

HEBREWS 16
(Hebrews 4:12-13)

THE WORD OF GOD
By Ron Harvey

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday we finished up with Hebrews 4:11 where it says, *“Let us labour therefore to enter into his rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.”*

The most urgent plea is that we would be diligent to make sure that we enter into God’s rest. We must be very careful that we don’t throw away the offer of God’s rest.

Now the way to miss out on God’s rest is carefully laid out in that verse. It is by unbelief. And we have a most terrifying example that was left for us – and it is the example of Israel.

Lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. (v.11)

Can I state that as simply as I know how? The people in the wilderness did not enter the land of Canaan because they did not trust God. Instead, their carcasses were found scattered in the wilderness. Whatever you do, don’t be like them. If you don’t believe God, it will keep you out of God’s rest.

You see, they didn’t believe. And the question would be, what is it that they did not believe? Did they not believe that God exists? No, they were well trained with first-hand experience in the existence of God. They

had seen his miracles. They marched through the Red Sea on dry ground by a most audacious miracle. They knew and believed that God exists.

Did they not believe in the omnipotence of God? I find it hard to believe that they were not completely aware of God's awesome power.

So what is it that did not believe? The answer to that question is found in Hebrews 4:2.

For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

They did not believe the gospel. It is as simple as that. The good news of deliverance was preached to them and they did not believe it. Moses said, "Be still and see the salvation of the Lord."

And the people murmured and grumbled with every test. And they said, "Please Moses, let us go back to Egypt because we don't believe that God will save us from our troubles."

This was the gospel that was preached to them in the wilderness. God said, "I will deliver you." And the people said, "God, we don't believe you."

The Israelites failed to enter into rest. Why? Let's evaluate verse two.

There was preaching. Moses and perhaps others were ordained by God to preach to the Israelites. And they preached to them on a daily basis. Now preaching is described by Paul as "foolishness." And humanly speaking, it is a rather odd ritual that we go through. We meet regularly and someone preaches to us. Nevertheless, this has always been God's way and it says in verse two that Israel had preaching in the wilderness.

But, notice the subject of the preaching. They did not have preaching of Psychology or Self-Improvement or Science or Mathematics, but they had preaching of the gospel. The gospel is the good news of deliverance and Israel had this gospel preached to them daily in the wilderness. I am sure that Moses and others preached their hearts out. And this gospel is also called the word in verse two.

But the word preached to them did not profit them.

Now I want you to notice next that they heard it preached.

Not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

They could not say that they never heard the gospel. It was preached to them over and over. The very word of God was preached. Moses was faithful over his house and part of that faithfulness was in his preaching to the people. God told Moses what to say and the people heard the very word of God.

But lastly in verse 2 you will notice that they heard the very word of God and they did not believe it. (v.2)

Not being mixed with faith.

Now we pick up in verse 12 and the writer of Hebrews will tell us about this Word of God which they despised in unbelief.

The Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Why should we make haste and be diligent to enter into God's rest? It is because the Word of God is a very terrifying tool of destruction to those who do not believe.

The word of God is an instrument of judgment. This is the meaning of verse 12.

Now we are going to take a few minutes to evaluate verse 12 in a theological sense. And we are going to do this word by word so that we get a sense of the nature of God's Word.

The Word of God is quick

Now this word quick has nothing to do with speed, although I suspect God's Word travels the universe with lightning speed. God spoke and the world immediately appeared. God said, "Let there be light and immediately there was light."

But this word "quick" here means something else. It means alive. God's word is alive. God's word is so closely linked to God himself that it is spoken of as a living entity all its own. The Word of God is the very mind and will of God. And it carries with it the very power and authority of God.

Example: When Jesus spoke to the fig tree, it immediately withered. Jesus never touched it. He didn't take a heater and dry it out. He simply spoke to it and his word withered the tree.

The Word of God is quick (alive).

Example: The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life. (John 6:63)

There is something about the word of God and that something is that it is alive. The Word of God is not simply intellectual dogma, mere words spread across a page, but it is alive with activity and it does the works of God. You see, God sends words into the air and those words run about doing the will of God.

My goodness, how we should tremble at the Word of God! It is a living force. The word of God is capable of creating worlds. It is capable of destroying worlds. It is capable of causing the sun to stand still. It is capable of causing a heart to stand still. God's Word does whatever God wants it to do.

Does God want the lightning to strike a target? Then his word carries out his will. Does God desire to harden Pharaoh's heart? Then it is hardened by the word of God.

The word of God is quick.

Now the word of God is not merely that word that is spoken directly into the nothingness like he did in creation. But it is also that word which was spoken to the prophets and to the apostles. It is that word which they wrote down through inspiration and which is miraculously preserved for us in the Scriptures. This is the very word of God.

And this word of God is quick. By quick we mean that it is alive. It does something.

Listen to what Paul says about the Word of God.

*For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel;
Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit . . .*

Col.1:5,6

You see, Paul and other preachers spoke the word of God and the word of God brought forth fruit. And it is able to bring forth fruit because it is alive.

Now sometimes the word of God appears to be lifeless. The word of God is spoken and nothing happens. But then, in due season, it comes alive and it works its work. This is the way it was with words of prophecy in the Old Testament. The prophet spoke God's word and then a thousand years later that word brought events to pass.

Never doubt the living word of God.

The word of God is powerful

The word that is translated powerful in verse 12 is the greek word meaning energy.

Example: If I lay a ball on this pulpit, my physics teacher taught us that it has potential energy. Right now it is doing nothing, but if it rolls off the side, then it has a certain amount of energy depending on its size and weight and the force of gravity pulling it down to the floor.

Energy is the capacity to do work.

And the word of God is a living force that has infinite capacity to do God's work.

Is not my word like as a fire? Saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?

Jeremiah 23:29

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Isaiah 55:10,11

Here is the true principle: God's Word accomplishes something. And it accomplishes something because it is alive and it is powerful. Let me just give you a couple of examples:

Example: The word of God was the cause of creation. God opened his mouth, words came out, and the worlds came into existence. And this shows the great power of his word.

Example: The word of God is the cause of regeneration.

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.

I Peter 1:23

There has long been a debate between the Arminians and the Calvinists as to which comes first faith or regeneration. The Arminian says, first you believe and then God makes you alive. The Calvinist says, No, no. First God makes you alive and then you believe.

And we believe here that the word of God operates on a dead soul – a soul that is without hope in the world. It is a soul incapable of faith or obedience. And it is the word of God that graciously makes a soul alive. It is not faith that makes the soul alive it is the power of the word of God that makes a soul alive.

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth . . .

The word of God is that living thing that imparts life with a powerful influence and when it has done its work of regeneration, then faith appears.

The Word of God is piercing

Now the writer of Hebrews here uses an analogy to illustrate the idea that the Word of God lays bare the thoughts and intents of the human heart. Don't think that you can deceive God. Don't think that you can go on in your unbelief like the Israelites in the wilderness. You can fool your friends, you can fool your family, you can fool the preacher, but the Word of God will cut you open and lay your inward parts open for inspection. And it will expose your disobedience and your unbelief.

Now take a look at the analogy. The Word of God is here compared to a two-edged sword. This was a common weapon in those days. The sword was sharp on both edges. This made it a very fierce weapon that would cut easily and cut deep. And it would cut with a forehand stroke or a backhand stroke.

Now what I have discovered about analogies is that they are often designed to teach a central idea. Every part of the analogy does not have to have some corresponding meaning. In fact, unless the various parts of the analogy are interpreted by Scripture, it is often best to search for the central meaning and not press the other parts too far.

And that's what I have tried to do with this verse.

It seems to me that the core meaning here is that the Word of God, being alive and powerful, pierces into the very heart of man. The Word of God is not an idle spectator but it is a sharp sword that cuts deep into the inner man. This is what it means when it says it pierces even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit.

Commentators have had a field day here trying to prove all kinds of things concerning the soul and the spirit and the two-fold or three-fold nature of man. But, the key idea here is that the Word of God is penetrating and it pierces deep into the heart of man.

In terms of penetrating to the inner being, the word of God is like a sword. It is like a sword that is razor sharp on both edges. And here is what such a sword can do physically. It can cut you apart at the joints. So everywhere that you have a joint, a place where your bones connect, this sword can sever those joints.

But this razor sharp sword can do even more than that. It can penetrate those bones and lay open the bone marrow – that soft tissue that makes up the core of the bone.

Now it is true that the word of God can cut you apart at the joints and it can cut your bones open and pierce even to the marrow. If the word of God can bring a universe into existence, it can also open up your bones.

But, this is an analogy here. Paul is using the physical realm to illustrate a spiritual truth. Whereas a two-edged sword can pierce the physical parts of man's body so as to have a very real effect on them piece by piece, the word of God can pierce the immaterial parts of man so as to have a very real effect on them piece by piece.

Now the word of God will have one of two effects on the soul and spirit of man. It will either be effective to save him or it will be effective to lay him open to judgment. Let me illustrate these two effects of the Word of God from the Scriptures.

Now remember that the point of our text is that the Word of God is alive and powerful and piercing. It is a living entity that has energy and it will do work.

Example 1: In Acts 2 Peter preached that well known sermon at Pentecost. And his sermon was attended by the sign of tongues. Everyone heard in his or her own language. And at the end of the sermon, Peter said something like this: You killed this man Jesus, but God has raised him up and he is now seated at the right hand of God. And he is Lord and Christ.

Now I want you to notice what effect the word of God had on these listeners in Acts 2:37.

Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

Acts 2:37

The Word of God penetrated into their hearts and it says it pricked them in their heart. And apparently this was a pricking that had a very positive effect. And they gladly received the Word and they were baptized.

So, the Word of God, being alive and powerful and piercing into the heart of man, is capable of making a heart alive unto God and bringing about faith and repentance.

Of course, we call this work regeneration. It is actually the very Word of God, accompanied by the Spirit of God that brings life into a dead soul. In talking to Nicodemus, Jesus called it being born again. Paul called it a quickening in Ephesians 2.

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.
Eph.2:1

Now it is the Word of God that is the vibrant instrument of regeneration. No one will ever be saved by the preaching of human psychology or by instruction in mathematics or science. But the Word of God is alive and the Word of God will enter into the hearts of men and will regenerate them.

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.

I Peter 1:23

And so the Word of God is that living instrument that works salvation in the hearts of men.

But it is also that living instrument that can harden a heart and then can expose it in its naked reality and can judge it in truth.

Example 2: In Acts 7 Stephen preached the Word of God to another group of people.

When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

Acts 7:54

You see how the Word of God had a very different effect on those who heard Stephen. They also were “cut to the heart.” But this was a different cutting. Those that heard Peter were pricked in their heart unto salvation. But those who heard Stephen were cut to the heart in a much different way. Their hearts were stirred up unto wickedness.

Nevertheless, you see the point. The Word of God is alive and powerful and it pierces into the heart of man. If Stephen had simply preached those old dead Jewish traditions, there would have been no effect on the people whatsoever. But he preached the living, powerful Word of God and it cut them to the heart and they stoned him.

Now we must hurry on. We have seen that the Word of God is quick (alive) and powerful and piercing. And now we see next that,

The Word of God is discerning

Now we won't spend much time here, but let it be known that the Word of God discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. The Word of God is never deceived. It is never deceived by outward appearances. It is never deceived by false professions. It is never deceived by the performance of rituals. Look at the end of verse 12. It is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Now that is a scary thing isn't it? God's Word discerns your thoughts. And not only does God's Word discern your thoughts, his understanding extends even to the motives behind those thoughts.

He is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

In that Judgment Day, many will think themselves to be worthy to enter into God's rest, but the Word of God will be the Judge of that. And the Word of God is oh, so capable in that role because,

It is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

And based on the testimony of the living, powerful, piercing and discerning Word of God, Jesus will say to them in that day,

Depart from me I never knew you.

Now before I make application of our message, I would like to comment on verse 13.

Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

1. All things are naked before God. Now when it says all things, notice that the word “things” is italicized. That means that the translators simply supplied the word “things” to make it more understandable. In this context, those who are naked before God are his creatures - and most specifically, human beings.

Now I see that most of you have clothes on. And that’s because you don’t want to be exposed physically. But, all of us are naked before God in our inward parts.

2. The reason why all things are naked before God is that the Word of God pierces to the innermost recesses of every creature and lays them open for inspection. Like a two-edged sword, His Word cuts to the inmost part. And it will all be filleted and exposed to the light because the Word of God is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

3. God sees. When the Word of God lays us open, there is a God who then looks and sees. He takes notice. He inspects the bone and he inspects the marrow inside the bone. He inspects the soul and the spirit. He inspects the thoughts and the intents of the heart.

4. We are responsible to God.

All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

Now in our daily lives, all of us have to deal with others. We have to deal with our employers. We have to deal with our creditors. We have to deal with our spouses. And we are all accountable in various ways to others.

But the One with whom we have to do is God. There is no way around it, there is no way of avoiding it and there is no way of ignoring it. It is Him with whom we have to do. We have to face Him. And we have to account to Him.

And all of us are naked and opened unto His eyes.

Now I want to be careful to interpret our text in light of the immediate context of Hebrews 4. Paul wasn't primarily writing a theological statement here, but he was warning his readers.

What is the first word of verse 12? It is "For."

That word "For" attaches the verse to what was said before.

Now Paul could have said, "Now, let me go on to something different and unrelated." But instead, he said, "For."

Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. "For . . ."

Why labor to enter in? Why be concerned about it? It is because the Word of God is quick and powerful and piercing and discerning.

In this context, Paul is not referring so much to the saving power of the Word of God as to the judging power of the Word.

You know, the same is true of Jesus Christ. He is a most loving and gracious Redeemer to his people, but he is also a most savage warrior to his enemies.

Look at Revelation 1:16 where John is describing his vision of Christ.

And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword:

Rev.1:16

And then in Revelation 2:12.

*And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write: These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges.
I know thy works . . .*

And in Revelation 19:15

And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

So you see that the sword speaks of the work of God in judgment. God is able to discern if you do not believe and the sword with two edges will lay you open to God's fierce judgment.

It is your gravest and most pressing duty to believe God because that is the only way to be saved from his wrath.

Jesus has made a way for sinners to come out of condemnation. And it is a simple way. It is called faith.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.
Acts 16:31

But we should all know that faith is not merely an offer it is a command. It is our chief duty unto God – to believe Him. And if we don't believe Him, then the Word of God will cut us to shreds.

There is an interesting passage in John.

And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.

Application of our text to the Church

1. We need to preach the Word of God.

The gravest error of churches today is that by and large they have abandoned the Word of God as being the power behind salvation. For whatever reason, churches no longer believe that the preaching of the Word of God will bear fruit.

And churches have abandoned the preaching of the Word of God in favor of gimmicks and programs and entertainment and things that “work.” They have adopted methods that produce large numbers.

No longer do we see that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, but marketing strategies and things that appeal to the unregenerate heart are the power unto bigger churches.

But our text says that,

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

What we need is a return to preachers who preach the bare, naked Word of God – word by word and line by line. The power is not in the preacher and it is not in the delivery but it is in the message itself. The preacher is not quick and powerful and piercing and discerning, but the Word of God is.

2. The Word of God will judge the church.

Never think that because we have united in a church membership, that we escape the eyes of Him that searches all things. Revelation 2 and 3 make it clear that God judges and disciplines His church.

I saw somewhere that fifty percent of all Americans claim to be born again. And if that were true, you could be sure that we would see a massive effect on our culture.

But I would suggest that the percentage of true believers is a mere fraction of those who actually profess Jesus Christ. And this book of Hebrews is a stern warning to people just like that. Putting on a charade on Sunday morning does not confuse the Word of God.

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

My goal for every one of us in this church is that we would be true believers. My hope is that when the Word of God opens us up and lays us bare, that it will find among the bone and marrow and among the ligaments and sinew and in our soul and spirit a healthy dose of saving faith.