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## CULTURAL RELIGION VERSUS SAVING FAITH

Hebrews 4:1-11

By

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Hebrews Lesson 12

## Cultural Religion Versus Saving Faith Hebrews 4:1-11

For me, some of the most frightening words in the Bible are Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'"

Clearly, Jesus is warning us that it is possible not only to claim to follow Him, but also to serve Him in some remarkable ways—prophesying, casting out demons, and performing miracles—and yet be excluded from heaven! Jesus was not talking about pagans, who spent their lives partying and disregarding God. These were men that had spent their lives serving Him, or so they thought. Their cry, "Lord, Lord," shows that they professed Jesus as their Lord. Clearly, they were shocked at being shut out of heaven. They expected to get in, but when they got there, the door was barred! If Jesus' words do not strike fear into your heart, they should!

Both Jesus' words and the words of our text warn us against the danger of cultural Christianity. Cultural Christians go to church. They claim to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Many of them serve in the church. But on that great and terrible day, they will hear Jesus utter the chilling words, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." I want to explain how to avoid being a cultural Christian and how to be genuinely saved.

Hebrews 4:1-11 is a difficult text to understand. While I think that I am on the right track here, I confess that for many years I could not understand these verses. Many pastors and Bible scholars apply these verses along the lines of how believers can experience God's peace or rest in the face of trials in our daily walk. I grant that there may be a valid *secondary* application in that sense.

But as I have wrestled with these verses in their context, I think that to apply them primarily as an encouragement to believers to rest in Christ in the midst of trials is to misapply them. Rather, I think that the main message is:

All who are associated with the church must beware  
of the cultural religion that falls short of  
personally experiencing God's salvation.

In other words, I view them as a warning to professing Christians to make sure that their faith is genuine. I am going to follow the old Puritan approach to sermon structure, first explaining the doctrine and then giving "the use" (applying the text).

DOCTRINE: THE TEXT EXPLAINED IN ITS CONTEXT:

Two statements will help us understand the text:

1. The author is not talking about an experience of inner calm that some believers may lack; rather, he is talking about experiencing God's salvation (Context).

"Therefore" (4:1) takes us back to chapter 3, especially to verses 12 & 19. He is warning against having an evil, unbelieving heart. His readers were Jewish believers in Christ who were tempted in the face of persecution to go back to Judaism. Twice he exhorts them to "hold fast" their confession or assurance of faith (3:6, 14). He cited Psalm 95:7-11, which recounts how the Israelites in the wilderness provoked God and were thereby excluded from entering His place of rest, the Promised Land. They all had applied the blood of the Passover lamb to their doorposts. They all had passed through the Red Sea and escaped from Pharaoh's army. But even so, with most of them, God was not well pleased, and He laid them low in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:5).

To understand that story correctly, it is important that we not push the typology too far. We would be mistaken to conclude that all of those who came out of Egypt were true believers who were "living in carnality." I have often heard the story applied in this way. Those in Israel who grumbled in the wilderness are likened to "carnal" Christians. They are saved, but they just haven't yet moved into Canaan's land, which is the experience of victory over sin. Sometimes this is phrased that they are still in Romans 7, but

they haven't yet moved into Romans 8. I contend that that is to misapply this story.

Rather, I think that those who rebelled in the wilderness and incurred God's wrath represent what I am calling "cultural believers." They were a part of the people of God (Israel), but their hearts were far from trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are repeatedly described as hardened (3:8, 13, 15; 4:7). They were under God's wrath (3:10, 11, 17, 18; 4:3). Their basic problem is called unbelief (3:12; 4:2), disobedience, and sin (3:17, 18; 4:6, 11).

The author plainly is talking about a person's response to the gospel, not to an experience of a deeper Christian life. Twice he states that these people, like us, had the good news preached to them (4:2, 6). Even under the Law of Moses, people were not saved by keeping the Law, but by the righteousness of faith (Gen. 15:6; Exod. 34:6-7; Ps. 32:1-2; cf. Rom. 4). But the good news did not profit these people, because it was not united with faith (4:2).

Thus when the author exhorts us to fear, lest we may come short of entering God's rest (4:1), the thing we are to fear is unbelief and its terrible consequences, namely, eternal judgment. We should fear that like these grumbling unbelievers, we may fall through the same example of disobedience (4:11; cf. 3:17). Either we have entered God's rest (His salvation) through faith or we are the objects of His wrath through unbelief and disobedience (3:10-11, 16-18; 4:3, 5). If we do not believe God's promises, those very promises turn into frightening threats of judgment!

So I contend that the context shows us that the author's pastoral concern was not that some "carnal" Christians in the Hebrew church would miss out on the experience of God's peace in the midst of their trials. His main concern was that some of them may be like those in Israel in the wilderness. They may be a part of the religious crowd, but not true believers. His concern was for their salvation from God's wrath through genuine saving faith.

A second statement will help us understand our text:

2. God always has offered His salvation to people, and still offers it, under the imagery of rest (4:3-10).

The train of thought in 4:3-10 is difficult, but I think that the author is explaining from the Old Testament how the imagery of

God's rest has been a picture of salvation in four different time periods.

- A. At creation, God's rest on the seventh day was a picture of the rest that we enjoy in Him (4:3-4).

The author begins by stating, "For we who believe enter that rest." Then he cites again Psalm 95:11, "As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest" (see Heb. 3:11). Then he adds, "although His works were finished from the foundation of the world." He goes on to cite from Genesis 2:2, how "God rested on the seventh day from all His works." F. F. Bruce (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 74) explains the thought connection: "It was not because the 'rest' of God was not yet available that the wilderness generation of Israelites failed to enter into it; it had been available ever since creation's work was ended."

In other words, the Jewish Sabbath, which was rooted in the creation narrative, was a picture of the rest that God's people enjoy through His salvation. It was a day to cease from normal labors and to be refreshed through time with God. It was a weekly opportunity for God's people to stop and reflect on His goodness and care for them. From the beginning, there was a spiritual element to the Sabbath. The soul in harmony with his creator found a sense of satisfaction and rest on that day.

- B. At Canaan, the Promised Land was a picture of the rest that God offers through faith in Him (4:5, 8).

The author repeats (see 4:3) the last phrase of Psalm 95:11, "They shall not enter My rest," to refer to the generation that perished in the wilderness. In 4:8 he shows that even those who entered the Promised Land under Joshua did not experience the fullness of God's rest, in that David, over 300 years after Joshua, spoke of the need to enter God's rest. In the Greek text, Joshua is *Iesous*, "Jesus," which means, "Yahweh saves." So the original readers would have seen the play on the names: the original Jesus (Joshua) was only a type of the Jesus to come. Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, but that was only a picture of the rest of God's salvation that Jesus Christ provides.

- C. Canaan was not God's final rest, since David wrote of a rest available to God's people in his day (4:6-7).

Since those in the wilderness failed to enter God's rest, and since David wrote, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts," there is still a day of opportunity to respond to God's offer of rest. The emphasis here is on the word "today." The gist of the argument here is that God's promises always have a present application to them. Even though Israel in the wilderness failed to appropriate God's rest, God offered it again through David. Every generation has the opportunity to respond in faith to God's promises. This leads to the bottom line:

D. God is still appealing to us to enter His rest through faith (4:9-10).

The author here uses a unique word for rest, translated "Sabbath rest." Some think that he coined the word. It calls attention to the spiritual aspect of God's rest. It goes beyond observing the seventh day as holy. It goes beyond entering the physical Promised Land. This Sabbath rest is a soul-rest. It is what Jesus promised when He said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

The author says that this rest remains for "the people of God" (4:9). Then he explains that "the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (4:10). "The people of God" refers to Israel in the Old Testament, and here to all who are associated with God's church. Bruce (p. 78) thinks that verses 9-10 refer to "an experience which they do not enjoy in their present mortal life, although it belongs to them as a heritage, and by faith they may live in the good of it here and now." He refers to the believers in chapter 11, who did not experience the fullness of the promises in their lifetimes, but who were looking for the heavenly city that God prepared for them (11:16).

Leon Morris (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:43) cites Bruce and then comments,

I should reverse his order and say that they live in it here and now by faith, but what they know here is not the full story. That will be revealed in the hereafter. There is a sense in

which to enter Christian salvation means to cease from one's works and rest securely on what Christ has done.

The author's point here is that from the beginning God has offered His salvation to people, and still offers it, under this imagery of entering His rest. At the heart of it is that we stop trusting in our works to save us and begin trusting instead in the finished work of Christ to save us. As Paul puts it, "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5).

To sum up, when the author talks of entering God's rest, he is not talking about believers learning to trust God in trials so that they experience His inner peace. Rather, he is talking about God's salvation under this imagery of rest, in line with the Old Testament. He is warning his readers about the danger of being associated with God's people but missing His salvation because they do not respond in faith to the message.

USE: THE TEXT APPLIED TO US:

I offer seven applications. Some of them are repeated from earlier messages, but since the writer hammers these things home through repetition, so will I.

1. Cultural religion (general belief) will save no one; to be saved, we must have personal faith in Jesus Christ.

The Jews in the wilderness believed in God in a general sense. They knew and believed in the story of creation and the history recorded in Genesis. They believed that the covenant with Abraham applied to them as his descendants. They even believed God enough to apply the blood to their doorposts and to follow Moses through the Red Sea. They had heard God's good news, but it did not profit them because they did not believe it personally (4:2). When they heard about the giants in the land, they complained that it would have been better to die in Egypt or to die in the wilderness than to be killed by the Canaanites (Num. 14:2-3). So God granted them their wish; they all died in the wilderness!

It is not enough to grow up in the church and have a general belief in God and in Jesus Christ. Perhaps you've heard the gospel all your life, and intellectually, you believe in Jesus and that He died for your sins. But intellectual belief is not enough! Saving faith

trusts personally in the shed blood of Jesus as the only payment for *my* sins. Saving faith believes that God will be gracious *to me* in the judgment because *my* sins are covered by Jesus' blood and that His righteousness has been imputed *to me* according to God's promise. Make sure that your hope of heaven is not based on your parents' faith or on the fact that you hang out with Christians in a church building! You must see your need as a sinner before God and come personally to the cross in faith to receive God's mercy.

2. Beware of the false peace that comes through cultural religion.

I fear that there are many in our churches today, like those Jesus referred to, who will say, "Lord, Lord," but who will be shut out of heaven. Jeremiah 8:11 warned about false prophets, who healed the brokenness of the daughter of God's people superficially, saying, "Peace, peace," but there is no peace. People today are encouraged to "invite Jesus into their hearts" and then are told that they have eternal life and will never lose it. They are not told that they need to repent of their sins. They are not told that God must change their hearts. Polls show that there is virtually no difference today between the way that "evangelicals" think and live and the way the rest of the population thinks and lives!

Just because a person *feels* inner peace does not mean that he is truly saved. I encourage you to read Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise on Religious Affections* (a modern English, condensed version is called, *The Experience that Counts*). He analyzes in great detail, with an abundance of Scriptural support, how a person can know which feelings are valid indicators of genuine conversion.

3. Saving faith is a matter of the heart towards God, not of outward religion.

Verse 7 is the third time the author has repeated the warning about not hardening our hearts (3:8, 15). God looks on the heart, not on the outward performance of religious duties. Salvation is a matter of God doing "heart surgery," replacing our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Ezek. 36:26) that are tender towards Him. If you are truly saved, you know that your heart is different than it was before. It is not that you never sin now, but rather that your attitude towards sin is radically different. Before, you loved it; now,

you hate it. Before, you were apathetic towards the things of God. Now, you love God and His Word. The bent of your life is a desire to know Him and love Him more and more.

4. Saving faith is always obedient faith.

As we saw last week, the author uses faith and obedience (or, unbelief and disobedience) interchangeably (3:18-19; 4:2, 6, 11). It is not that we are saved by works, but rather that true saving faith *always* results in a life of obedience to God. Again, I'm not talking about sinless perfection. No one lives perfectly this side of heaven. But a true believer strives against sin (Heb. 12:4). Instead of being a slave of sin, a believer is a slave of righteousness out of obedience from the heart (Rom. 6:17-18). A person who is not growing in obedience to God's Word should question whether his faith is genuine saving faith, or just cultural religion.

5. Saving faith rests completely on the work of Jesus Christ.

If we are depending on anything in ourselves to get into heaven, we have not entered God's rest (4:10). It is possible even to depend wrongly on your faith, thinking that your faith gets you into heaven. To do this is to turn faith into a work! It becomes the thing you are trusting for eternal life. Don't trust in your faith; trust in Christ. If salvation were based on my faith, then it would be due to something in me, and not according to grace (Rom. 11:6). God saves us by His grace, based on the merit of Jesus Christ. Faith simply looks to Christ and relies on Him alone.

6. Saving faith is effortless in one sense, but requires diligent perseverance in another sense.

There is a sense of irony in the exhortation (4:11), "Let us be diligent to enter that rest." While salvation is a gift that we passively receive, there is also an active responsibility on our part to lay hold of it. We must rest from our works (4:10), but be diligent to enter God's true rest (4:11). As I said last week, you can cruise into hell without any effort. Just go with the flow of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and you'll get there. But getting into heaven requires diligence and watchfulness. Jesus said, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). Be diligent in seeking God's rest through His Word, so that you do not come short of it.

7. Saving faith results in great confidence in God in present trials and great hope in God for future eternal joy.

The rest spoken of here is both a present reality and a future hope. The present reality is, as Paul said, "having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). It also includes, as he goes on to say, that "we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5). The future hope is the promise of being with the Lord forever in glory, when "He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; and there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Rev. 21:4).

### Conclusion

I hope that this message has disturbed the comfortable and comforted the disturbed. If you came in feeling comfortable in your standing before God because you are associated with this church, or because you serve in some way in the church, or because of anything you do, I hope you are now disturbed because you see that your standing with God is on shaky ground. To base your hope for heaven on any outward religion is to have false hope.

On the other hand, if you came in feeling disturbed because you were despairing of your propensity toward sin, and you knew that if salvation depends on your performance, you will never qualify, I hope that you are comforted with the good news that you can enter God's eternal rest through faith in Christ alone. Fear the unbelief of cultural Christianity! Trust in the Savior who gives true rest to His people!

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with the interpretation offered? Why/why not?
2. Do doubts mean that our faith is not genuine? How can we know if our faith is genuine?
3. What are some marks of cultural religion versus true faith?
4. How can fear (4:1) abide with true faith? See Luke 12:5; Rom. 11:20; Phil. 2:13.

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