

Hebrews 4

First, a short 'recap' back into **chapter 3**! It finished with a very clear warning for those who 'have become partakers of Christ' (**3:14**), by comparison with the people of Israel who, sure enough, had been rescued out of slavery in Egypt, but did not enter the 'rest' of the Promised Land. Why? Because of their lack of trust, so that the LORD had said of them *"They always go astray in their heart, and they did not know my ways"* (**3:10** quoting **Psalms 95**), unlike Moses, to whom the LORD made known his ways (**Psalms 103:7**).

That word 'partakers' (*metochos*) is used 5 times by the writer to the Hebrews, 4 times meaning someone who has an active share in something that God is doing and once referring to the companions of the Son of God.¹ The only other place it is used in the New Testament is in **Luke 5:7**, when Peter (and probably his brother Andrew) had such an enormous catch of fish that they needed their **partners** in another boat to come and help them. Very definitely **active** participation!

So, the Israelites coming out of Egypt had very definitely been active participants, but still they provoked the LORD by 'hardening their hearts' – no longer being tender and responsive to what he said to them. They had rebelled, especially at Massah and Meribah (**Exodus 17:1-7**), and again when they refused the encouragement of Joshua and Caleb to enter the Promised Land (**Numbers 13 & 14**). The key verses to which David refers in **Psalms 95:11** are in **Numbers 14:22-23**: *"Surely all the men who have seen my glory and my signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not listened to my voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned me see it."* See also **Deuteronomy 1:22-36**. Devastating passages!

The warning to us is clear: We may have been rescued, may have been responsive to what the Lord has done for us, but **we need to go on responding in faith and obedience to him**. In that way, we continue as 'partakers of Christ' (**3:14**). And that word translated 'assurance', 'confidence' or 'conviction' really means 'foundation', 'something placed underneath'. 'Hold on', says the writer, 'to that confidence which you had at the beginning'.

And so into **chapter 4**, with another 'therefore'! Because of all this, and the warning of a whole generation of Israel missing out on the promise that God had made to them, we need to make sure that we don't miss out ourselves! There's a promise there for **us** – entering his rest – and the writer wants to make sure that we might not seem to fall short of it.

Miss out on **what**? Entering his rest! What does that mean for us? We'll see very soon. For the Israelites, it meant occupying the Promised Land, taking God up on his promises of a land of plenty. Not just sitting there but actively taking hold of what the LORD had given them. In practice, that meant many battles – and victories! See also **Deuteronomy 12:9-10**.

So what is the process? **4:2** gives the first step – having the good news announced to us. The Israelites also had good news announced to them, but what good did it do them? None, because it was not 'mixed with faith in them that heard'. They did not actively take hold of God's promises.

But *"we who have believed enter that rest"* (**4:3**). God finished his own work from the foundation of the world, and rested on the seventh day (**4:4**), but still it was possible for his people not to enter that rest! In the case of the Israelites in the wilderness, because of their disobedience, not responding to the good news that was proclaimed to them (**4:5-6**). (The word translated as 'disobedience' here means 'wilful refusal to be convinced', with the same origin as 'disobedient' in **3:18**).

¹ Partakers: a) in a heavenly calling, **Hebrews 3:1**; b) in Christ, **3:14**; c) in the Holy Spirit, **6:4**; d) in discipline, **12:8**. The reference to the companions of Jesus is in **1:9**, where the Son is shown as having been anointed *"with the oil of gladness above your companions"* (quoting **Psalms 45:7**).

The writer of this letter refers back to **Psalm 95** and sees the Lord offering another opportunity for people to enter his rest: “*Today, if you hear his voice . . .*”, and makes it clear that this is not just talking about Joshua **eventually** taking the Israelites into the Promised Land! David wrote this psalm many years after Joshua, and spoke of being able to enter God’s rest ‘today’. ¹

What did he mean? We are getting to it, at last! “*There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered his (i.e. God’s) rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from his*” (**4:9-10**).

4:11 Therefore (again!) we need to be diligent² to make sure that we enter that rest, totally stopping relying on our own efforts to try to please God and relying instead on his grace and mercy. Not doing this would mean that we would fall, and it would count as disobedience (wilful refusal to be convinced) ! (See [The Christ-Life for the Self-Life](#) by F.B.Meyer.)

You may remember that, after the LORD had told them that they would not enter the land because of their disobedience, the Israelites turned round and said ‘Oh yes, we will!’ and tried to enter the land without the LORD being with them. Needless to say, they were hopelessly defeated (**Numbers 14:39-45** and **Deuteronomy 1:41-46**), and then went on to wander in the wilderness for 40 years! ‘Don’t follow their example of disobedience’, the writer says, always ‘going astray in their heart’ and not knowing the LORD’s ways.

4:12-13 We need to realise that we can’t get away with this sort of thing, because when God speaks, what he says is alive, active and really sharp, able to distinguish between God-inspired spiritual things (‘spirit’) and things manufactured by the schemes and ideas of mankind (‘soul’). Nothing is hidden from his sight. The One we are dealing with has everything open and laid bare before him. No room for deception here – don’t even try it! (Compare with those who did **not** listen to his voice in **Numbers 14:22**)

4:14 So – because of all that we have seen in these verses, and because we have a great high priest in Jesus the Son of God – “*let us hold fast the confession.*” (The opposite of falling short of the promise as in **4:1**). ‘Confession’ reminder: ‘saying the same thing’. In this case, agreeing with, personally endorsing and actively participating in what God has done for us in Jesus, as ‘partakers of Christ’ (**3:14** again).

4:15-16 He already wrote about Jesus becoming a ‘merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God’ back in **2:17**, where he says that he needed to be ‘made like his siblings’ to fulfil that role. Here again he emphasises that, because Jesus faced every kind of temptation (but without failure), he can definitely sympathise with our weaknesses, and **therefore** we can come to his throne (and it **is** a throne!) of grace, in order to receive mercy for ourselves and find grace to help at the time of our need. Literally, ‘grace to undergird at the right time’. This word translated ‘help’ is only used one other time in the New Testament, describing the undergirding of the ship in which Paul was travelling to Rome, to stop it falling apart in great storm and stress, **Acts 27:16-17**. Perhaps a useful picture for us!

In the next chapter, we shall discover more about Jesus as our great high priest . . .

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¹ The Authorised (King James) Version says ‘Jesus’ in this verse. ‘Jesus’ is the Greek version of ‘Jehoshua’, which is the full version of ‘Joshua’ and means ‘The LORD is Saviour’. (**Numbers 13:16** – and **Matthew 1:21**).

² Also translated elsewhere as ‘be eager’ and ‘make every effort’.