

The Book to the Hebrews

Remember

1. The purpose of the book is to encourage despondent believers suffering religious ostracism and denunciation from the Jewish communities, not to drift away from all that they gained in Christ.
2. The argument to sustain the writer's purpose is something like this. What we have in Jesus, the superiority of what the Hebrew Scriptures anticipated, has been revealed to us in our Lord's first coming as through a glass darkly, and guaranteed most fully when He returns. The writer accomplishes his aim by revealing the supremacy of Christ in three ways: to angels who mediated the Law, to Moses who inscribed the communication of angels, and to the Levitical system that could only foreshadow a complete redemption that would come in the Son.

I. The Argument of the Book: The Pre-eminence of Christ in His Person and Work, 1:1-10:18

A. The Superiority of Son to the Angels. 1:1-2:18

The argument is three-fold: Christ possesses a superior status (that of Son); Christ is the object of the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures; and He accomplished what no angel could, the restoration of human dignity.

B. The Superiority of Christ to Moses, 3:1-6

1. The call to consider, v. 1

The audience is clearly believers ("holy brethren" and "partakers of a heavenly calling"). This should help us to put the warning passages in perspective. The "dark passages" are the exhortations of a preacher warning of the danger of spiritual loss through disobedience, not the loss of heaven. (Remember these are Jewish people and they think in pictures, not particulars. Preachers are prophet-like folks who strive to make points without qualifications at times).

The word "consider" means "to fix your mind upon." The "therefore" connects our passage to 2:10-18, a description of Jesus' mercies.

Jesus is described in two ways: "the Apostle (the sent one, suggesting His origin, authority, and mission)" and "High Priest," indicating His work of compassion. He secured the forgiveness of our sins, not a

heart-felt symbolic gesture that Messiah in His coming would cleanse them in some geopolitical disaster.

2. The redemptive roles of Moses and the Christ, v. 2

Both Jesus and Moses were faithful in their callings, responding in obedience. The word “house,” which occurs five times in our passage, is used figuratively for the sphere of faithfulness in their duties. Moses is one of the greatest examples of faithfulness in the Hebrew Scriptures, yet he fades (he was humble, but he also had a violent side [Meribah and the striking of the rock]) in contrast to the faithfulness of Christ. Moses struck the rock in anger while Jesus allowed Himself to be stricken for us out of compassion.

3. The contrast between Moses and Christ, vv. 3-6

While Jesus and Moses were both obedient, they did not possess equal status. Jesus is worthy of “more glory” and this is illustrated in three ways. Christ built the house; Moses was part of the house. Christ is over the house; Moses was in the house. Christ is the heir of the house; Moses was a servant in the house.

I think house is a metaphor for the presence of God.

a. Builder versus occupant, vv. 3-4

Jesus “built” the house, the place of divine service, the “place” where humanity intersects with transcendence; Moses labored “in” the house that Jesus erected.

b. Servant versus son, vv. 5-6

Does the “if” indicate an uncertainty of status or is it an exhortation based on surety of end? This is an exhortation to a people who are drifting, but they are God’s people (“our confidence,” “our hope”).

You find a similar expression in v. 14 where we are called “partakers of Christ.” See also v. 1.

Parenthesis I: Warning against drifting, 2:1-4

(The path to glory is the way of suffering.)

Parenthesis II: Warning against Doubting, 3:7-4:16

(The path to rest is the way of trusting.)

The defection of the ancient people of God under faithful Moses brought judgment. A greater than Moses is here (derelictions do not cancel God’s promises, only the fullest enjoyment of them that comes with obedience. Will there be another defection? God has a rest for His people; it is the refuge of obedience and trust on their earthly journey. There are a people, like many we know, who live turbulent, restless Christian lives because of an unwillingness to do as God commands. These are people who chose comfort and immediate gratification over obedience and live lives that are, at times, without peace.

Between Egypt and Kadesh Barnea (Num. 14:22 Israel responded to God with doubt and fear ten times. In the disobedient episode at Kadesh rebellion climaxed with divine judgment: they would not enter the rest that Canaan symbolized (all over twenty years, Joshua and Caleb the exception). With over 603,550 adult males at the beginning of the Exodus, Israel suffered 42 funerals daily for 38 (perhaps 40) years.

1. Two examples: the case of Israel's failure, vv. 7-11

The reference is to Exod. 17:1-17 and Num. 20:1-13. One before Mt Sinai and the other at the end of the wilderness journey (Massah [Rephidim] and Meribah, "the place of contention or testing [the issue was a lack of water])," Rebellion characterized the entire period of forty years (this was Stephen's point in his speech to the Jewish leadership in Acts 7:51).

The quotation is from Psalm 95:7-11, a call to worship. The psalmist calls Israel to praise God as Creator and Protector but includes a warning based on past derelictions.

Parenthesis: The promise of "rest" in the Bible.

a. The foundation of "rest" is found in the creation account. After the sixth day of creative work God rested. The seventh day was celebrated in Israel as the Sabbath. If God did not work on the seventh day, what did He do. He admired His own glorious act of creation; He spent the day rejoicing (Is there an insight of what we should do?).

b. "Rest" has three nuances in the Bible. "Rest means the enjoyment of the delights of redemption; there are stages.

1) First, all who know Christ have into the security of "redemptive rest." It a "rest" obtained by Jesus' sacrifice declared forever by God (A FACT).

2) Second, there is a daily rest for God's people in the trustworthiness of God's promises. It is a growth in grace, the applicational experience of grace. It is subject to experience, ebbing and following. We call it "sanctification." Redemption does not cure the Adamic nature, death does!!! (A STRUGGLE). Perseverance does not gain salvation; it demonstrates the reality of trust.

3) We will "rest" forever when we are gathered into God's eternal kingdom (A SURITY).

2. The application: the call to faithfulness, vv. 12-15

a. The caution, v. 12

As the ancient people failed to find rest, so have the readers of this book. The point is not the loss of salvation; that is not the issue in the book. It is about the avoidance of a troubled life when it is not necessary. The path of peace for believers is the path of trust.

- b. The antidote, v. 13
This is interesting. The writer tells this assembly of believers that they have a duty to each other of encouragement in their struggles. Learning to trust is a process, not a one-time event.
- c. The basis, v. 14
The evidence of faith is obedience, not rooted in distrust of God's character and provision; it is endurance, not concession. The "if," as in verse 6, is an exhortation, not a call to uncertainty; it is a fact. Obedience leads to the rest-life that was to be experienced by the ancient people in the journey to and in Canaan.
- d. The warning, v. 15
This writer is a preacher. This is clear from his practical applications and immediate urgency to change "today."
- 3. The interpretation: the cause of Israel's failure, 3:16-19
 - a. The cause of God's anger, v. 16
The very people God rescued provoked Him by not trusting Him.
 - b. The consequence of God's anger, v. 17
They sinned and suffered the consequence. The graves in the wilderness (603,550 of them) are a witness and warning of the consequences of disobedience!
 - c. The warning of God's anger unheeded, v. 18
Disobedience brought failure to experience the blessing of God intended for His people.

Remember: Canaan, the land, is a picture of the place where God grants blessings to His earthly people (Canaan is not a picture of heaven; even when they got there, they struggled with disobedience, something not true for us in heaven). It is an earthly figure of peace and rest. Blessing, "Canaan," peace, and rest are the fruit of an obedient life, even in less than the best of times.

- d. The conclusion: unbelief, v. 19
The people did not obtain the rest that they started out for because of unbelief. The argument is that the first generation of those redeemed from bondage failed to enter the rest which was promised because they did not continue in trust of God's goodness. They fell into unbelief; unbelief issued in disobedience, and this led to open sin. The present generation is in a similar situation and similar danger. A Jew did not become a non-Jew by disobedience. Disobedience, similarly, does not take away our status, just our peace. The covenant of Redemption is irrevocable; personal peace is not.
- 4. The call to fear, 4:1-10
"Therefore" indicates a conclusion or inference based upon what has been

previously stated. Israel failed to enter promised rest because they refused to trust the Lord. Like the ancient people, these Jewish Christians desired the “pleasures of Egypt,” in this case Judaism, we are called to avoid “displeasures” for a walk of faith and trust.

a. The command: stated, v. 1

The promise of rest through obedience is ours for the taking! We should make it a priority to enter a life of trust in adverse circumstances. The NET Bible translates the imperative “be wary lest.”

b. The command: reasoned, v. 2

Like the ancient people of God, these believers had the “gospel” preached to them, the good news of God’s promises, and the disclosure of God’s character. The ancient people failed to heed the message because they did not respond in faith, trusting what God promised.

c. The command: the surety, v. 3

Trust brings with it rest; abandonment of self-centeredness for God-centeredness brings rest. The ancient people failed to trust, and they did not enter into rest. Again, the writer returns to Psalm 95 (v. 11).

d. The command: the proof, vv. 4-5

The quotations in these verses show that the ancient people did not enter rest, the rest of faith, which God had prepared for them. Israel’s rest was to be a shadow of the new people’s rest. The divine rest was from creative labor; ours is a rest rooted in trust.

1) There is a rest, because God rested, v. 4

The principle of a “rest” is established because, after God’s creative work, He rested (Gen. 2:2). God’s rest from creative labor has become an illustration of the rest available to God’s people.

2) There is a rest available to us, v. 5

There is a “rest” for us, though the ancient people failed to obtain it; it is the rest of faith. God’s promises always find fulfillment! God’s promise of rest has been available since the creation was completed; it was forfeited by Adam (Gen. 3) and what a mess he made!

e. The command: restated, vv. 6-10

1) The prevailing condition, v. 6

Since God promised rest for His people, and the ancient people did not fulfill the promise, He has appointed another time for its fulfillment. That time is now (“today”).

2) The fact proven, vv. 7-8

a) From Scripture, v. 7

The citation is again from Psalm 95. Though unstated in the Psalm, the writer indicates that David either wrote it, or he is saying that it comes from writings generally attributed to David. The “if” does not imply an uncertainty; the option of reason is

available every day,

b. From history, v. 8

The “rest” of faith was not accomplished in Joshua’s time. The land was left unconquered because of the failure of faith on the part of the tribes (Caleb was the exception to Israel’s failure).

The “rest” for the ancient people was not life in Canaan; according to Psalm 95, they were already in the land. The “land” is a picture of the place of trust in God, and only partially fulfilled; the fulfillment of the “rest” will be in heaven!

3) The result, vv. 9-11

a) A “rest” remains, v. 9

Ours is called a “Sabbath rest” because it parallels the divine rest after the creation. There is a difference: God’s work was good. Ours, in contrast to faith, is often self-oriented protectionism. We need to desist from our work and rest in His.

b) The “rest” described, v. 10

As God rested from His works on the seventh day, we should rest in faith from our works.

4) The call to faithfulness, vv. 11-15

Here the writer draws the parenthesis (3:7-4:15) to a conclusion.

a) The command, v. 11

The command is a deduction (“therefore”). With intensity of purpose, we are to strive earnestly, diligently, to enter faith rest. (This rest is a present reality, not a future one; it is now, not heaven [present tense, not future tense].)

b) The basis, vv. 12-15

(1) God’s speech, v. 12

There are five statements concerning the Word of God, the Hebrew Scriptures.

“Living:” it shares in the life of God (eternal).

“Active:” it manifests the life of God.

“Sharper than,” it is discerning.

“Piercing:” it is penetrating (even the immaterial).

“Able to judge:” it discriminates (even thoughts and affections).

(2) Jesus’s omniscience, v. 13

We have a high priest that knows us intimately.

(3) Jesus’s triumph, v. 14

(4) Jesus’s sympathy and compassion, v. 15

5. The conclusion; A call to trust and confidence, v. 16

Thoughts:

1. Folks who are genuinely redeemed are not exempt from the acts or consequences of disobedience. The ancient people of God are a marvelous, and chilling, example to ponder. Delivered from oppression by miracle through the covering of blood and parting of a sea, they were not healed of unbelief. No number of mercies from God seems to cure us of this blight. Where do you struggle with unbelief in your life?
2. The downside of unbelief is that it robs us of “our Canaan,” a life of restful trust in a fully faithful and mighty God. Failure to trust God leads to a life of choices and consequences the Lord never intended for us. Israel, in this instance, is a huge, looming negative example. In what areas of your life should you replace unbelief with trust, unrest with rest?
4. God is not pleased with distrust in Himself on our part. It is unjustifiable. The consequences are a lack of blessing on our lives, the blessing of peace and repose in a troubled world and broken social relationships. It is simply not rational to express distrust in the Lord when He has been altogether faithful in word and deed, yet we do. Have you ever talked to yourself about that?
5. The anger of God is not evidence of being severed from God’s grace in our lives; it is evidence that we have forfeited the expression of the pleasures of God in our lives. As a child is not severed from the family name by disobedience, though it might (and likely should) occasion parental displeasure and negative consequences, so we are not severed from the Lord’s family by our foolishness. In both cases, negative consequences are rooted in the hope of remediation, correction. Neither parents, nor the Lord, act to punish, but to correct deviant behavior.