

Chapter 8 – The paradoxes of inheritance - Hebrews 4

Hebrews chapter 4 presents us with a series of paradoxes. Our inheritance, which is described here as *rest*, requires both confidence and fear, both striving and ceasing from striving, both personal diligence and God's unhesitating grace. God is uncompromising in His examination of our hearts and yet sympathetic to our weakness. In Christ we have entered our rest and yet must remain in that rest. In all this, Christ is our compassionate High Priest.

Prayer

Reflect on the things you learnt in Hebrews 3. *Thank* God for your heavenly calling and for Jesus, your High Priest. *Remember* before God the times when you have known Him speaking to you. Express your *confidence* that He will complete the work that He has started in you. Ask for the Holy Spirit to guide you as you continue to study His letter to the Hebrews.

Questions & Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 4 by reading through and noting any surprises or questions. These are the surprises and questions that strike me in chapter 4.

- V1 What is this *rest* that is still promised?
- V3 What has this *rest* to do with creation?
- V7 What did David think the *rest* was?
- V9 What is the connection with the Sabbath?
- V11 It sounds odd to make every effort to rest!
- V12 What has the power of the word to do with entering rest?
- V14 What has Jesus our High Priest to do with entering rest?

The two main questions I have on reading the chapter through are “What is this rest?” and “How does the chapter hang together?”

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Ps 95, Gen 2:2, Ex 20:8-11, Ex 31:17 and Numbers 13 & 14 which are the principal passages behind this chapter. Additional background is found at Josh 22:4, Isa 49:2, 2Chr 16:9, Job 26:6 and Isa 53:3-5.

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was “Warning and exhortation to enter God's rest.”¹ It follows quite logically from chapter 3, which warns against unbelief through a reminder of how the Israelites in the desert were prevented from entering the Promised Land because of their unbelief. Chapter 4 is the climax to the previous three, all urging the readers to give careful attention to the message proclaimed by Christ. So, the fine-brush structure might go as follows:

- 4:1 Conclusion of chapter 3 – Therefore pay careful attention to what is being said.
- 4:2-10 For there remains a *rest* for God's people.
- 4:11-13 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest.

¹ See chapter 4

4:14-16 We should have full confidence in obtaining help to enter that rest from Jesus, our great High Priest.

Argument

The argument flows very naturally through this chapter, centred around the theme of entering God's promised rest. The promise of blessing in the promised land, referred to as *rest* by the Psalmist, was made for Abraham's descendants. The Israelites in the desert failed to inherit the promise through unbelief but, since Christians are Abraham's descendents,² we can inherit this promise. The author argues that since the Psalmist appeals to his generation not to harden their hearts against the promise of rest, it could not have been fulfilled when Joshua led the new generation into the promised land. He argues that this promise remains for believers in Christ to inherit. He then reminds his readers that God sees deep into every heart and that unbelief cannot be hidden from Him. But we need not despair since God has provided us with a sympathetic High Priest, Jesus, who is able to give us mercy, grace and help as we make every effort to enter the promised rest.

The author draws a parallel between the faltering faith of his readers and the faltering faith of the Israelites in the desert. Moses, acting in a high-priestly role, interceded with compassion for the people - yet still God swore an oath preventing them from inheriting the promise. But Jesus is a greater High priest who is able to obtain bountiful grace for us.

It is easy to assume that the references to *rest* refer to eternal salvation, or heaven, but careful reading rules this out. It was well established typology³ to see the Israelites in the desert as representing saved believers. Paul says they were baptised through the Red Sea into Christ and He was the Rock from which they drank (see 1 Cor 10). The people were saved at the Red Sea and firmly established as God's covenant people *in the desert*. The Promised Land, therefore, represented something beyond basic salvation. The writer to the Hebrews follows the established analogy in these opening chapters. Just as the Old Covenant believers should have entered God's promised rest through faith before they died, so should New Covenant believers. We will consider the nature of this rest shortly.

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 4:

God's promised rest for this life is entered by faith. We need God's help for this and should come boldly to His throne through our great High Priest, Jesus, who obtains for us mercy, grace and help.

The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 4.

Heb 4:1

⁽¹⁾ Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.

The Promised Rest

The promise of rest was introduced in the previous chapter, but we did not explore its meaning. Chapter 4 develops the case for urging believers to enter the rest, but still without explaining

² This is stated many times in the NT. e.g. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Ga 3:29) See also Rom 4:16, 9:8, Gal 3:7,14

³ Biblical typology is where an OT event is understood to foreshadow a New Testament event or truth. Paul refers to this when he says of various OT practices "These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." (Col 2:16-17)

exactly what is meant. Let us see what clues we can find as we go through, and then we will return to the question of what exactly the *rest* is. I can see three clues in this first verse:

1. The promise was available to Israel in the desert, and remains available to us.
2. The *rest* is associated, by analogy, with the promised land.
3. Christians can fail to enter the *rest* if they do not take care.

Heb 4:2-5

⁽²⁾ For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. ⁽³⁾ Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. ⁽⁴⁾ For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." ⁽⁵⁾ And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

God's rest is entered by faith

The author follows up his statement of two verses ago (that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief) with this statement about the need to combine hearing with faith. The logic of the argument that follows is rather difficult to unravel, but there seems to be a parallel between v2 and vv3-5. Writing the argument out in a table helps us to follow it:

Concerning Us	Concerning Them
v2 The gospel has been preached to us	just as to them but the message was of no value to them because they lacked faith
v3-5 We who believe enter the rest	But God declared they could not enter even though He had finished the work as it says, "God rested on the seventh day" Nevertheless, they shall not enter this rest.

Now we can see how the argument flows through these four verses even though it is expressed in a slightly confusing way. This technique of separating the clauses is frequently useful in unravelling biblical arguments.

Continuing with our deductions about the *rest* we observe:

4. The promised *rest* is part of the gospel.
5. The promised *rest* is entered by faith.
6. Those who believe can enter the *rest* now, in this life.
7. The promised *rest* is associated in some way with God's Sabbath rest.

Heb 4:6-10

⁽⁶⁾ It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. ⁽⁷⁾ Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." ⁽⁸⁾ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about

another day. ⁽⁹⁾ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ⁽¹⁰⁾ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.

The Sabbath Rest

The argument here is straight forward. Since David repeats the exhortation, "Do not harden your hearts" in relation to the promise, it must be that Joshua was not able to give the people rest and that the promise still stands. Again the author clearly associates the rest with the Sabbath. Whoever mixes faith with the gospel and inherits this promise will "rest from his own work".

I make three further observations regarding the *rest*:

8. Disobedience or hard-heartedness may disqualify a believer from entering the *rest*.
9. *Rest* is meant to be a present-day experience.
10. *Rest* is resting from our work, as mirrored in the seventh day of creation and the Sabbath law.

Heb 4:11

⁽¹¹⁾ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

Entering Rest

We are exhorted to "make every effort to enter that rest." This is the tenth and last reference to *rest* in the letter, so let us try to work out what this *rest* is. From our observations we can say:

- Since we are to make every effort to enter rest *now*, and we are encouraged to come through Jesus to the throne of grace for help (vv14-16), we can say that *rest* refers to this life rather than eternity.
- The warnings and exhortations concern a promise of rest, for which the Israelite Promised Land and the Sabbath are types.
- Faith is required to enter the *rest*, whereas disobedience and hard heartedness may prevent us.

Using a concordance to find the occurrences of the word *rest* throughout the scriptures, we can trace the history of the concept:

The Sabbath Rest

"For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death." (Ex 31:15)

Rest Promised to Moses

"If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people." The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Ex 33:13-14)

Rest promised in the Promised Land

"But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety." (Deut 12:10)

Rest won by Joshua in the Promised Land

So Joshua took the entire land, just as the Lord had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war. (Jos 11:23)

The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled. (Jos 21:44-45)

Rest won by David in the Promised Land

For David had said, "Since the Lord, the God of Israel, has granted rest to his people and has come to dwell in Jerusalem for ever, the Levites no longer need to carry the tabernacle or any of the articles used in its service." (1Chr 23:25-26)

Rest for the soul of the faithful

"My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I shall never be shaken. ... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him..." (Ps 62)

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." (Ps 91:1)

Rest in God rejected

"This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.'" (Isa 30:15)

"This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.' But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'" (Jer 6:16)

The promise of rest restored

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Mt 11:28-29)

The promise of rest enjoyed

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (1Jo 3:18-20)

Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them." (Rev 14:13)

Through these scriptures, God's ancient promise of rest for His people, given first to Moses and gained by Joshua, is taken up and reapplied by David and the Prophets to be fulfilled finally in Jesus (literally, another Joshua). When Jesus promised rest for weary souls, using the very same words as Jeremiah, His hearers would have recalled the history of that promise first given to Moses. As we saw in our study of chapter 3, they were reminded of this ancient promise every Sabbath when Psalm 95 was sung. Originally it concerned rest from the harassment of their enemies but later, for the Psalmist and Prophets, it came to mean rest for one's soul from weariness, fear, anguish and condemnation. This is the *rest* which, we are now told, is entered by faith in Christ but is forfeited by believers whose faith falls short.

A brief study of the Sabbath and its association with rest is also revealing.

Instigation of the Old Covenant Sabbaths.

The first Sabbath was when God rested after the six days of creation.⁴ Curiously it is not mentioned again until Moses finds himself, one day, having to explain to the Israelites why they have received double the usual supply of manna:

On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much—two omers for each person—and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. He said to them, “This is what the Lord commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.’” (Ex 16:22-23)

It was only some time later that the *command* to rest on the Sabbath is given. At that point, the association was first made with God resting on the seventh day of creation.

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Ex 20:8-11)

Following this, the Sabbath is explained in terms of salvation:

“Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.’” (Ex 31:13)

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” (De 5:15)

Along with the Sabbath day there were three additional Sabbaths.

1. The Sabbath (seventh) month (Lev 23:24). This has the feasts of Trumpets, Atonement and Tabernacles. These feasts represent our ultimate rest in the second coming of Christ, the marriage feast and our eternal dwelling with God. The feast of Tabernacles itself is a Sabbath feast, lasting seven days and celebrates the end of labouring to bring in the harvest.
2. The Sabbath year (Ex 23:10). Every seven years there was to be feasting and celebrating, the cancellation of debts and the freeing of slaves. Here we again see a clear symbol of salvation. We are set free from sin and its debt and so we celebrate. (Deut 15)
3. The year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-10). This was the year following the seventh Sabbatical year (i.e. every 50 yrs.). This was also a year of great rejoicing and along with the freeing of slaves and cancellation of debt, property was returned to its original owner. Here we see a symbol of the final act of salvation when the whole of creation is redeemed and Christ rules over the kingdoms of the earth and every knee bows to Him.

Each of these four Sabbaths was supposed to be a feast celebrating God’s salvation of Israel. They were never intended to be solemn days of inactivity, but holidays from work in which God’s wonderful salvation would be remembered and rejoiced in. The Rabbis (and subsequently the Puritans⁵) sadly missed the point when they made it a day of sobriety and abstinence.

⁴ Ge 2:2-3 “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

⁵ J. Packer, *Among God’s Giants* p311 “The Puritans created the English Christian Sunday – that is the conception and observance of the first day of the week as one on which both business and organised recreations should be in abeyance, and the whole time left free for worship, fellowship and ‘good works’”.

The significance of the Sabbath

It is striking that only one of the Ten Commandments deals with religious rites, and that is to observe the Sabbath. Likewise, the only sin relating to religious rites that merited death was breaking the Sabbath.⁶ One day a man was found picking up sticks on the Sabbath and, even though God had already commanded that such a person should be put to death, Moses was unsure what to do.⁷ I imagine, like us, he thought the death penalty a bit harsh for such a minor infringement. But God spoke to Moses, saying the man must be stoned by all the people. Clearly the command to rest on the Sabbath could not be simply to give their bodies a rest – that would hardly merit the death penalty. Neither could it be to ensure the people spent at least one day a week in worship – the command was to rest, not to worship, and the penalty was not for lack of worship but for doing manual work. The significance of the Sabbath is found in its association with salvation. It was a reminder that “I am the Lord, who makes you holy” and that “you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Ex 31:13, Deu 5:15 quoted above).

When we understand the Sabbath as a symbol of our salvation we begin to see why that poor man who was found picking up sticks on the Sabbath had to be stoned: we cannot work for our salvation. To do so is to reject God’s provision and claim we can merit a share in God’s righteous Kingdom by our good works. Such rejection of God’s standards of righteousness and such exaltation of self can lead only to death. Working on the Sabbath represented working for our own salvation and its penalty was death. But, curiously, there is One who works on the Sabbath. Although God rested on the seventh day of creation, Jesus said, when He was accused of working on the Sabbath, “My Father is always at His work to this very day and I too am working” (Jn 5:17). Taking up the symbolism of the Sabbath as God’s provision of salvation, Jesus said that both He and the Father continue to work on the Sabbath. Not surprisingly this caused great offence, but Jesus knew that His great work of salvation would take place on the Sabbath.

Sabbath rest in the New Covenant

Considering the great emphasis that is given to Sabbath keeping in the Old Testament it is surely significant that it is not restated as a command for believers in the New Testament. The writer to the Hebrews is not at all concerned with observing a day of rest, but rather entering God’s rest by faith. Likewise Paul says that the Sabbath day is a shadow of Christ, and its observance is no longer relevant:

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (Col 2:13-17)

Jesus worked on our behalf to obtain the gift of salvation which is given freely to us in response to our faith, not our work. Looking forward to the cross, God gave the Sabbath day of rest as a symbol of resting in the saving work of Christ. The Sabbath is a shadow pointing to Jesus.

Sabbath rest in Hebrews

Returning to the meaning of *rest* in the letter to the Hebrews, we can now see how natural it was for the author to raise this issue with his Nazarene friends. It has roots in both the Sabbath rest and in

⁶ Idol worship, witchcraft and blasphemy are the only other “religious” sins receiving the death sentence.

⁷ See Numbers 15:32-36 and Exodus 31:14

the promise of rest in the Promised Land. The explicit connection between these two examples of rest had not been made before, but the writer shows how both of them point to and are fulfilled in Christ. What becomes clear as we trace the origins and development of these parallel traditions of rest is that although they are types of salvation in the broad sense, they do not symbolise life after death but peace and rest for the soul in this life. Both, of course, are made possible only through faith in Christ as our saviour, but while the glory of eternity is something we anticipate after death, God's rest is something we are meant to enjoy in this life. The Israelites were always God's people, saved by His mighty arm, but whether they enjoyed rest in the land depended on their faith and obedience. Likewise believers are eternally saved by grace through faith, but they may not find rest for their souls if they keep listening to the accusing lies of Satan or the deceitfulness of sin.

"Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience." (Heb 4:11)

We often face giants of opposition and accusation and discouragement in the land. Let us make every effort to stand against them by faith and enter God's rest. Will we be found "picking up sticks on the Sabbath" – trying to earn and justify our peace with God? Will we fall short in our faith and fail to enter the promised Sabbath rest? No! Let us "pay careful attention to what we have heard", "fix our thoughts on Jesus", "hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" and "make every effort to enter that rest." Let us rejoice in His work on our behalf and find rest for our souls. This is entering our inheritance. This is celebrating the Sabbath. This is finding rest.

Heb 4:11-16

⁽¹¹⁾ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience. ⁽¹²⁾ For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ⁽¹³⁾ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. ⁽¹⁴⁾ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ⁽¹⁵⁾ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Take care lest we fall

After the Israelites refused to believe God would give them the land, God swore an oath against that generation saying they would not enter but die in the desert. On hearing this they tried to recover the promise and took up arms to fight their way into the land. But it was too late and, despite Moses' warning, they engaged the enemy and fell under the Canaanites swords (Num 14:43). The memory of this is behind the author's metaphor in this passage. We are to take care lest we, like them, fall under God's sword of judgement.

The sword of the Spirit

The unbelieving Israelites tried to work out God's promises their way, using their wisdom and strength, but God judged them. Are we any better? God's ways are not our ways and He calls us to trust Him rather than our wisdom. We may try to disguise our mistrust and disobedience with shows of faith and action, but we cannot fool God. We may give away a generous sum of money yet not trust God to give the whole amount He put on our heart, or we may outwardly forgive an offending brother yet harbour a secret resentment. But God's word is sharper than any Canaanite sword. It divides between soul and spirit, judging the thoughts and attitudes of our heart and nothing is

hidden from God's sight. Entering God's rest requires fully trusting God, obeying His Spirit and resting all our confidence, hope and security in Him.

Mostly the issues are worked out in practical ways. But sometimes they are matters of belief. It is all too easy to stand fast on a particular interpretation of scripture or an understanding of some doctrine, believing we are holding fast to truth, when in reality we are defending our own security in familiar teachings. We all tend to love the things we are familiar with and rise to defend them with emotion, but sometimes without good reason.

Jesus faced a similar problem with the Pharisees. They were the faithful religious leaders in the communities, seeking to rescue the faith from the compromising priesthood by expressing the faith in daily living. They were the new-church charismatics of their day. Jesus interacted so much with the Pharisees precisely because they were the best thing that was happening in the religious world of that day. But the sad thing was that they taught as doctrines the teachings of men. Jesus brought the sharp sword of the Spirit into their hearts dividing soul from Spirit and most of them did not like it.

The word in our hearts

God judged the Israelites for having hard hearts. We should give careful consideration to the warnings and exhortations of Hebrews chapters 2-4. Are our ears open and our hearts receptive to God's word? Do we let the word speak to us and change us, or do we sit in judgement over the word, congratulating ourselves on our familiarity with it? Does the word penetrate our spirit, or just bounce off our intellect? Do we let it judge us, or do we merely use it to judge others? Are we obedient to what God says to us? One day we will have to give an account to God for how we have responded to His word.

Jesus, our helper

Thankfully we are not abandoned in our struggles with the hardness of our hearts and the dullness of our faith. We have a great high priest who sympathises with our weaknesses. Although most translations have the word "sympathise" the meaning is somewhat stronger, as indicated by the AV, "... touched with the feeling of our infirmities..." It means "to share experience with", thus in Act 9:4 Jesus says to Saul, "Why do you persecute me?" Jesus felt the persecution Saul was inflicting on the saints. He is before the throne of grace, sharing in our troubles and interceding for us. Let us come to Him with confidence to receive all the help we need to stand against the wiles of the evil one and by faith obey God and enjoy His Sabbath rest. Let us find rest for our weary souls in the finished work of Christ.

Approaching the throne with confidence

The thought of approaching the throne of God with confidence would conjure visions of fire and destruction for a Jew. They would remember how Aaron's two sons were consumed by fire for bringing the wrong sacrifice and how David's friend Uzzah was struck down by God for putting out his hand to steady the ark when the oxen stumbled.⁸ Under the Law only the high priest could approach the ark and that required special preparation. The tearing of the temple curtain at the moment of Jesus death symbolised a radical change. Through the atoning sacrifice of Christ we now have free access to God without fear of condemnation.

Grace to help us in our time of need

The Lord makes a remarkable comment about those who rebelled in the desert and faced the Canaanites swords on that fateful day. It is recorded for us by Jeremiah in chapter 31:2

⁸ Lev 10:2, 2 Sam 6:7

Thus says the LORD, “The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness— Israel, when it went to find its rest.” (NASB)

Even those rebellious people against whom God had sworn an oath continued to live under His grace. They found grace to help in their time of need. God continued to feed and protect them for 40 years in the wilderness until such time as a new generation was ready to believe God and enter the promised inheritance. The author quotes extensively from Jeremiah 31 in chapter 8. It seems reasonable to surmise that he had this verse from the beginning of that chapter in mind when he wrote about us finding grace as we search for our rest in Christ, even if we too experience the sword of the Spirit cutting into our deceitful hearts. The scriptures are indeed written for our instruction and encouragement. If they found grace following their gross disobedience under the old imperfect covenant, how much more will we find grace from our Father through the intercession of His Son, our brother and High Priest.

Review

We have addressed all the surprises I noted at the beginning, so let’s summarise what we have discovered about *rest*. Rest in the Promised Land from their enemies was first promised to Israel whilst they were in the desert. Their faith failed with news of the enemy and God swore that generation would not enter. Moses interceded for them, obtaining forgiveness, but was, nevertheless, unable to take them into the land. Joshua succeeded in bringing the next generation in and he gave them rest, but it was short lived. Centuries later David restored rest from their enemies but again it was short lived. The problem was not their enemies but their hearts. The prophets appealed to the people to repent and enter God’s rest but without the Spirit dwelling in their hearts it was hopeless. The New Covenant was announced where the Spirit would dwell in the hearts of God’s people enabling them to rest in Him. Jesus declared Himself to be the one through whom God’s people could truly find lasting rest. However, just as rest was not automatic for God’s people in the Old Covenant, so, according to the author of this letter, rest is not automatic for believers under the New Covenant. But Jesus is a gloriously superior High Priest to Moses, and is far more able than he to help us inherit the promises God has given.

I suggest you now re-read the first four chapters of Hebrews, with this summary in mind. I think you will find it all starts to make sense.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 4

- V1 What are the two types of rest promised in the Old Testament?
How do these come together in Christ?
What rest did Jesus promise?
How restful is your soul?
- V2 What do you need faith for in order to have your soul at rest?
- V4 What do you think we have to learn from the fact that God rested for a whole day when he had finished creation?
What do you do when you have finished your work?
Do you like to fill your days with activity of some kind? If so, why do you think that is?
Apart from exhaustion, do you think there is any other reason why God might want us to stop working from time to time?
- V5 Why do you think God would say to those with faltering faith, “You shall not enter My rest”? Why not just let everyone enjoy it, whatever their faith level?
How does the story about the man picking up sticks on the Sabbath help us to understand God’s insistence upon faith? (Remember, the Sabbath is a picture of salvation).

- V7 When was the last time you think God spoke to you?
What did God say?
How did you respond? Are you still living in obedience and faith?
- V9 What does the New Testament say about keeping the Sabbath (or the Lord's day)?⁹
What is the New Covenant version of Sabbath rest?
How do you celebrate your Sabbath rest?
- V10 What does the Old Covenant law about avoidance of work on the Sabbath suggest as an application under the New Covenant? (Hint: In what ways might we be found to be working for our salvation?)¹⁰
- V11 How does disobedience rob us of rest?
What has God said to you that you struggle to obey?
- V12 Why do you think the word has to be so sharp?
In what ways has the Holy Spirit divided your soul and spirit?
- V16 What do you feel about this exhortation to come to the throne of God with confidence?
What hinders your confidence when you are in real need of God's mercy, grace and help?
How does the Sabbath rest help us to come to God with confidence?
- Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?

⁹ The first evidence of Christians meeting for worship on a Sunday is found in Ac 20:7. "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." John refers to the Lord's day in his Revelation (1:10). But the switch from worship on the Sabbath to worship on the Lord's day (Sunday) was quite slow and sporadic. Even in the middle ages Sabbath day worship among Christians was not uncommon.

¹⁰ An obvious one, paradoxically, would be by insisting that Christians observe a day of rest!