

Fear, Failure and Rest
Hebrews 4:1-2

The point of Hebrews is the superiority of Jesus over anything in the Old Testament –

1. He is the superior revelation (the prophets, Heb. 1:1-3)
2. He is the superior mediator (angels, Heb. 1:4-2:18)
3. He is the superior servant (Moses, Heb. 3:1-6)
4. He is the superior priest (Aaron, Heb. 4:14-5:10; 6:13-7:28)
5. He is the superior covenant (OT, Heb. 8:1-13; 9:15-22)
6. He is the superior sanctuary (temple, Heb. 9:1-11, 23-28)
7. He is the superior sacrifice (animals, Heb. 9:12-14; 10:1-18)
8. He is the superior mountain (old covenant as Mt. Sinai and new covenant as Mt. Zion, Heb. 12:18-29)

In light of Jesus' superiority there is a series of warnings against rejecting His gospel (i.e., the New Covenant, cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-38) or reverting to Judaism (i.e., Old Covenant).

1. Heb. 2:1-4
2. Heb. 3:7-4:13
3. Heb. 5:11-6:12
4. Heb. 10:19-39
5. Heb. 12:14-29

Our text is part of the 2nd warning and actually begins in 3:7-19 and the effects of unbelief – God's wrath on Israel in the wilderness

This is an important warning because every Jew in the wilderness saw God's power in the Passover, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness, yet they still doubted God and failed to trust him at Kadesh-Barnea and other times.

But it was at Kadesh-Barnea that fear caused Israel to fail to reach God's rest.

Numbers 14:22-23 & 34-38...none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³ shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it.... 34 - According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure. ' ...35 - Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.... 36-38 - And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing up a bad report about the land—³⁷ the men who brought up a bad report of the land—died by plague before the LORD. Of those men who went to spy out the land, only Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive.

Hebrews 4:1-2 - *Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.*

First: Verse One

1 - Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

a) Fear

“fear” = “phobeo” = to put to flight, to flee

Fear is also translated ‘take care’ or ‘beware.’ The verb is in the passive indicating that fear should overtake or overwhelm us. It is not something we cause but something that happens to us when we contemplate missing out on salvation in light of what happened to Israel in the wilderness

Other versions (I’m using the ESV) begin with *“Let us fear...”* because the emphasis is on the warning.

The Bible mentions two specific types of fear. The first type is beneficial and is to be encouraged. The second type is a detriment and is to be overcome. The first type of fear is fear of the Lord. This type of fear does not necessarily mean to be afraid of something. Rather, it is a reverential awe of God, a reverence for His power and glory. However, it is also a proper respect for His wrath and anger. In other words, the fear of the Lord is a total acknowledgement of all that God is, which comes through knowing Him and His attributes.

The fear of the Lord brings many blessings and benefits.

Proverbs 28:14 - *“Blessed is the one who fears the Lord always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.”*

Philippians 2:12-13 - *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you.”*

Hebrews 10:31 - *“It is a frightening thing to fall into the hands of the living God”*

Hebrews 12:29 - *“And thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire”*

- It is the beginning of wisdom and leads to good understanding (Psalm 111:10).
- Only fools despise wisdom and discipline (Proverbs 1:7).
- The fear of the Lord leads to life, rest, peace, and contentment (Proverbs 19:23).
- Fear is the fountain and life (Proverbs 14:27)
- Fear provides a security and a place of safety for us (Proverbs 14:26).

1 - Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. – Where are you failing to fear God first and most?

b) Rest = *katapausis* = ceasing from work or action.

When we fear the Lord, we can rest.

Matthew 10:28-33 - *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.*

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good*

ROMANS 8.28-33 - *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* ³⁰ *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.* ³¹ *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*

Rest in the Bible:

1. Gen. 2:2, God's rest on the seventh day of creation
 2. Num. 13-14, Joshua's rest which was the Promised Land
 3. Ps. 95:7-11, David's rest which was peace from enemies and war
 4. Heb. 4:1, 10-11, the day of rest as a reference to peace with God and life with God (heaven)
- Applied to God's rest it means to stop trying to save yourself.

ILL - Israel's major blunder was Kadesh-Barnea but how many times in the OT when Israel was at war with a foreign power did, they make treaties with other nations in an effort to save themselves and failed to rest in God?

1 - Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. – Where are you failing to rest?

c) "Fail to reach" = to come short

Romans 3:23 – *“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”*

“and fall short” = “καὶ ὑστεροῦνται” = *husterountai* = deprived, lacking, bereaved,

Matthew Henry - “as the archer comes short of the mark, as the runner comes short of the prize”

This verb ὑστερέω (*hustereo*) occurs sixteen times in the NT and consistently denotes the lacking of something, in the case of Israel in the wilderness, lacking obedience.

- the rich young man lacks just one thing (Mark 10:21),
- the younger son lacked what he needed in the far country (Luke 15:14),
- the disciples are sent out without travel equipment and yet lacked nothing (Luke 22:35),
- the Corinthians are not lacking in any gift (1 Cor 1:7),
- God honors the body part that appears to be lacking (1 Cor 12:24),
- God's faithful are lacking in the sense of being destitute (Heb 11:37).
- In Phil 4:12, Paul speaks of being in lack as opposed to abounding (περισσεύω).
- Two instances in Numbers denote “refrain from” (Num 9:7) or “fail to keep” (Num 9:13)

When we lack the fear of God, we have too much fear for other things.

When we have too much fear of other things, we have too little fear of God.

Acts 5:29-31 - *“We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”*

2 Timothy 1:3-12 - *I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴ As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷ for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. ⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹² which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.*

Fearing God will inhibit Timothy's fear of suffering and shame when he remembers, among other things, that Jesus has 'abolished' death.

By failing to obey God, they failed "God's glory." Just as God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden and they failed "God's glory" by their disobedience, so Israel fails his intended end for the nation to enter the Promised Land.

1 - Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. – What are you failing to reach as a result of failing to fear God first and most?

Second: Verse Two

2 - For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened

The Israelites heard and then saw what God could do –

Exodus 14:10-14 & 28 - *When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. ¹¹ They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." ¹³ And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.....28 - all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.*

And yet, Israel failed to enter into God's Promised Land rest for fear of other enemies far less formidable than Egypt

ASIDE: (We all know that faith is a gift of God (Ro 2:8) but this text is not about the sovereignty of God, i.e., "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (Ro 8:14) but on the responsibility of humans to believe the gospel when it is heard.

From R.C. Sproul - "Romans 8:7-8 explains that it is impossible for minds set on the flesh to please God and obey Him. People who are not in Christ are in the flesh, so they lack the ability to do the Lord's will. Since His will for us is that we trust in His promises, unbelievers are incapable in themselves of believing in Christ Jesus for salvation. Furthermore, John 3:3 says that we cannot even see the kingdom of God unless we are first born again by the Spirit. If we

that we cannot even see the kingdom of God unless we are first born again by the Spirit. If we cannot see God's kingdom, we can by no means enter it. In sum, faith can arise only from a new heart. To put it in theological categories: regeneration precedes faith.

Faith is a gift of the Lord to undeserving people, the outworking of God's electing grace and the atonement of Jesus for His own. Ephesians 2:8 confirms the truth that faith is ultimately a gift of God. "The gift of God" in the original Greek appears in the neuter grammatical form, which means that it refers back to both grace and faith earlier in the verse. Grace *and* faith are divine gifts, and our Father does not give them to all people. Only this view of faith is consistent with the biblical teaching on the pervasiveness of our depravity and our desperate state apart from Christ.

Sinners are intellectually able to understand the basic content of the gospel, but they lack the moral ability to believe the gospel. That is, they are wholly unwilling to turn from their sin and rest in Christ alone until the Spirit changes their hearts and enables them to heed the preaching of the gospel of God (Acts 13:13–52)."

Those Hebrews who fell in the wilderness saw and heard God's word but hearing the gospel only, doesn't save us. It has to be combined with faith.

The Bible says clearly that human beings are genuinely responsible. Romans 14:12, for instance, tells us plainly that every person "will give an account of himself to God." And Scripture consistently commands us to repent (Acts 17:30), to believe (16:31), to obey (Matt. 28:20), to work out our salvation (Phil. 2:12), to do good (Gal. 6:9), to set our minds on things above ([Col. 3:2](#)), to pray at all times (1 Thess. 5:17), and to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18).

III - Isaiah 10 - "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger." At first glance, this makes no sense. If Assyria is functioning as an instrument of God's judgment, why is He pronouncing condemnation on the Assyrians?

V 6 - "I send it against a godless nation [Judah, the southern part of the kingdom] and commission it against the people of My fury" (v. 6). The Jews are thus designated as the people of God's fury. God holds Israel fully responsible for their disbelief; fully responsible for their idolatry; fully responsible for their rebellion and their rejection of Him, His Word, and His worship. So He commissions the Assyrians to come against them.

God grabs Assyria by the nape of its national neck and assigns it to be the instrument of His fury against the godless people of Judah who have rejected and rebelled against Him.

Verse 7, "Yet it [Assyria] does not so intend, nor does it plan so in its heart." Assyria is the instrument of God's judgment—and the Assyrians themselves are clueless about it. It was never Assyria's purpose, motive, or intention to serve God. They had no interest in the God of Scripture—they didn't even believe in Him. Rather, Assyria planned in its own heart to cut off many nations.

But does being instruments of divine wrath somehow exonerate them from responsibility for the evil inherent in their military policies? If this irresistible divine decree brings them to Israel, what culpability do they have for their actions? And yet Scripture is clear that they will be held accountable.

Verse 12 says that when God has finished using Assyria as an instrument of His fury, "So it will be that when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will say, 'I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness.'"

Vs 12-13 - "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness. For he has said, 'By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this'"

ILL - Acts 27:13–44 also demonstrates how divine sovereignty works together with human responsibility.

In the midst of a fierce storm on the sea in which “all hope of . . . being saved was . . . abandoned” (v. 20), God tells Paul that he will not perish in the storm and that both he and everyone else on board the ship will be saved alive.

But, even with this knowledge of God’s sovereignty over the storm and the lives of the seamen, Paul still commands the soldiers on board to prevent the sailors from leaving the ship when they try to escape in the lifeboat (vv. 30–31), he still urges “them all” to eat some food to preserve their lives (vv. 33–34), to lighten the ship for the storm (v 38) and to “cast off the anchors . . . loosening the ropes . . . hoisting the foresail . . . ran the vessel aground . . .” and the centurion ordered those who could to swim . . . and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship” (vs 40-43)

“And so it was that all were brought safely to land” (44).

John 5:37-40 - *And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. ³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*

Knowing the law is only an advantage if we obey it. The Jews knew – they saw – God in all his power and still did not believe

The Jews in the wilderness saw Sinai smoke and tremble. They heard the voice of God. And they still did not believe and for that reason, the 10 spies died under a plague and the rest of Israel who sinned against the Lord at Kadesh-Barnea, perished in the wilderness, except for Moses, never seeing the Promised Land.

2 - For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened

Conclusion: 3:12-4:2