

Draw Near

We sometimes struggle with Hebrews because it is laced with the imagery and events of the Old Testament, foreign to our day. As you study this complex and encouraging book, remember that God is the same in both testaments and his grace is our consistent hope.



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Consider the first verse of our text: "While the promise of entering (God's) rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should have failed to reach it" (v. 1). The recipients of this letter were exhausted by the obstacles of life, the rejection of their world and uncertainty that their witness was making any difference. Listening to our current newscasts may stir similar feelings in us.

Hebrews is a word of encouragement for anyone who seeks to share God with our world. The writer uses the image of "God's rest" from the Old Testament, but this image is not one of taking a nap because you are exhausted. Psalm 95:11 explains that the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness 40 years because they disobeyed God, so God declared "they shall not enter my rest." To rest in God does not mean to relax in your satisfaction but to live decisively in the center of God's grace and purpose. When the writer says, "So, then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God" (v. 9), he is reiterating God's unchanging promise of meaningful life when we live for God. God rested on the seventh day of creation, but he knew that more work would be necessary as humanity grew, rebelled, struggled, failed, lost its way and experienced restoration in God's grace. As it was for Israel, so there is hope for us, in spite of the voices of politicians and news commentators!

Jesus said: "Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Jesus carried the sins of the world all the way to the cross. He understands every challenge of life, including our weaknesses and vacillating spiritual understanding. The Christian life begins when you make the choice to accept God's love and invite God into every moment of your life. You will not be perfect in your thinking or actions, but your faith will point you back to God again and again as you grow in

"God's rest."

The Christian life is a maturing experience not unlike our emotional or physical life. The writer warns us not to make the mistake of those freed exiles from Egypt who disobeyed God and perished during their wilderness wanderings while a new generation grew up to claim "God's rest" in the Promised Land. The writer presents a wonderful promise from God that is key to our living as God's people: "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow, it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one whom we must render an account" (vv. 12-13). When we refer to "the word of God" we usually mean the Bible of today, but for those original readers the only "Bible" was Hebrew scriptures. The New Testament writings are interpretations and guidelines for living as followers of Jesus. John 1:1 offers a more complete meaning of "the word of God": "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." A printed page is not the WORD of God, Jesus is! So we interpret the written word of God based on Jesus who is the WORD. We are not saved by a book, kept safe by a book or changed by a book. Constructed by the inspiration of God's Spirit, given shape and meaning by the incarnate Christ, a writing like "Hebrews" becomes our guide for living as God's people. This is why the written word is so important. We are lost without some kind of operations manual for Christian living.

The only way you can truly become a child of God is through personal faith in Jesus Christ, described as the "great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God ... (who can) sympathize with our weaknesses ... one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (v. 15). The perfect Son of God, who is one with God, chose to become one with us in this real world. Salvation is not just a mystical theological concept, or a magical equation, it is the tangible gift of God's love. Just as wondrous is the idea that God created us with the capacity to make our own decisions, as he grants us free will.

Formations

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Scripture: Hebrews 4:1-3, 11-16

Christian faith must not be reduced to a system of fear and guilt, replaced by a form of forgiveness that continues to remind us that we must tremble before a "god" who watches for our mistakes. Certainly God is clearly aware we are not perfect, but his love offers us the opportunity to grow spiritually, to learn by experience, and to love as he loves. Hebrews offers this powerful positive encouragement: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (v. 16). A rereading of the Old Testament reveals a chosen people who made the same mistakes over and over, seemingly unable to remember any of God's blessings or warnings. Even in the most tragic circumstances of Israel's own choosing, God always offered them a way back. God's grace provides room and opportunity for us to return to his open arms. We may bear scars and carry the burden of regret, but God's grace can even heal those painful reminders.

This morning, the television reminded me how broken our world continues to be, with racism, violence, political corruption, drug problems and politicians working for their own goals. The original readers of Hebrews lived in the same kind of world, and like them, we are tempted to give up. Unlike those early Christians, we are free to worship God, free to express opinions, free to vote and free to live as we choose within reasonable limits. We are free to "draw near to God."

We are free to share God's love without fearing violence or prison. The requirement for being heard as a witness for Christ is to live what you preach. Recently we have heard influential people claim to be Christians, while their values, actions and words prove their faith is false. I have had visitors from other nations ask, "Are Americans really Christian?" based on what they are witnessing. We must draw near to God, for that is where we find the strength and direction to be God's people.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.