

**Hebrews 3:7-19:** “*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice,<sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,<sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.<sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’<sup>11</sup> As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.<sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.<sup>14</sup> For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.<sup>15</sup> As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”<sup>16</sup> For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?<sup>17</sup> And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?<sup>18</sup> And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?<sup>19</sup> So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”*

**A Second Warning Exhortation:** In this second exhortation, the author uses an illustration based on the exodus experience of Israel in the desert. He draws an analogy between Israel’s experience and that of the church. This is an example of exodus typology. Typology refers to the recognition of corresponding patterns between earlier and later occurrences in history. Such similarities are useful in understanding Scripture. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:11 “*Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.*” And similarly in Rm. 15:4 “*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*”

The Old Testament passage quoted and the author’s comments deal with God’s provision of a “rest” for His people and the requirements for achieving that “rest.”

The author reveals a unique concept of “rest” for the church, a “rest” made possible by what Christ has done. Hebrews 4:1-11 will elaborate that topic.

The author’s first exhortation (Hebrews 2:1-4) concerned the danger of “drifting” from the great salvation declared by Christ. This exhortation (Hebrews. 3:7-19) warns against the danger of hardening our hearts to the point of “doubting” and “disbelieving” the Word of Christ. In Hebrews 3:7-11 he quotes Psalm 95:7-11 with commentary on the quote beginning in verse 12.

**Words from the Holy Spirit:** The author prefaces his quote with the phrase “*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says.*” He clearly views Scripture as the Word spoken by God. He doesn’t deny human authors, but they are not of great concern, since in the final analysis, God is responsible for what is written.

The first 6 verses of Psalm 95 are praise and worship. Beginning with verse 7, the five verses quoted here are the warning given by the psalmist based on the narrative of Exodus 17:1-7 and the judgment passage of Numbers 14:20-35. The psalmist appeals to his own generation to avoid falling into the plight of the generation who perished in the wilderness. In the wilderness, the Jews were free from slavery but not yet in the Promised Land. This fact will be important a bit later.

**Typology:** The author applies the quote from Psalm 95 to Christians. The exodus typology underlying his interpretation appears in several New Testament passages (e.g., 1 Corinthians. 5:7; 10:1-12). The exodus events are dramatic and important. They are the basis of typology for many later events in the history of redemption. There exists a special relationship between the Jew’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt and Christian’s deliverance from slavery to sin through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. God acted gloriously and triumphantly in both instances.

The exodus was a redemptive “type” of the cross. The freed slaves in the wilderness experienced the exodus deliverance, yet fell away from God’s path and suffered for it. The warning to the readers of Hebrews is that those who have experienced the redemption of the cross may find themselves in a similar situation. They need to guard against falling away. They should stand firm in faith.

**Application of the Quote from Psalm 95:** Commentary on the Psalm 95 quote begins in verse 12. Key words from the quote provide a foundation for the author's comments. *"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."* The NIV has *"See to it brothers and sisters."* An "evil unbelieving heart" is to be avoided at all costs. The word translated "falling away" is the word from which we get "apostasy." Apostasy is a deliberate rebellion against God's truth. "Apostasy," as the word is used today, usually means abandoning one's faith. That would mean being condemned forever. That meaning does not seem to fit either with the exodus story or the situation with the people to whom the author is writing.

At a time in the wilderness when they were desperate for water, Israel "tested" the Lord by not trusting Him to provide for their need. Moses called the place where that happened "Massah and Meribah" which means "testing and quarreling (or rebellion)." Israel fell away from the living God by refusing to accept God's will for their lives. Even after all the miracles they had witnessed, they did not trust God to provide for their daily needs. Instead, they stubbornly wanted to go back to Egypt rather than continue to follow God in the wilderness.

God would not permit His chosen people to return to Egypt and bondage. Rather than have them turn back, He disciplined them where they were in the wilderness. The author emphasizes that true believers have eternal salvation through their trust in a living Savior who constantly intercedes for them. But confidence in eternal salvation is no excuse for sin. God disciplines His children who sin. Believers who come to doubt God's Word and rebel against Him will not miss heaven, but they miss the blessings of their inheritance today, and will suffer the chastening of God.

**All Believers Subject at Times to Falling:** All believers are at times subject to the possibility of falling into doubt and rebellion. They must constantly be vigilant and careful, encouraging one another daily, lest they too, like the wilderness wanderers, *"be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"* and fall away (verse 13). The Christian life of faithful discipleship must be lived day-by-day. Every day is a new "today" in which God requires faithful trust and response to His call. Each new day

will be called “today” as long as we live. Faithful trust with confidence equal to our original confidence is required of us, as verse 14 says, “to the end.”

As Christ shares in our humanity, so Christians, by participating in the fulfillment He brings, ***“have come to share in Christ”*** (verse 14). The original subjective assurance that came at conversion and produced faithful trust and obedience must be held firmly to the end. This requires focus and deliberate attention to the spiritual disciplines to which Christ calls us (verse 14). Verse 15 repeats the warning of Psalm 95, ***“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”***

**Six Questions:** The author closes this section of warning with six questions given in three pairs. The first question in each pair asks a question; the second question answers it. The questions are phrased to cause searching tensions among his readers. Verse 16: Question ***“For who were those who heard and yet rebelled?”*** Answer: ***“Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?”*** Verse 17: Question ***“And with whom was he provoked for forty years?”*** Answer: ***“Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?”*** Verse 18: Question ***“And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest?”*** Answer: Was it not ***“to those who were disobedient?”*** The three sets of questions illustrate first hardness of heart, then a descent from **hope** – to **disbelief** –to **disobedience**. The conclusion is ***“So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”***

**Failing to Achieve the Promised “Canaan Rest”:** In their desert wanderings, the Hebrews tested God. In spite of all He had already done for them, they complained and failed to trust God to provide for their daily needs. The consequence was that most of the exodus generation was denied the privilege of entering the Promised Land. They died in the desert, failing to enter the rest God had prepared. God had freed them, led them to safety, sustained them in the wilderness, and yet they were disgruntled with God’s provision. Their disgruntlement eventually led to unbelief.

**The Nature of the Hebrews Disobedience:** The nature of the Hebrews disobedience in the wilderness is given in Hebrews 4:2, ***“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.*” Some heard and believed, but most did not. Most failed to trust the good news, the Word of God that was preached to them in the wilderness, i.e., the promises of God that He would provide for them, give them victory, forgive them, and be merciful to them. They didn’t trust God to deliver what they heard. When troubles arose, they grumbled and complained. They thought how much better off they would be if they were back in Egypt. So they yearned to return to Egypt rather than follow God in the wilderness. That attitude was unbelief and the source of their disobedience.

The promised “Canaan rest” was primarily physical, a rest from slavery and from wandering in the wilderness. There would be battles to be fought and much work to be done. Most of the generation, who were adults when they left Egypt, died in the desert, but the next generation entered Canaan and experienced the limited rest (Joshua 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). The Canaan rest was only one aspect of the blessed rest God prepared for His people. The far more important aspect was spiritual rest in salvation which was beyond Joshua’s capacity to bestow.

**Hebrews 4:1—11:** *“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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” <sup>5</sup> And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.” <sup>6</sup> Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. <sup>9</sup> So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, <sup>10</sup> for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did*

*from his.<sup>11</sup> Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”*

**Many Failed to Enter the Promised Rest but the Promise of God’s Rest Still Stands:** It was unbelief which caused so many Hebrews in the wilderness to fail to enter God’s Canaan rest. The promised rest was much more than the Canaan rest. God’s promise of a rest for His people did not die with those in the desert or with those who entered the Canaan rest. It still stands.

But does the promised rest apply to Christians? The author is concerned that his readers may mistakenly believe that in becoming Christians they gave up the opportunity to enter God’s rest. If they believe they have lost God’s promised rest, they may believe they can regain that opportunity by turning back to Judaism. The author assures them that those who have believed in Christ do enter God’s rest. What is the rest that God calls “my rest?”

Christians understand there is no rest for the soul apart from God. St. Augustine expressed it beautifully when he said **“Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”** We know this is true. Why did so many of the freed Hebrew slaves fail to enter God’s rest? They disbelieved the power of God to provide for their needs and bring them to the Promised Land. Doubting God’s power to provide for their needs and bring them safely to Him continues to be a problem for Christians.

**Meaning of the Word “Rest”:** What do people today usually mean by the word “rest?” The English noun “rest” has many meanings. The basic idea is the act or state of ceasing from work or activity. It can also refer to peace, ease, or refreshment resulting from ceasing an activity. There are other less common meanings. The author’s discussion of “rest” is based on the rest God entered when He completed His work of creation. From Jesus own comment, the “rest” from creation **cannot** be a ceasing from all work or activity. One Sabbath Jesus healed a man and was accused of breaking the Sabbath. John 5:17, **“Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”** This is a plain statement the Father and the Son continue working – even though God’s Sabbath rest continues. Moreover, Jesus’

activity of healing did not break the Sabbath. God's rest is not a ceasing of work and/or other activity. What is the nature of His rest?

**God's Rest:** When God concluded His creation work, He entered the delightful rest which comes with accomplishment, completion, and satisfaction. God "rested" because His project was accomplished, and His work was good. Jesus entered a similar rest when, after His successful incarnate mission was accomplished, He ascended to the Father. A rest after completion of mission is what God wants to share with His children. To make it happen for us, God made salvation possible through Christ's "work." The Holy Spirit applies the benefits earned by Christ to those being saved. "Rest" is found in peace with God, adoption into His family, and transformation into a moral character like Christ. For that is not the whole story.

**Jesus Promises Rest:** In Matthew 11:28 Jesus says, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" Jesus Christ is our haven of rest, the One who saves us from ourselves. A newspaper in London published an article asking, "what is wrong with the world." G.K. Chesterton responded in a letter "Sir, I am." That's the way it is. We are all sinners who need to be saved from the sins of our own fallen nature. Until we are redeemed, we are all rebels.

**Salvation Rest:** God gives the astounding gift of "salvation rest." Salvation is a gift from God made possible through the completed work of Jesus Christ. He regenerates us enabling us to come to Christ by faith. (No one comes to the Father except through Christ). We enter the blessed rest and leave behind the struggle to find salvation through works. It is a rest where our fallen nature is tamed, and the Holy Spirit works within us to transform us into a likeness of Christ. Does that mean we are not to be active? No!

Salvation rest gives us "peace with God," a resting from enmity with God, a resting in the love and grace of God, a resting in the assurance we have become a part of God's family, joint heirs with Christ. "Salvation rest" has both a "now" and a "not yet" component.

**The “Now” of Salvation Rest:** The “now” component is the “here and now” rest we enter when we submit to God in obedience, a rest of submission. We are still in the world and subject to the buffeting of a fallen world, but we ourselves rest securely in the “will and grace of God who loves us.” We know He holds us firmly in His hands. This “salvation rest” is primarily a “rest for our spirit.” By contrast the “Canaan rest” promised the Israelites was to be primarily a physical rest from slavery and wandering in the desert, though even in Canaan there would be battles to be fought and much work to do.

**The “Not Yet” of Salvation Rest:** The “not yet” component of salvation rest is expressed in God’s promise that there remains for us a Sabbath rest prepared by God. We rest in the finished, completed, marvelous work of our Lord Jesus which in grace He did for us. The Sabbath rest that is “not yet” is the “heaven rest.” It waits for us until we stand before God’s presence in heaven and enter eternal life with Him. In Revelation 14:13 we read that then and there we truly “*rest from our labors,*” but not from activity. God brings believers into His rest but denies it to unbelievers.

**Diligence or Falling into Disbelief:** The idea of verse 4:11, “*Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.*” Failing to be diligent in obedience can cause people to end up following the disobedient example of the Hebrews in their wilderness experience. They failed to enter God’s rest because of unbelief. The author says don’t be like them. If we fail to trust God, we will find no rest.

**The Author’s Argument:** The overall sense of the argument the author has presented is that the chief purpose of life is to live such that you enter God’s heavenly rest. The only way to achieve that goal is to experience God’s regeneration and to trust Him with our life, Hebrews 4:3, “*For we who have believed enter that rest.*” To believe and trust God, we must know the truth about salvation. We must hear His Word, know His promises and believe with understanding, Hebrews 4:2, “*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.*” The Apostle Paul says in Romans 10:17, Having come to faith, we must strive with diligence to



understand. *“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”*  
We are to absorb and practice God’s Word lest we drift and fall into unbelief. The great danger we face is drifting into unbelieving thought through lack of attention.

We must constantly fight unbelief. Unbelief blocks access to God's rest.

**What is Next?** The character of God’s word.