

Seeing It Through

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[0:00] Before there was Adrian Plass, there was Gordon Bailey. I don't suppose many of you remember Gordon Bailey.!

I've opened it for 20 years or more. I managed to find it. And it's about the rest. Sunday is the Christian's rest day.

That was what the curate said. I thought, if that's really true, mate, why don't Christians stop in bed? Well, a good question, perhaps. What is this rest that we're talking about here?

Yeah. So one thing I think we can say from Hebrews 4 is that the three key ideas that he's talking about are those of rest, those of today, today in the sense of today is when we should not harden our hearts, and various things it says about the Word of God and various words that mean the same thing.

So he talks about hearing his voice and so on. So we'll look at those three and see where we can go with them. So this passage is really part of the second warning that we looked at briefly last week.

[1:39] So the writer is continuing the theme of the human Jesus. And in chapter 2, verse 17, and in chapter 3, verse 1, he mentions the role of Jesus as high priest.

And from 4.14 onwards, he's going to take this up as his main theme. But having introduced the topic of those Jews who failed to enter the promised land at the Exodus, the writer makes this little digression to expand on that thought.

But it is a bit difficult, actually, to see exactly what he's saying. But we will look and see what we can see. Certainly he is continuing his exposition of Psalm 95, as we saw last week.

The quotations there are from Psalm 95. But now he just focuses on two sentences from it. In Hebrews 4, verse 3, he quotes that verse, So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest.

And then the other one, 4, verse 7, where he quotes those two lines. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

[2:58] So, as I say, the three key ideas, I think, are rest today and the word of God. So let's look at those ideas. So the author starts, the writer starts with saying, well, God's work was finished from the foundation of the world.

He says that in chapter 4, verse 3. So perhaps that's the place for us to start as well. 4, verse 4, For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words, and on the seventh day God rested from all his work.

This is, of course, a quotation from Genesis chapter 1. So, what's the point of this? Now, we could, of course, get into a discussion here about whether the creation took a week in some very literal sense, or whether it was five billion years, like the geologists want to tell us.

But let's not go there. Instead, let's remember those words of Peter, who said, Do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

That's 2 Peter 3, verse 8, if you don't know where it comes from. So I could say that five billion years for God is a blink of an eye, but on the other hand, the point I want to make is that a week is a very long time.

[4:30] How long did God take for creation? A whole week? Why? I mean, the hymn says, At his voice creation sprang at once to sight. But this isn't actually how it's described in Genesis, is it?

It took a whole week. And then what happens? Is the meaning here that after all that work, well, what does it say? It says then, On the seventh day God rested from all his work.

Have you ever wondered what that's actually saying? Is it saying that after all that hard work, God was exhausted and needed a holiday? I mean, that might be true of us, but it's difficult to see that that can be what God meant about this.

Surely not. And surely the point is that after all that work, God declared it done and it was good. Job done. Job finished.

It was good. It's time to stop. You remember what the Ten Commandments say, Six days shall you labour and do all you have to do.

[5 : 36] The seventh day is holy to the Lord. Now, some of us have problems with one part of that commandment and some parts have problems with other parts.

Personally, I find the six days shall you labour part, the hard part, but I don't have so much difficulty with the stopping. But other people perhaps do. They find it difficult on the seventh day to put the affairs of the week out of their minds and turn to God.

Really, probably we struggle with both bits of that, to be honest. But that is what's the point, isn't it? A week is enough for a whole week's work, a job done.

And I think that is what we're talking about here. Creation is described in a week because it was an enormous project. Making a whole universe is quite a big job.

But God saw it through to its completion. That's the point, I think. And declared it good. But by contrast, of course, the Jews did not see the job through when they tried to enter God's promised land.

[6 : 52] And the writer describes it, the entering the promised land, as a Sabbath rest. The completion of a good week's work, except they didn't actually do it. In their case, of course, it was more than a week.

But it's the same thing. They crossed the desert, got to the boundaries, but they didn't actually enter the rest. But anyway, how is that relevant to us?

Well, the writer tells us that, well, okay, but in the next generation, they did enter God's rest, didn't they? Joshua, indeed, led the people into the promised land.

Was rest achieved then? Well, in a sense, yes, but of course not exactly, because they were still fighting. And of course, David, writing this psalm, the writer says it's a psalm of David, the heading on the psalm doesn't actually say that, but the writer here suggests that the author is David.

And it says, David said, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, for if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.

[8 : 05] So the promise of rest wasn't finished when Joshua entered the land. But then we come to verse 10, which really I think is the tricky one, so let's think about this for a bit.

Well, verse 10 and 11, For anyone who enters God's rest also rest from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following the example of disobedience.

So we need to think about what this verse actually means. Do we enter that rest now, as perhaps verse 3 and the present tense in verse 10 might be suggesting?

Or is it something to strive for, as we might perhaps conclude from verses 9 and 11? And in fact, I think there are at least three possible explanations of this verse which have been given.

and perhaps we might look at all three of them. And the first one is the one that's sometimes been described as let go and let God, or sometimes been talked about in terms of higher life teaching.

[9 : 26] And the idea of that is that what the writer is saying is that actually we shouldn't be striving for holiness at all. What we should be doing is just laying back on God, as it were, and let him do the fighting for us.

And so that's sometimes been described as let go and let God. Or the second interpretation, which I guess is probably the traditional Reformed one, or certainly one of the traditional Reformed interpretations, is that it means that what we do now is we rest in the work of Christ rather than working, rather than our own works.

And the argument then is that the last part of verse 10, where it says, as God rested from his, is that God's work was completed, he completed the work of creation, and has now completed the work of salvation.

Now that is certainly a possible explanation, I say it's probably the traditional evangelical explanation. I think the difficult, there is a difficulty with it because God's completed his own work, and are we supposed to rest on his work?

Also, the general theme of the book is more about pressing onwards and fighting through. So I have to say I'm not totally convinced myself by this explanation.

[10:58] I did read the, look at what the Jerusalem Bible said, the Jerusalem Bible is the Catholic, Roman Catholic translation into English, and as you might expect, it's a word, is it slightly differently, so which you now really arrive at the third thing I've put on the slide there, that it means you should complete your work now in order to achieve rest when, in order that you achieve rest when your work on earth is completed.

which is correct. Even the context doesn't help us all that much because certainly previously the writer has been reminding us of the need to persevere, but in verse 16 he does tell us to approach the throne of grace now.

So I say that personally I'm inclined to the third version there, but it is very difficult to be very dogmatic about it. I think we can definitely say, however, it doesn't mean let go and let God. Why? Well, because of verse 11. Verse 11 tells us that we should be struggling to, or making every effort to enter. Now, would that make any sense?

Make every effort to avoid effort? I don't think so. So I think we can reject that interpretation, but I think honestly it is quite hard to decide between those other two interpretations.

[12:21] fortunately we could say whichever is actually meant here, then certainly both of those things are true. Both of those things are taught elsewhere in the book.

That's perhaps why it's a bit hard to make the definite decision which he actually meant here. But both those things are true. There is a rest for the people of God to be found now in Christ, and there is a rest still to come in the New Jerusalem.

So I think both those things are true. Just to the end of this chapter which we didn't read, verses 14 to 16, does tell us that we need to trust in the work of Christ to approach God's throne.

But it also is, it says in chapter 3 verses 13 and 14 for instance, to exhort each other to effort today. So I think both of those things are true, and even if we can't be exactly sure which of them he meant here.

The other thing is of course that what we need to do is the same in each case anyway, in one sense, that we need to encourage one another daily, that's just chapter 3, 13 and 14, encourage one another daily as long as it is called today so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

[13:39] We've come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to all the confidence we had at first. And in fact I think both of those ideas are found there aren't they?

Trusting in Christ now but also holding firmly to the confidence in the confidence we had at first, holding on to it to the end. But the important point that the writer is making anyway is that action is needed today.

So let's just look exactly what he means by this idea of today. Excuse me. So first of all when was today for those Jews at the time of the Exodus?

It was when the spies reported back wasn't it? You may or may not be familiar with the story but what happened was Moses had led them right to the border of the promised land they sent in spies to spy it out and the spies came back and said oh there were giants in the land there are powerful nations there's no way we can go in and take over the land at least that's what most of the spies said two of them had a minority report and said the Lord is able to make us do it the Lord can do it but unfortunately the people listened to the the doom sayers and said no we can't do it despite of having been led all the way through the desert by God when the crunch came they chickened out they didn't believe that God was able to do what he said or that God would do what he said and the references to the exodus in Psalm 95 are not just of course for his mere historical interest because David had something for the Jews of his day to learn he says today if you hear his voice and so there was something to be learned at the time of David but in fact the writer to the Hebrews thinks that it's still today when he was writing in fact it's possible that he's actually saying that today is the gospel age when he talks about he says that there is

God set a day and called it today so it is possible again that what he means is that today actually the day that God set is the gospel age when the crunch really comes when it's really time to say will we follow Christ or not but still I don't think this would exclude today in David's time as well because David was clearly reading the warning the readers of the psalm in his day also but today is the time for grace that's the point that David was making that's the point that the writer to the Hebrews making and in fact it's always today in this sense isn't it today if you hear his voice do not harden

your hearts faith can't be retrospective that's the point he's making we can't rely on some past experience as evidence that we're in the faith of course past experience is a good thing to learn from and to remember that up to now the Lord has led us but faith is always has to be exercised today doesn't it we need to question are we in the faith now are we believing now because if we're not when the crunch comes then we may fail as the

[17 : 30] Jews at the time of the exodus did that's exactly that kind of thinking that often in fact often got the Jews into trouble they would look back and say well God's looked after us in the past and he'll look after us now in spite of the fact that they were no longer walking according to God's word and prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other prophets spent a lot of time saying no you can't believe that God will bring you to rest if you're not walking according to his word and believing him and so the writer says today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts I just want to say that's not perhaps saying that we might not have times of doubt doubt I'm sure all of us do from time to time but I'd like to make the point that doubt can lead to unbelief but doubt is not the same thing as unbelief unbelief involves a hardening of the heart and a deliberate rejection of the word of

God in fact what is the remedy for doubt the remedy for doubt is to turn to God's word and to take it seriously to make sure that we're obeying God's word now there's a story told of the American Christian philosopher Cornelius Van Till Dutch American the student came to him and said teacher I think I need more faith and the teacher said no you don't need more faith you need more works by which he meant that you need to be putting God's word into practice now and if you do that then you will be exercising faith so doubt is not the same thing as faith but we have to make sure that doubt is not the same thing as unbelief but we do have to make sure that doubt doesn't lead to unbelief so the crucial issue here is listening to

God's word today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts so let's thirdly look at what the passage has to say about the word of God Hebrews 4 verse 12 of course is a very well known verse very well known evangelical slogan for the word of God is living and active sharper than any double edged sword it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit joints and marrow it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart God the problem is of course that it's such a good verse that we often just quote it on its own without perhaps asking the question why is it here why did the writer put it here at this particular place this particular juncture in his argument as part of this discussion about entering

God's rest what point is it that the writer is making and it seems to me from looking at verse 13 nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account it seems to me that it's the discriminating power of God's word which the writer has in mind particularly here what was it that barred the exodus Jews from the promised land it was disobedience to God's word what was the great spiritual danger that David found in his life and for those of his contemporaries who he was trying to warn it was not listening to God's word wasn't it when he turned aside from God's word he got into trouble David did I mean it's not just that

God sees into the heart though that is true but rather it seems to be saying that God's word exposes the heart it's God's word that divides between the soul and the spirit judges he says the thoughts and attitudes of the heart when we hear God's word that in a sense is when the crunch comes it pushes us one way or the other it pushes us either into obedience or rebellion once we've heard God's word neutrality isn't an option it wasn't just lack of courage that excluded the Jews from the promised land in the exodus they did chicken out but it wasn't just a failure of courage it was much more a failure of obedience to God's word God had told them to go but they preferred their own strategy so how are we to enter

[23 : 05] God's rest well he tells us doesn't he in verse 14 since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens Jesus the son of God let us hold firmly to the faith we profess and indeed when he says the faith we profess here it seems not so much to mean faith our faith in experiential experiential terms but the faith the word that we hold to so that's why here we put such an emphasis in preaching and teaching God's word isn't it it is the most effective weapon we have but so often we lose confidence in it and we think we need to substitute something else we could look in all sorts of directions for something else we could look for miracles or we could look for slick presentation or we could look for fancy technology now any one of those things might be useful at some point but none of them will change people's hearts unless they are used in order to get the word of

God applied to people's hearts it simply won't work remember that Jesus said even if someone were to come back from the dead it wouldn't make any difference he said they've got the words of Moses and Jesus said then Lazarus says not Lazarus the rich man says yes but if somebody came back from the dead then they would take notice but Jesus said no even if someone would come back from the dead it wouldn't make any difference they won't listen to the word of God Moses they're not going to listen if somebody comes back from the dead it is the word of God that divides between the soul and the spirit it is the word of God that lays bare the secrets of men's hearts so let's not lose confidence in preaching God's word I'm not saying it's wrong to find new ways of making God's word available if we can do that through the internet or through something else that's so much the better but let's not lose confidence that it is God's word that changes hearts that it's when God's word is proclaimed that it's in demonstration of the spirit that hearts are changed as I say that's why we put such an emphasis on preaching and teaching God's word it is the most effective weapon that we have so let me just leave you with that reminder then it is the word of God which divides soul and spirit and which judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart