

‘God’s rest’ is still available

‘God’s rest’ is still available, he says. It did not finish with the days of Joshua. ¹Therefore let us fear, lest, with a promise of entering his rest left open, any one of you might suppose that he has missed his chance. For the first time the writer speaks of ‘his rest’, that is, God’s rest. This rest is what God is enjoying and we enter into it

• A right kind of fear

There is a right kind of fear. ‘Let us fear...’, says our writer. We do not want to miss ‘entering God’s rest’. We do not want to come under God’s oath of wrath in this life, or his fiery judgement which deprives us of reward at the judgement seat of Christ. Let us – together – fear lest you or I or any Christian in our circle of fellowship fall into unbelief and hardness of heart.

• Promises held out to us

There are promises held out to us. The word ‘promise’ ^{□1}occurs here for the first time in Hebrews. The promises are not about initial-salvation; they are what comes **after** our initial salvation (after ‘justification’, Paul would say). ‘Inheritance’ and ‘justification’ are different. Abraham had to wait to obtain the promise ^{□2}, but one does not have to wait for one’s first assurance of salvation. We shall see what the promises are as we proceed: a calling to ministry, enablement despite infirmities and weakness, the experience of Jesus as our Melchizedek-priest, and so on. The greatest aspect of the promise in this life is the ‘rest’ that we share with God himself. Then there is the after-death reward for everything we have done for God. The promises are achieved in this life but at the same time they are laid up as treasure in heaven.

□1 4:1

□2 6:15

• In this life the ‘rest’ that we share with God himself

• The after-death reward for all we have done for God

• Discouragement is refusing to believe in the grace of God

Scholars debate the translation here. The word used (*dokeo*) often refers to a faulty human opinion. A faulty opinion is again in view here, and the translation should be: ‘**suppose** that he has missed his chance’. (i) First, they might think that since Canaan can only be entered once in the story of the Israel. ‘It was only for those first days’, they might say. (ii) But also the readers are discouraged. They might well be saying, ‘We have lost our chance. God is angry with us. We may as well give up.’ The writer says this too is unbelief. Discouragement is actually just one more form of rebellious unbelief. It is refusing to believe in the grace of God.

Our situation is not so different from that of the first generation of Israelites

Our situation is not so different from that of the first generation of Israelites. ²For we also are people who have been told good news, just as they were. But the word which they heard did not benefit those people, for they were not united by faith with those who listened. Actually the Israelites did believe when Moses first took them the message of their deliverance. ‘The people believed’^{□1}. It was their faith in the blood of the lamb that enabled the angel of destruction to pass over them in the time of God’s judgement. But the ‘good news’ of the land of Canaan was also important. It was in the **second** stage of their relationship with God that they developed an unbelieving heart. ‘The Lord, after he had once for ever saved a people out of Egypt, **in the second phase** destroyed those who did not believe’^{□2}. Later in the narrative God reminds Moses that the people, including Moses himself, were excluded from Canaan ‘because you believed me not’^{□3}.

□1 Exodus 4:31

□2 Jude 5

□3 Numbers 20:12

• A land ‘flowing with milk and honey’

The entire Christian message includes a call to press on into God’s rest. We who have already put our faith in the blood of the lamb are being told **more** good news. We have **already** escaped from God’s judgement through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. But there is further good news for us. There is a place ‘flowing with milk and honey’, the place of abundant blessing from God, the place of restfulness, as we see our Lord Jesus Christ working on our behalf and hear him swearing. ‘I will indeed bless you’. A report is coming to

us from the Scriptures, just as a report of Canaan came to the people of Israel. The question is: will we Christians respond in faith ‘the second time’ (Jude 5, literal Greek)? What will we do with the good news of God’s future plans for us? God holds up before us a pole of grapes and pomegranates and figs and says to us, ‘Look at what I want to give you! Why don’t you trust me, and press on into maturity – the land flowing with milk and honey?’

• *The twelve spies were agreed about the basic facts*

The twelve spies were agreed about the basic facts. All twelve of them were agreed that they had observed many people, and fortified cities, as well as a fertile land which could abundantly provide for the needs of the people. But ten of the spies said, ‘We are not able to go up.’ Caleb and Joshua felt quite different: ‘We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it’ ¹. Caleb and Joshua had seen God’s power again and again. They had seen manna fall from heaven. Joshua and Caleb had learned God’s ways. They knew that despite appearances to the contrary when God gives a promise he means what he says.

¹ Numbers 13:30

• *Ten spies failed in faith*

Ten spies failed in faith; two spies were all for persisting in faith. What should the people do? Hebrews 4:2 tells us what happened. They were not united by faith with those who listened. Joshua and Caleb had listened to the promises of God. So despite the marvellous promise of a fruitful land ahead of them, the word which they heard did not benefit them. They were not united by faith with those who listened. In their unbelief they forfeited the promised land. He forgave them – a point that should be noted – but swore they would not enter Canaan ¹.

¹ Numbers 14:20–24

• *‘We who have believed’ – to whom does this refer?*

Hebrews 4:3 puts the challenge of commitment to us. The first Israelites heard a message about the goodness of the land of Canaan but they did not receive that message with persistent faith ¹, and therefore they lost the experience that was being offered to them. Now he gives a concluding word of explanation, ³*For we who have believed are entering into rest, as he has said, ‘As I swore in my wrath, “They shall certainly never enter my rest.”’* What does he mean in verse 3a? **Is ‘we who have believed’ a reference to all Christians?** No. If it is a reference to all Christians he would be saying, ‘All Christians enter God’s rest’. This is obviously not true. **Is ‘we who have believed’ a reference to only some Christians?** Yes. It refers only to those who diligently persist in faith. If the unbelief of Hebrews 4:2 refers to failure to continue to believe, then the faith of Hebrews 4:3 refers to those who do not fail and who continue to believe. In effect, then, Hebrews 4:3 means, ‘For we who have made a firm commitment to continue in faith are expecting that we shall sooner or later enter into God’s rest.’

¹ 4:2

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• *Only to those who diligently persist in faith*

 <p>slices.org.uk</p>	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)</i> books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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