

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 4, Verses 1-11
Notes From Class on September 8, 2009
Last Revised on (September 12, 2009)

Good evening everyone!

Welcome to our continuing study of the New Testament Book of Hebrews.

Before we begin I would like to make sure that you have everything you will need.

Tonight you will need a Bible and a song book.

If you are using an English translation of the Bible other than the English Standard Version ("ESV") then it may help you to have the handout which I have prepared, which has the ESV text of Hebrews, Chapters 1 through 6.

There is coffee and tea at the back.

Please get what you need and, then, let's get started.

General Introduction

Tonight we will be reading into Hebrews, Chapter 4, parts of which are difficult to understand.

It is helpful to begin by remembering some of the things that we have previously read and discussed.

We remember that Hebrews was a document written in Greek around the end of the First Century A.D.

When the author cites the Old Testament, as he very frequently does, he cites a Greek version of the Old Testament, which differs in some respects from the Hebrew versions of the Old Testament on which our modern English and Japanese translations are based.

Hebrews is probably best thought of as the text of a sermon, which the author intended to be heard by a particular church.

We do not know anything about the author or the church, except what we can infer from the text.

One thing we can infer is that the author of the sermon and the members of the church knew one another.

Another thing we can infer from the text, is that the church consisted of people who had confessed Christ quite some time before they heard this sermon.

In other words this does not seem to be a sermon directed toward those who were seen as "seekers" or new believers.

There are a number of comment throughout this sermon to suggest that the preacher fears that some in the church may fall away.

It appears that one of his main purposes in addressing them is to encourage them to hold fast to their original confession of faith.

However there are also a number of kind and encouraging comments mixed into this sermon, such as one would address only to those who are understood to be true believers.

Therefore, as I think I have suggested before, the preacher seems to understand that his words will be heard by people who are in various states of spiritual health and maturity. Probably this is true for every preacher and teacher of all time.

To speak a little more plainly, I guess that the preacher understood that the congregation he was addressing included those who were and those who were not true believers: both wheat and weeds, as described in the parable told by Jesus and recorded in Matthew, Chapter 13

And I guess it is not easy for him to be certain which are which or, at least, that he does not have the luxury of addressing the wheat and the weeds separately.

Indeed that seems to have been the point of Jesus' parable: that we must leave it to God to sort out the wheat and the weeds in the end.

Acknowledging this uncertainty regarding the spiritual health and maturity of those who first heard this sermon will, I think, help us to understand Hebrews, Chapter 4, and possibly Hebrews in general.

I do not mean to read anything into the text, only to observe, as Christ taught, that there always are wheat and weeds in every church.

I merely suppose that the author of this sermon knows this too.

Chapters 1 and 2

It will also, I think, help us to understand Chapter 4, if we remember the flow of the sermon up to this point.

Remember that this sermon begins with the observation that, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son," (1:1-2a)

It is important to remember that throughout all of history, it is the same God who has spoken, and that he is unchanging.

Therefore the speech to the fathers by the prophets, is consistent, with the speech by his Son and, indeed, it is the same speech.

But the speech by the Son is God's ultimate message, the highest and fullest and the most complete revelation of God's nature and character and purpose, and so all of the Bible, Old Testament and New, can best be understood in the perfect light of Christ.

The remainder of Hebrews, Chapters 1 and 2 are primarily intend to make sure that we fully understand the greatness of Christ.

He is greater than everything in all creation, even the angels.

He came down and became for a while and in some sense a little lower than the angels (as man is) so that he could then lift man up, making us his brothers and, therefore, children of the Living God.

Chapter 2 ends by saying that, because of the manner in which Jesus has lifted us up, by coming down and enduring suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are tempted, if only we will turn to Him.

That leads nicely into Chapter 3

Chapter 3, Verses 1-6

In verse 1 of Chapter 3, the preacher addresses his listeners collectively as holy brothers who share in a heavenly calling and invites them to consider Jesus, whom he describes as the apostle and high priest of their collective confession

In other words, he addresses them as the true church of God of which Christ has been revealed as the foundation and the center.

Or in still other words, such as we might expect to hear from the Apostle Paul, he address them as his brothers and sisters in Christ.

I do not understand this to mean that everyone who hears this sermon is necessarily a true believer in Christ.

On the contrary I hear a note of concern in the preacher's voice that the church may not be sufficiently Christ-centered and that some to whom he preaches may not truly be saved.

Some of them might once have placed their faith in Moses and the Law, and some might still have a tendency to do that.

Moses certainly was a faithful servant in all of God's house, just as God Himself has said.

But Jesus is faithful over all of God's house, as a son!

That puts those of us who believe in Jesus on the same plane as Moses within God's house!

And we are that house if only we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. (So ends verse 6, of Chapter 3).

Q. What hope?

A. Surely he is speaking of the world to come, the heavenly calling, where we will finally and fully be brothers and sisters of Christ and sons and daughters of God, sitting alongside faithful Moses, and all the saints.

This is our hope and Jesus Christ is the founder of it.

Our confidence and our boasting in our hope is our confidence and our boasting in Jesus! In what he has accomplished. In what he has promised. In the present help that he offers us, to deliver us from Satan and from sin and from death.

Our salvation is, in some sense, "just" a matter of believing in Jesus.

But of course we do not mean the sort of belief that the devils have: simply knowing who Christ is and what he has done.

We can read all about that in the Bible and so can Satan.

No this is the sort of believing that manifests itself as willing obedience to the word of God, that produces fruits of the Spirit.

This is the sort of belief and obedience that one sees in those who have truly been adopted into God's family.

And this is the sort of belief and obedience that does last until the end, because it is a work of God, the Holy Spirit, in us.

And if God is for us, who can be against us?!

The picture that is forming in my mind as I read this is that the preacher regards this church and says, in effect, if what you represent yourself to be is true --- true believers in Christ --- then you are already children of God and citizens of heaven, and nothing can ever change that,

God knows already who you are and eventually we're going to know, also, by whether or not some or all of you actually do hold fast until the end.

but meanwhile, let's not simply assume that everything is OK in the Church. Some of us may be in danger, meaning we may not truly believe.

others of us, even among true believers, may be in danger of falling pray to the deceitfulness of sin

So let's continue to watch each other and exhort one another and worry about one another.

Chapter 3, Verses 7-19

I guess our preacher is afraid that his audience will not understand the danger that the Church is in.

So he proceeds to show them a frightening picture of what disbelief and disobedience look like.

I am speaking of the picture of the generation of men and women who left captivity in Egypt under the direction of Moses, then repeatedly put God to the test, and consequently failed to enter Canaan because of their unbelief and disobedience.

The author brings this generation to our attention, not by quoting the Torah directly, but by quoting a part of Psalm 95, in which the Psalmist had looked back 500 years into his past and commented on the events of those ancient days.

Our inspired author understood Psalm 95 to have been written by King David. (This Psalm is so inscribed in the LXX.)

He also understood that all scripture is the voice of God, the Holy Spirit.

"Therefore," he says in verse 7, of Chapter 3, "**as the Holy Spirit says** 'Today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion...etc.'"

This key phrase (i.e. about hearing and hardening) is repeated **twice** in Chapter 3: once in verses 7 and 8 and once in verse 15.

"His voice" is "God's voice".

Whoever hears God's voice is commanded to obey it.

This is a command for all people of all time.

The story of the Exodus generation in Israel is a picture of what should never be allowed to happen among God's people, and can only happen among God's people --- i.e. those to whom God speaks!

When God speaks to his people and they do not listen to him and obey him, they are at risk of having something really bad happen, something such as that which happened to the Exodus generation in Israel.

By the time David composed this Psalm, the people of Israel finally had occupied the Promised Land and he himself ruled over it, so he could no longer have been concerned specifically about entering and occupying Canaan.

That means that the Holy Spirit by David was already using the story of the Exodus generation as an object lesson with new applications in David's own generation, just as the Holy Spirit, by the author of Hebrews would use it again 1000 years later.

Q. What lesson was David teaching (i.e. in Psalm 95)?

A. To obey God? Certainly. (And not just to worship him c.f. the first part of Psalm 95)

A. That disobedience of God could bring disastrous consequences, even on this side of the grave? Almost certainly.

David and his Son Solomon and all the Kings descended from them would themselves provide further lessons for future generations of what disobedience and sometimes obedience to God would look like.

Soon enough after the time of David, disobedience would manifest itself in the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and, a bit later, the exile of the southern Kingdom of Judah to Babylon.

These examples are, to me, no less striking than the fact that those who were adults during the Exodus spent 40 years wandering in the desert and then died before their children under Joshua and Caleb entered Canaan.

There often are earthly consequences for disregarding the Word of God. And as the people to whom God spoke, Israel exhibited such consequences throughout its history.

So did David Himself, and Moses, too, for that matter, in their personal life stories.

Amazingly, by God's grace, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, these stories are all recorded for us in the Bible.

They are lessons, for our benefit.

But in Psalm 95, in the last part of the last verse of that Psalm. God the Holy Spirit, in the mouth of David describes the exclusion of the Exodus generation from the Promised Land in a rather curious way.

God swears "They shall not enter **my rest**."

This curious phrase is repeated twice in Chapter 3, in verses 11 and 18 just as we previously noted the repetition of the equally curious phrase "Today if you hear his voice do not harden your heart and etc."

We seem to be presented with the thought ---- don't we? --- already here in Chapter 3 --- that there may be something called "God's rest" which one may not be able to enter if he has first heard and then hardened his heart against God's word.

The converse seems also to be true: that one simply does enter something called God's rest when he hears God's word and obeys it.

In short, when we have done that which God has told us to do, whatever that may be, we enter "**his rest.**"

That is a lot of background and review, but hopefully it will help us understand tonight's reading.

Does anybody have any questions before we read on into today's lesson?

Chapter 4, Verses 1-11

Will somebody please read Hebrews, Chapter 4, verses 1-11, in Japanese (Shin Kaiyaku)

Thank you. Now will someone please read that same 11 verses in English (ESV)

- 1** Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.
- 2** For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.
- 3** For we who have believed enter that rest, 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 somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works."
- 5** And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest."
- 6** Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience,
- 7** again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."
- 8** For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.
- 9** So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,
- 10** for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.
- 11** Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Thank you. As we have seen, Chapter 4 begins with the word, "**Therefore.**"

I take this to mean, in view of what we have read and reviewed in Chapter 3, verses 7-19 about the Exodus generation

"Therefore" may refer more particularly to the concluding verse of Chapter 3 which says "So we see that they were unable to enter because of **unbelief**."

Our author tends to use the terms "unbelief" and "disobedience" interchangeably.

Perhaps these are ultimately the same thing.

I mean, if we hear God's voice and believe it, then we will surely obey it, won't we?

Well, perhaps not if we are devils: they hear, and believe, and yet disobey.

But if we are truly children of God, and God speaks to us, yet we disobey him, then surely this is evidence of unbelief.

Or else we are the same as the devils!

"Oh wretched man am I," I hear Paul say...

However can we explain our sin?!

How desperately we need Jesus.!

Verse 1

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

What follows from the story of the Exodus generation is an invitation to be afraid:

"Therefore...**let us fear**..."

Notice that **all** are invited to fear lest **some** have failed to reach it.

In other words, it is a fear that the **group** is supposed to have on behalf of **each** of its members.

This is first of all a matter of appearances: that any of them should **seem** to have failed to reach it.

I think this is his recognition that only God sees the heart, whereas we can only see the "seeming"

Obedience is, in fact, the only measure that we humans have for belief in others and, perhaps, even in ourselves.

When we see disobedience, in others and also in ourselves, we must fear the presence of unbelief and possibly the deadly kind.

Therefore the "seeming to have failed" is something to be afraid of because the seeming might be true

Q. What is the "it" they may seem to have failed to reach?

A. This is made clear within verse 1 itself, in the clause that reads: "**while the promise of entering his rest still stands.**"

The "it" which they must fear to seem not to have reached is something called "his rest."

This is obviously a reference to the last verse of Psalm 95 as twice quoted in Hebrews Chapter 13, as we have discussed.

Q. So what is "his rest?"

A. Let's read on and see what the preacher says about that

Verse 2

For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

This first part of this passage can be translated more literally as, they were evangelized just as we were but it didn't benefit them because...

The last part which reads, in the ESV, "because they were not united by faith with those who listened," is very difficult for anyone to translate with confidence.

Having reviewed many of the possible translations, I think we can be confident that it loosely means that evangelization was not effective in the Exodus generation because of lack of faith --- i.e. because they didn't believe God and disobeyed Him.

The preacher is more interested in the implication for his own congregation, that though faith their evangelization will benefit them.

In their case---i.e. the congregation that the preacher is addressing --- the content of the evangelization is clearly was what we call the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Regarding the content of the evangelization of the Exodus generation, it certainly included the Gospel of the Promised Land,

but I suppose, and I think very many would agree with me, that the Promised Land was, for them, more than a piece of real estate.

It was for them also a figure of heaven and the world to come and, so ultimately, a figure of Christ and his kingdom.

Because that evangelization was not met with faith in them, God said something really scary: "they shall not enter his rest."

Whatever that means the best thing to do would seem to be to embrace the Gospel of Christ!

Verse 3

For we who have believed enter that rest, 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.

Here we have an argument from the opposite, if I am understanding the author correctly.

He means to say that rest is the place where believers naturally go.

The Exodus generation was prevented from going there because of their disobedience and unbelief.

But since we have believed, we enter that rest.

The "rest" being referred to here is called "God's rest"

It is grammatically possible for this to mean, only, the rest which God confers on man.

It may also, or instead, mean the rest in which God Himself participates .

Our author seems to mean the latter or, rather, both.

Here in verse 3, he alludes to the creation story as he does also in the following verse 4

Verse 4

For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works."

Clearly now what our author is doing is connecting the creation account from Genesis with Psalm 95.

The connection is the word "**rest**"

which in the Greek (but not the Hebrew) Old Testament is the same word in Genesis and Psalm 95.

This is a fairly standard exegetical technique among the Jews.

In effect this is importing the definition of "rest" from Genesis into Psalm 95 and thus into his own sermon.

Clearly the author means to say that "God's rest" means a "rest" in which God Himself participates and which he allows the faithful to enter with him.

Since the creation of the world, God has been "at rest" in this particular sense and those who have believed enter into this rest with Him.

It is not clear, here, whether the author understood the faithful of the Old Testament to enter into this rest when they died, or whether they would wait for the work of Christ to be completed on the cross, or whether they would wait for the resurrection at the end of time, or some combination of these.

Such issues are not, I think, explored here.

But the author does mean to say that unbelief is the one thing we have to fear, because it is the only thing that might stop us from entering, with other believers, into God's rest, which is heaven, or the world to come.

Verse 5

And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest."

God spoke of the establishment of his rest in Genesis, and he again spoke of the existence of his rest in Psalm 95 as a place that might still be denied to those who rebel against God.

The point, I think, as has already been made, is that God's rest has existed for so long as the world has existed and it will continue to exist as the place where those who have believed do enter.

but where those who do not believe do not enter.

Verses 6 and 7

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷again he appoints a

certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

David, then, in Psalm 95, appears to be teaching, not only the importance of obeying God but, also, that disobedience has eternal consequences.

Specifically those who disobey and disbelieve may be prevented from entering God's rest.

Surely this is consistent with what we hear David saying elsewhere and in general, throughout the Psalms and Former Prophets.

He believed in a blessed eternal life for the faithful and was never focused too much on an earthly Promised Land.

He also knew the Gospel of Grace --- i.e. that salvation depended on God not counting our sins against us and that some were recipients of such grace

The same thing David looked forward to, we look forward to: resting from our labor WITH God.

Verses 8 and 9

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,

Some might have thought, and undoubtedly some did think, that the rest which had been denied to the Exodus generation had later been granted to the generation of their Children under the leadership of Joshua and Caleb.

That is certainly one possible way to read things, and might have been what David had in mind in Psalm 95.

But our author says, "no."

IF that is all that God in the mouth of David had meant by "rest," then he wouldn't have spoken of it as something that could still be entered or might still be denied based on our disobedience and unbelief.

David must have been referring to an eternal rest for the people of God.

Here he calls it a Sabbath rest, which is consistent with the allusion to Exodus, when God rested from all his work, and consistent with the view (not unanimously held) that the Sabbath is something that began on the seventh day of creation and which continues indefinitely.

Which is to say that God did the work of creation and then rested or desisted from that work, and that we do the work of faith and obedience and then will desist from that work when we rest with God, eternally I suppose.

Or perhaps we should say that God does the work of faith and obedience in us (which is different from the work of creation from which God has rested) so that we may rest with him eternally.

Verse 11

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

The rest we have been discussing, sort of the human analog of what God did at Creation, is something that we arrive at not by rest but by striving.

This must be a very important point. It is a point that the Apostle Paul made often and beautifully in Philippians 3:12 ff

This is not to be confused with "works righteousness."

We do not work to save ourselves, since it is obviously quite impossible for us to attain righteousness by works.

Literally nobody has ever accomplished that, except for Christ, who displayed his eternal perfection by living a perfect life.

But the faith in Christ that is required to enter God's rest, is a faith that demands our complete attention and everything that we have and everything that we are, and it will manifest itself as works of love and obedience.

And a big part of the work we will be seen to do, will be helping others within the church to walk that narrow path.

That is what our preacher is doing in this sermon.

But we will not need to do any of these things alone!

This is family business, including God our Father, Christ our Brother, the Holy Spirit within us, and all of the holy brothers and sisters around us.

In that sense, we who have believed, have already entered our rest!

This is our confidence and our boasting in our hope to which we must hold fast.

Chapter 4, Verses 1-11 (Review)

OK. Now let's read Hebrews, Chapter 4, verses 1-11, once again, and see if it makes more sense to us than it did the first time we read it:

- 1** Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.
- 2** For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.
- 3** For we who have believed enter that rest, 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.
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- 7** again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."
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- 9** So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,
- 10** for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.
- 11** Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Any Questions?

Next week we will finish Chapter 4.