

## Our Savior's Rest

Recently, I came across<sup>1</sup> a novel interpretation of a verse in Hebrews chapter 4, and want to share it with you. It is broadly associated with the events at the end of our Lord's life—his passion, resurrection, and ascension—and so I thought it would be profitable for us to consider it at this season when most of Christendom commemorates these events.

### Overview of Heb 4

Let's start by reviewing the argument of Heb 3-4. There is much detail here that we don't have time to consider. I just want to sketch out the high points.

**The motivating issue** is the need for believers to persevere in the faith, in the face of opposition. This is the point of 3:6, which introduces the quotation of Ps 95:7-11. The sequel through 4:11 is an exposition of this text, which recalls how Israel in the wilderness, because of unbelief, was unable to enter into God's rest (3:7-11).

#### **3:12-4:2, The Threat: Unbelief**

3:12-14 urges Christian believers to persevere in their Christian walk and exhort one another, lest they be turned aside by unbelief.

3:15-19 motivates this warning by amplifying the events described in Ps 95, the unbelief of the Israelites and their death in the wilderness.

4:1-2 brings this warning back to the contemporary believers.

#### **4:3-5, The Expectation: Rest**

In explaining the rest that the Israelites lost, the author focuses on the possessive pronoun, "my rest." What would God's rest be? It must be the rest described in Gen 2:2, God's rest after the work of creation. The rest of the original Sabbath is available to believers, if they do not fall into unbelief.

#### **4:6-9, The Time: Future**

The Psalm, which he dates with other psalms to the time of David, comes well after the wilderness. The psalmist, like the writer to the Hebrews, is exhorting modern believers not to repeat the mistakes of the exodus. The offer of rest has not been exhausted or fulfilled. It still remains open. Note that he explicitly refers to Joshua's failure to give the people rest. Our version accurately reflects the Greek name of Joshua, which is the same as that of our Savior.<sup>2</sup>

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1 In Joseph Pipa's essay in Donato, ed., *Perspectives on the Sabbath*, B&H Academic, 2011, pp. 159ff.

2 In this study, I do not discuss the shift from καταπαυ- to σαββατισμος in v. 9, and its relation to Christian worship. Note that this Sabbath vocabulary is joined with an exhortation to exhort one another (3:13), both to guard us against falling away from the final rest, and then note how the assembly of the saints, mutual exhortation, and the future hope are all joined together later in Heb 10:25, suggesting that 4:9 may be referring to assemblies of the church, parallel to 10:25. Confirming this requires a large-scale study of Hebrews that I hope to undertake after Isaiah.

## 4:10-11, *The Concluding Exhortation*

In light of this promised blessing, and the risk of losing it through unbelief, the believers must labor to enter into rest.

## Who is v. 10?

I've deliberately skipped over 4:10 in this summary.

For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God *did* from his.

Who is this that has entered into the promised rest?

Most expositors understand this to refer to believers, who having "ceased from [their] own works" of sin and self-righteousness, now enjoy the rest of salvation. Some call this the "faith-rest life." I held this view at one time, but it faces several problems.

1. The writer draws a direct parallel between the works of the mystery person and God's works. God, having engaged in productive creative work, rested by taking pleasure in what he had done. The mystery person is said to rest in the same way. But we do not enjoy our salvation by looking back at our sinful works and calling them good. The parallel just doesn't work.
2. The mystery person has already ceased from works and entered into rest, but we are told in the very next verse that we must continue to labor in order to enter into a rest that is yet future.
3. Throughout this passage, God's people are described in the plural, but the mystery person is a single individual.
4. Throughout Hebrews, there is only one person who "has entered in" (aorist of εἰσερχομαι), and that is our Savior:

6:20 Whither the forerunner is for us **entered**, *even* Jesus,

9:12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he **entered in** once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*.

9:24 For Christ is not **entered into** the holy places made with hands, *which are* the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us:

On reflection, it seems clear to me that the one who "entered into God's rest," having "ceased from his own works," is none other than our Lord Jesus. And once we see that, we understand why the writer named Joshua, the OT "Jesus," in v. 8. Joshua was unable to bring the people into God's rest. But our Jesus has entered into his rest, and now invites us (v. 11) to follow him there. The following chapter shows that his high priestly ministry enables us to do so, and we'll see in 4:14 that the author assumes this interpretation of v. 10 as a basis for his argument there.

## What does v. 10 teach us about our Lord?

Now let's walk through vv. 10-11 to unfold the consequences of this observation. Note four details.

**10 For he that is entered into his rest,**--First, our Lord is said to have entered into God's rest. I

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believe this is reflected in one of the favorite OT texts for the writer to the Hebrews, Ps 110:1:

The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.

Mark quotes it once of the ascension:

Mar 16:19 So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.

Ephesians alludes to it:

Eph 1:20 Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set *him* at his own right hand in the heavenly *places*,

Hebrew mentions it no less than four times, and three of these times it is directly related to the completion of his redemptive work:

1:3 Who being the brightness of *his* glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, **when he had by himself purged our sins**, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;

8:1 Now of the things which we have spoken *this is* the sum: We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens;

12:2 Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith; who for the joy that was set before him **endured the cross, despising the shame**, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

10:11-13 And every priest **standeth** daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: 12 But this man, **after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down** on the right hand of God; 13 From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool.

Note especially in 10:11-13 the contrast between “standeth” and “sat down.” Our Savior sat down. In the modern age, when many of us earn our bread by sitting at desks, we miss the point. In earlier years, labor was done mostly standing, and people sat down to rest. We see this in the verse that defines the promise of rest,

Deu 12:10 But *when* ye go over Jordan, and dwell [sit ישב] in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and *when* he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell [sit ישב] in safety.

The relation here rests on a pun. The Hebrew verb ישב refers both to a person sitting somewhere, and to a nation dwelling (“sitting” in its land). ישב is the only Hebrew verb that lies behind the Greek verb “to sit.”<sup>3</sup> David's history actually links the ideas of sitting and rest, using the same two Hebrew verbs:

2Sa 7:1 the king **sat** in his house, and the LORD had given him **rest** round about from all his enemies;

While there were enemies to conquer, he was out fighting, but now that he has rest from his enemies, he is represented as seated. So our Savior enters into God's rest by sitting down at God's right hand.

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3 See notes

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This truth thus lays the foundation for one of the conclusions that the writer draws from this exposition. 4:14 confirms our interpretation of v. 10:

4:14 Seeing then that we have a great high priest, **that is passed into the heavens**, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* profession.

What in the previous context justifies the conclusion, "Seeing then?" The conclusion follows only if "he that is entered into his rest" (v. 10) is our "great high priest, that is passed into the heavens."

When the world seems against us on every side, let us hold fast to this first lesson from Heb 4:10. Our Savior is seated in heaven. We have an advocate at the right hand of the Father. Nothing that happens to us can escape his notice and his intercession.

**he also hath ceased from his own works**,--Second, his rest is pictured as the appropriate conclusion to his works. We saw this in three of the four allusions to Ps 110:1, where he takes his place at the Father's right hand because he has completed his redemptive work.

A major theme of Hebrews is that this work is complete. A favorite term is "once for all" εφ'απαξ:

7:27 Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did **once [for all]**, when he offered up himself.

9:12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in **once [for all]** into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*.

10:10 By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**.

Against this background, he also uses "once" ἀπαξ with the clear sense of a single, completed work:

9:26 now **once** in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

9:28 So Christ was **once** offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

The culmination of our Savior's offering on the cross was his great cry, "It is finished," John 19:30. God sent his Son to redeem a people for himself. The Son left no part of this work undone. He did not rest until he had finished the work that the Father gave him to do:

Joh 17:1 I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.

This is the second lesson from Heb. 4:10. The war against sin is over. The Savior's work is done.

If this is true, why do we continue to struggle? An illustration may help. I was born in 1947, 20 months and one day after the Japanese surrender that ended WWII. Yet I clearly remember in the 1960's hearing reports of Japanese soldiers in various Pacific islands who continued to fight for the emperor. The last known such holdout surrendered in Dec. 1974.<sup>4</sup> Our defeated foe continues to writhe in his death-throes. Our part is to occupy until our Savior returns. But during this time, there can be no greater comfort for us in our combat with sin to know that the work is done, completely, finally, irrevocably.

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4 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese\\_holdout](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_holdout)

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**as God *did* from his.**--Third, the Savior's work is compared with that of God at creation. Recall how John opens his gospel, starting by identifying the Lord Jesus with God "in the beginning," thus echoing Genesis, and then going on to outline a new creation week of seven enumerated days. The culmination of the first creation was Adam. The culmination of the second are the believers, who enjoy a "new birth" distinctly superior to their first, physical birth (John 3). As a result, the Bible calls the believer a "new creation" (AV "new creature") in Christ, 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15. The parallel between the Savior's work and rest and the Father's work and rest is a summary of this important truth.

So the third lesson to draw from Heb 4:10 is to recognize our status as members of a new creation. We are different. Our lives should reflect this difference.

**11 Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest.**--Fourth, because our Savior's labor led to rest, we can be confident that our labor, no matter how painful or protracted, will one day be complete, and we too will enter into God's rest. This exhortation brings us back to the theme of perseverance in 3:6, 14.

Heb 12:1-2 presents this same argument:

1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Here is a second witness (Deut 17:6) to the principle set forth in ch. 4. Our Savior has labored—not the fleshly labor of self-righteousness or the wicked labor of sin, but arduous, spiritual, productive labor—and has now entered into his rest, seated at the right hand of the Father. His example should inspire us to labor in the same way, so that we may join in that same rest. And if we desire a third witness to the principle, hear the Savior's gracious invitation in the Revelation:

Rev 3:21 To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

Here is the fourth lesson from Heb 4:10. Our Savior's example assures us that when our struggle is over, we also shall enter into rest, as he did.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Note added 5/5/17: this interpretation aligns with the Lord's teaching in the parable of the talents, Matt 25:14-30, where the successful servants are invited to "enter into the joy of thy Lord." Alford understands the genitive as subjective, citing Heb 12:2 and Isa 53:11, as well as this text.

## Notes

Sitting vocabulary:

	ישב	שוב	
καθίζω	173	9	
other καθ	19+153		
κατοικεω	494		
other οικεω	23+28+58		

καθίζω always (errors apart) represents ישב.