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"The Entrance of THY WORDS Giveth Light"

CONTENTS

	PAGE
SOME NEW TESTAMENT TRIADS	49
THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS	59
NOTES ON HEBREWS	65
WHAT ABOUT THE APOCRYPHA	74
BIBLE MIRACLES	82
MAN'S FREE WILL	89
EXEGETICAL STUDY OF COLOSSIANS	92

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NOTES ON HEBREWS

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Chapter 4

Introduction

Though a chapter heading is introduced here, we are to regard what follows down to verse 13 as a direct continuation of the Apostle's arguments. He now again applies to his readers the history of Israel of which he had just been speaking, showing that in the Divine intention there was no other rest to be enjoyed than that of the land of Canaan. In the case of Israel, God was ready to bring them direct into the promised land, which was a comparatively short journey. "It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir unto Kadesh-Barnea" (Deut. 1:2). The distance is roughly about 200 miles. One day more, if they had been willing to advance, would have found them entering their inheritance. There they would obtain the rest which they had not been able to enjoy under the hard tyranny of the King of Egypt. Their unbelief forfeited the promised blessing "and they were overthrown in the wilderness." "Now these things happened unto them by way of example, and they were written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the ages are come" (1 Cor. 10:5-11).

"*Let us fear, therefore,*" says the writer, "*lest haply, a promise being left of entering into His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it*" (verse 1). The Canaan rest was pre-figurative of another rest to be enjoyed by God's people in fellowship with Him. To go back to Judaism would prevent the enjoyment of it, nor can any believer enter into it by works of his own fancied merit or self-effort.

Not United by Faith

In *verse 2* the parallel is pressed home: "*For indeed we have had good tidings preached unto us, even as also they.*" This recalls the statement at the opening of the Epistle, that "God hath spoken unto us in His Son," and again at the beginning of the second chapter, that the proclamation "had been spoken through the Lord and confirmed by them that heard." "Good tidings" of promised rest in Canaan had been given to Israel. Similarly good tidings had now been proclaimed, of rest to be obtained in Christ; "*but the word of hearing did not profit them, because they were*

not united by faith with them that heard." This rendering would indicate that the people did not identify themselves with those like Caleb and Joshua, who did believe. Each rendering, however, whether R.V. or A.V., points to the same meaning, that the good news failed to benefit them because it was not believed by them. However much people may congratulate themselves on receiving good tidings, unless they are accepted and obeyed, they produce only a hardening of the heart. So the Lord taught in connection with the parables He had spoken to the people (Matt. 13:13-16).

Entering into Rest

From the 3rd verse onward the writer takes up the subject of God's rest more fully, introducing it by the statement, "*For we which have believed do enter into that rest.*" There is a two-fold emphasis here which perhaps may be brought out by adopting the order of the original, "For we do enter into the rest, we who have believed." Firstly, there are some who do actually enjoy God's rest. Secondly, these are those who believe, and only such can in any way enter into God's rest. To confirm this point, which he has stressed with regard to believers, and believers only, he quotes again from Psalm 25, "*As I swear in My wrath, they shall not enter into My rest.*"

God's Rest

This leads him to expand his subject, to include God's rest in creation. This he does in the statement at the end of *verse 3*, "*Although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.*" God found His rest in that in which true rest lies, namely, in the completion and perfection of the work. "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good . . . and on the seventh day God finished His work that He had made, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made" (Gen. 1:31; 2:1, 2). The statement of God's rest is expanded in Ex. 31:17: "In six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed," and here the seventh day, or sabbath, is declared to be a sign between God and the children of Israel for ever, not between Himself and the Gentiles, nor between Himself and the Church, but with Israel alone. It was a reversal of Pharaoh's treatment of them. The quotation in *verse 2* is from Gen. 2:2. God's rest is not cessation from work, nor inaction, but the perfecting of activity.

The primary thought, however, here in the Hebrews passage is God's own Personal rest. "*For He hath said somewhere of the seventh day on this wise, And God rested on the seventh day from all His works*" (verse 4). He called Israel, His earthly people, to share His rest in Creation, by appointing the seventh day as a sign between Himself and them. Connected with that is the thought that this was the rest they were to enjoy in Canaan, but in this respect they failed.

Firstly, they failed to enter, and this is brought out in *verse 5* in the repeated statement "*and in this place again, They shall not enter into My rest. Seeing therefore it remaineth that some should enter therewith, and they to whom the good tidings were before preached failed to enter in because of disobedience, He again defineth a certain day, saying in David, after so long a time, To-day, as it hath been before said, To-day if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts*" (verses 6, 7). That is to say, a long time after He prohibited the people of Israel from entering into Canaan owing to their unbelief and after the distribution of the land under Joshua, God spoke of another day.

The allotment of the land under Joshua was only temporary. Ezekiel 48:9 to 22 and verse 35 show that the future rest in the earthly Canaan can be given to Israel only as a result of God's rest in Christ, and the finished work on Calvary. *For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken afterward of another day (verse 8).*

A Sabbatismos

Accordingly it is of the rest in Christ that the Apostle is speaking. He shows that the Canaan rest was anticipative of it, and says "*There remaineth therefore a sabbath rest (a sabbatismos or sabbath keeping) for the people of God*" (verse 9).

In order to understand this it is necessary for us to review the subject of God's rest. His rest in the finished work of His hands in creation was broken by sin. No sooner had His handwork been marred thereby, as recorded in Gen. 3, than He began to work with a view to man's redemption and to the restoration of the enjoyment of communion with Him.

There was an alternative. Man could have been hurled to His doom; the defiled creation could have been removed and a new one brought in. Such was the mercy of God, however, that He determined upon the carrying out of His plan of redemption.

Hence all the anticipatory and prefigurative sacrifices, and the types and shadows in the Old Testament. And when at length the Redeemer came to earth, the Incarnate Son of God, He said, "My Father worketh even until now, and I work."

Rest in Christ

Not, however, till He expired on the Cross, yielding up His infinitely precious life, could the work be accomplished. Accomplished it was when with His expiring utterance He cried with a loud voice, "It is finished." The work of redemption having thus been accomplished and the Son of God raised and seated at the Father's right hand, God rested once more. The resurrection of Christ ushered in a new creation and man was now called, not to keep a seventh day rest, appertaining to the old creation, but an abiding rest in Christ. The heart of God rested there on the ground of the finished work of the Cross, and there the sinner is invited to rest. The moment he believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, receiving Him by faith, he is spiritually seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 2:6) and blessed with all spiritual blessings therein (1:3).

Yet, while that is a matter of spiritual position assured to every believer in actual experience in his daily life, the believer is called to apprehend what it means to enjoy God's rest in Christ. Again, there is a triple foe, the world, the flesh and the Devil; yet there remaineth a sabbath keeping for him. It is true that there awaits for all the people of God the eternal rest which will be undisturbed by sin and Satan. That rest is assured to every believer through the blood of Christ. Not a single effort on the part of man can ever secure an entrance into that rest. But "there remains even *now* a sabbath keeping for the people of God,"—not one day in the week, but all our days.

In *verse 10* the Apostle makes this clear by his statement, "*For he that is entered into his rest hath himself rested from his works, as God did from His.*" This rest in Christ is thus parallel with the rest into which God entered after His works of creation. Only there is a contrast. The works from which a believer ceases upon believing are the works of the Law. All works of self-effort to attain to righteousness and life are like polluted rags.

With a special appeal to the Hebrews to abstain from Judaism, to cease from their own works, the writer shews what it is to find

rest in Christ and His finished work. He exhorts them to give diligence "to enter into that rest, that no man fall after the same example of disobedience." How terrible for them if, in spite of enjoying the rest that is to be found in Christ, the abiding sabbath keeping, they turn back to Judaism!

Failure through Disobedience

In *verse 11* the argument, which has now been completed concerning God's rest, is applied to the readers in the exhortation, "*Let us therefore give diligence to enter into that rest, that no man fail after the same example of disobedience.*" The rendering "let us labour," as in the A.V., is inappropriate; in addition to its not being an accurate translation, it is inconsistent with the thought of the cessation from works. The whole point of the writer's argument here is abstention from the works of Judaism, and diligence in the enjoyment of God's rest provided in Christ. The disobedience of which the Apostle speaks is determined opposition to the Divine will. This was the spirit that animated the people of Israel in their refusal to enter the land of Canaan according to the command of the Lord. This 11th verse should be compared with 3.12. Unbelief was seen to lead to apostasy from God. Here the effect of unbelief is a veil.

The Word of God

In *verse 12* what has been said about the voice of God through the Psalmist (4:7) leads to a description of the Word of God. What he says is indeed true of the whole of Scripture, but the writer seems to have particularly in mind what he has been speaking of in the Epistle thus far, including the word spoken through angels, which proved steadfast, so that every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward (2:2), and the fact that God has now spoken in His Son. "*The Word of God,*" he says, "*is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart*".

The Word of God is intrinsically possessed of life, power and efficiency, since it is inseparable from His own Person. The Lord said of His own utterances, "The words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life" (John 6:63). The Divine declaration that the unbeliever shall not enter into God's rest is not a dead letter but an unalterable decree. Out of God's Word "are the

issues of life." It is a minister of death to those who reject it, and of life to those who receive it. It judges the unseen motives of the heart, discerning the thoughts and intentions, dividing between those emotions which belong to the realm of the soul, that part of our being which influences or is influenced by our fellow-men, and those of the spirit, that part of our being which, if possessed of life, is able to hold communion with God.

It seems clear that the meaning here is not merely that the Word of God produces conviction and distinguishes between the emotions of the soul and those of the spirit, but rather that, while it is a means of life to him who receives it, it is likewise a means of death to him who refuses it. The preachers of the gospel itself are said to be a savor either of life unto life, or of death unto death (2 Cor. 2:16). The Word of God has power not merely to exclude from Canaan but from Heaven. So let him who is guilty of unbelief take heed. The figure of the "joints, and marrow" suggests the difference between the form, the more extrinsic, and the essence, that which is intrinsic. That which rules within affects the activities.

The Word of God is also "quick to discern (literally, 'critical of') the thoughts and intents of the heart." It takes cognizance not only of actions but of the emotions and purposes which produce them. It is quick to discern, for instance, the unbelief which produces departure from the Living God. Our thoughts and affections are to be subjected to the will of God and to this end we are exhorted to keep our heart with all diligence. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

All Things Manifest

In the 13th verse the writer passes from the living word to the Living One, before whose eyes all things are manifest: "*and there is no creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.*" The word rendered "creature" includes not merely created things but thoughts, emotions and acts. "Sheol and Abaddon are before the Lord: how much more then the hearts of the children of men" (Prov. 15:11). All things are naked in His sight. There is no covering possible, either natural or artificial. They are all "laid open." The word literally denotes "having the throat exposed," that is to say, with head bent back. Whatever the metaphorical reference may be, whether of the sacrifice of a victim

or not, the idea is that there is no means of hiding from the eyes of God. The two expressions then signify the impossibility of covering oneself or of hiding oneself. The phrase "with whom we have to do" is, literally, "to whom the account is to us;" that is, 'to whom we have to give an account.' This is recalled in 12:23, where God is spoken of as the Judge. Should therefore the conscience of a believer be awakened regarding any matter, he brings it into the presence of God in the spirit of self-judgment, that communion may be restored through the efficacy of the blood of Christ.

SECTION III

Chapters 4: 14 to 10: 39

Introduction

This portion presents the main part of the great theme of the book. Here we see Christ not only in the Heavens as our Great High Priest, called, qualified and perfected, possessed of the unique order of Melchisedec, but making open for us thereby the Sanctuary. All this is set in connection with a new, a better Covenant, in contrast with the first, with its ordinances. There are three subdivisions:

- (1) chapters 5, 6 and 7, bringing before us the Priest Himself;
- (2) chapter 8, speaking of His ministry as the Mediator of the better Covenant;
- (3) chapters 9 and 10, showing us the Way unto the Holiest and how it has been opened for us. The first section of the first subdivision consists of chapters 4:14 to 5:10, revealing Christ as the Priest called of God.

"A Great High Priest"

In chapter 4 *verses 14 and 15* the Apostle returns to his chief subject in language resembling that at the close of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. He is still pressing home his exhortation to steadfastness. He is now preparing the way to define the true purpose and holy functions of a High Priest, as fulfilled in the Son of God. While resuming his main subject he sums up the immediately preceding arguments in chapters 3 and 4. That this Great High Priest is here mentioned specifically as "Jesus, the Son of God," purposively recalls what has been said concerning Him in both respects in the preceding part of the Epistle. That He is the Son of God was the special theme of the opening

chapter. The second chapter laid special emphasis upon His human name Jesus; "*we behold Him who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus. . .*" (2:9) and again in 3:1, "*consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession even Jesus*" (R.V.). The fact of His Sonship is renewed in 3:6. Now in 4:14 the two subjects are combined. Our High Priest is "*Jesus the Son of God.*" That He is the Son of God receives mention in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 10. His single name "Jesus" is again brought before us, and from thence onward in 10:19; 12:2; 12:24; 13:12. Any contemplation of the Epistle in general demands the consideration of these two outstanding facts.

Our Confession

Let us hold fast our confession.—This admonition has a twofold basis in what has already been set forth: (a) The fact that we have a great High Priest whom he has exhorted his readers to consider (3:1), and (b) the need of steadfast adherence to the truth involved in the confession, of which Christ is both the Apostle and High Priest, instead of abandoning that confession for Judaism, and so failing to obtain the rest provided by God in Christ and coming under the judgment of His Word through unbelief (3:6 to 4:13).

To give up the acknowledgement of a High Priest who is none other than Jesus, the Son of God, would be to place themselves beyond the possibility of the expiation of their sins. For there would be no other who could act as a High Priest on the basis of a perfectly accomplished expiatory sacrifice. Accordingly the confession must be maintained.

And now (c) there is a third reason for the admonition:

Verse 15. For we have not a High Priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities: but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.—This double negation really expresses a strong affirmation; 'we have a High Priest who can be touched with . . .' "Touched with" translates the verb *sumpatheō*, to suffer with another, to be affected similarly (Eng. sympathy). It is rendered "to have compassion upon," in Heb. 10:34, the only two places where the word is found in the N.T. This suffering which is more than pity, it is pity which a tender hearted person feels towards these who are suffering what he himself has suffered. This is so with our Great High Priest. He experienced every form of trial and affliction.

The statement recalls the introductory passage which says, "For in that He himself hath suffered, being tempted He is able to succour them that are tempted," 2:18. The tender compassion of Christ is exercised, not towards our sins, but towards us in our circumstances of trial and temptation, and is consistent with His own sinlessness and His ministry as our High Priest. That which we suffer is the effect of sin. Not so with Him. He was "holy, harmless, undefiled, and separated from sinners," and this essentially conduces towards the perfection of His compassion for us.

It is on this account that the immediately following exhortation is given.

THY WORD IS A LAMP

The Bible is the light of day and the lamp of night. Its flame lights every hour and circumstance of life. The poet Coleridge said, "memory lights a lamp at the stern of the ship, shedding light upon the past but leaving the future as dark as ever." The sun is the master light of the material universe; the Bible is the master light of literature. It lights *the lamp of memory*, bringing within our ken the names and events of history, constantly charging us to keep in remembrance the many works and words of God in the past. It lights *the lamp for the future*, throwing forward its predictions and promises of what God will perform in the ages to come. Through the darkness of a confused and chaotic world shines the foregleam of the coming glory of Jesus Christ. It lights *the lamp of assurance*, enabling us to share with the apostle the confidence that quietly asserts, "I know Whom I have believed". It lights *the lamp of joy*; the Master's repeated "Be of good cheer" sends us radiantly on our way with a song for the journey. It lights *the lamp of prayer*; it is the first and best textbook of communion with God.—*The Scripture Union Notes on Psalm 119: 97-112.*

STEPS AND STOPS

"The *stops* of a good man, as well as his *steps*, are ordered by the Lord," says George Muller. Naturally an *opened* door seems more like guidance to us than a *closed* one. Yet God may guide by the latter as definitely as by the former. His guidance of the children of Israel by the pillar of cloud and fire is a clear case in point (Numbers 9). When the cloud was lifted the Israelites took up their march. It was the guidance of God to move onward. But when the cloud *tarryed* and abode upon the tabernacle then the people *rested* in their tents. Both the *tarrying* and the *journeying* were guidance from the Lord, the one as much as the other.

—JAMES H. M'CONKEY.