to God's Word is obedience. How have you responded to God's Word? Do you allow it to affect your life? (Note: The description of the Word of God in verses 12 and 13 echoes the "voices of God" from Psalm 95.)

Hebrews 4:11 says, "Make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following their examples of disobedience." How do we do this? The author of Hebrews tells us in verses 12 and 13. We obey God by laying our life beside His Word and allowing it to expose us and affect

change. This is the opposite of a “hardened heart.” This openness to God’s Word is how we know God’s ways, enter His rest, and continue along the path of true faith.

**Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and compare it with Hebrews 4:12-13.**

*Describe how God desires to use His Word in your life.*

*How can you open yourself to the transforming power of God’s word? Why would you want to do this?*

God already knows everything about you. He uses His word to let you know that He knows and to affect change in your life.

### **Application**

**Read Matthew 11:28-30**

*Who promises us rest? How can we obtain this rest? Consider Jesus’ words. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”*

*Jesus offers the ultimate source for true rest, for true rest is found only in a right relationship with the person of God. The rest is His rest, for His people, found by obeying His word.  
NIV Application Commentary, page 166*

*What things in your life keep you from fully participation in God’s rest?*

Are you standing at a moment of decision? Don’t choose unbelief and disobedience. Trust in God, His character and power. Cease your own efforts, let go of your own will and embrace God’s. Write a prayer of commitment to Him below.