

Let's do a thought experiment. Answer to yourself the following questions: What is the word of God? How would you briefly describe the bible? Hebrews 4:12-13 is a classic text on the power of the word of God. But it might seem like these verses are out of place. Why shift from talking about striving to enter rest and the caution of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. The key is for us to understand the connection between verses 11 and 12. The word "for" at the beginning of verse 12, indicates that what comes after is a reason for what came before. Verse 11 tells us to strive to enter God's rest so that we don't fall into the same sort of disobedience as the Israelites in the wilderness which resulted in their death.

Their disobedience is described in verse 2 as unbelief. And specifically, we are told that they didn't believe the "good news that was preached to them". Later in verse 2 it says, "the message [word] they heard did not benefit them because it was not united by faith with those who listened."

It's important to see the focus on the word, the message, the good news - God's word. The word did not benefit them because they did not believe it. It is not unbelief in good feelings or unbelief in vague spiritual ideas. It is unbelief in God's word. Our great danger is unbelief. The deceitfulness of sin comes from unbelief and leads to more unbelief. An unbelieving people - through outright rejection, ignorance, neglect, or lukewarmness will perish. They will go the way of those who came out of Egypt, wandered for forty years, and died in the wilderness.

So when verse 11 says "strive to enter that rest," it means "be diligent to hear the word, the good news, and believe in it, trust it, hold on to it tightly it, so that you don't fall away like those who died in the wilderness." So now we can see the connection. Be diligent to hear and respond in faith to the word of God - the good news - "for the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two edged sword..." So having made that connection, let's look at how the word of God is described. The powerful word of God is described in four ways:

### **The Word of God is Life-giving (verse 12a)**

#### *The word of God is living and active*

It is living and active. The word living is "zao" meaning the vitality of eternal life. The word active "energes" from which we get the word energetic. The word of God is lively in an eternal sense and energetic. In other words, it is effective to produce eternal changes in your life. It is a shame that so many Christians treat the word of God as though it was weak and powerless. As though there is some other word, some other message they really need to be alive, to be changed.

Americans are all about self-help, self-improvement programs and books. Ten steps to freedom, seven habits of highly effective people. I am not saying there is no value in these books. There is some. But in the word of God, there is eternal value. This book is infinitely more valuable than all the other books ever written combined. These are the words of God and they are alive because the One who speaks them is alive and lives forevermore. The certainty of the power of God's word is expressed in Isaiah 55:11:

*So shall my word be that goes out of my mouth, it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

The word accomplishes (living and active) that for which God sends it. It is effective to produce eternal changes in our lives. Just what exactly does it accomplish? How about salvation? 1 Peter 1:23 tells says we have been *“born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”* How about revival? Psalm 19:7 says, *“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.”* How about sanctification? 2 Thess. 2:13 says we are *“sanctified by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”* How about rest for your soul? *“There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God”* (verse 9). God’s word is living and active.

So we should pray like the psalmist, *“Give me life according to your word”* (Psalm 119:25).

### **The Word of God is Piercing (verse 12b)**

*... sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow*

The bible is not a harmless book. It has teeth. The word of God is sharp and it pierces. It cuts. The previous verses, four times, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Words like, “Take care lest there be in you an evil, unbelieving heart.” The warning about the deceitfulness of sin. Do these words penetrate? Do they pierce? They are meant to. The word of God is piercing, like a sword. But notice, it cuts both ways. It is sharper than *“any two-edged sword”*. Now, when fighting enemies, a two-edged sword is only used for killing - you can swing it both ways and cut with both sides of the blade.

But when God’s word is used on us like a two-edged sword, he uses it like a surgeon. He cuts, but he does it for a good purpose. The purpose is to expose the disease and ultimately to bring healing. The word of God cuts us to expose sin, and the deceitfulness of sin (3:15) and cuts them out, in order to heal. A bible that does not cut cannot expose a deadly disease. A bible that does not wound cannot heal. God laments the false prophets who only spoke nice words to God’s people, *“healing their wounds lightly”* (Jeremiah 6:14).

When was the last time you were convicted of sin when reading your bible or sitting under the ministry of the word here at church? When was the last time you found yourself repenting of sin when you read the scriptures? If not, may I suggest, you either are not being exposed to the word of God OR you have blunted the blade of God’s word so that it cannot do the necessary cutting in order that it may do the necessary healing. I fear many have done this. We should learn to pray like David and mean it when he said in Psalm 139:23-24,

*<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! <sup>24</sup> And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*

We should pray this way and mean it, expecting the Lord to actually show us through his word the things in our lives that grieve him.

## The Word of God is Discerning

*... and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

The word of God discerns the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. The word discern comes from the Greek word "kritikos" from which we get the word critic or critique. And the point is that the word is skilled at critiquing our thoughts and intentions. We, on the other hand, are not. "There is a way that seems right to a man..." (Proverbs 14:12). The Hallmark advice to "follow your heart" is really bad advice. And most people here would probably agree with that. But how often to you do exactly that? Jeremiah 17:9 says, "*the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*" I realize that some have taken this verse to such an extreme place that every thought and attitude in your heart is evil all the time. And we know for a Christian who has been born again, purchased by Christ's blood, indwelt by the Spirit, and has the law of God written on the heart, this cannot be true. But we must constantly expose our minds (thoughts) and hearts (intentions) to the scrutiny of God's word. Listen to the way Spurgeon describes the critiquing word of God:

*The Word of God says of this thought, "it is vain," and of that thought, "it is acceptable"; of this thought, "it is selfish," and of that thought, "it is Christ-like." It is a judge of the thoughts of men.*

If we want to truly understand ourselves, we must feed on God's word. God's word is functions as a mirror, showing us ourselves in stark reality. James 1:23-24:

*<sup>23</sup> For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.*

Kent Hughes said, "God's word - read, meditated upon, and prayerfully applied - will give us brilliant discernment and profound self-knowledge." [my experience with James 4:1] Unfortunately, an all too common way of approaching the bible is to critique it rather than let it critique us. To sit in judgment upon it. Has God really said... But who does that sound like? Those are the words of the serpent when he deceived Eve in the garden. Paul tells us the Christian is one who seeks "*to take every thought captive to obey Christ.*" In other words, we don't assume that every thought already is. The word of God is the great critic or discerner of the thoughts and intentions of our heart.

## The Word of God Takes Account

Up until now, we have been speaking of the power of God's life-changing, piercing, discerning word. Now in verse 13, the focus changes switches from God's word to God himself - as a seeing and knowing and evaluating God. Of course, we cannot separate God and his word, so this not unnatural - God's word is "God breathed". Verse 13 gives us a great depiction of the exhaustive knowledge of God:

*And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

God knows everything and sees everything. All things are exposed to him in plain sight. Nothing is hidden from him. The word "naked" simply means "laid bare" (NASB). Job 34:21 says, "*For his eyes are on the ways of man, and he sees all his steps.*" Verse 13 almost forces us to picture ourselves in the hands of God, under his divine gaze, with every single act, word, glance, thought, and intention being taken into account. We may fool others, but we cannot fool God. When he addresses us and speaks of unbelief, disobedience, the deceitfulness of sin, the hardness of heart, we may fool others, maybe even ourselves for a season, but we cannot fool him. It also means he sees every act of love and work of faith - every cup of cold water given in his name. Hebrews 6:10 says, "*God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.*" Kent Hughes, commenting on this verse said,

*Hypocrisy and duplicity will not work. Happily this means he will miss no good thing. But to the sinning and self-righteous heart, apart from the grace of God, this brings nothing but unmitigated terror.*

This is meant to be saving and sanctifying instruction to these storm-tossed people in the sea of persecution. The author (human and more importantly divine) is calling them to not rebel against the word of God in unbelief, to not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, but rather to submit in faith to it and find rest.

So the powerful word of God is life-giving, piercing, discerning, and accounting. **And so, how should we respond to this?**

1. Repentance for how we have treated God's word - ignored, played fast and loose, lukewarm, etc.
2. Believe in the life-giving word of God. It is not just faith in a good feeling. It is faith in the sure word of God who CANNOT lie. Beware of falling! Rest is available for me today? Jesus paid it all? I'm in!
3. Submit to the piercing, convicting, wounding and healing word of God.
4. Humble yourself under the discerning word of God.
5. Obedience before the face of God.

## **Conclusion**

***Therefore, strive to hear this word and respond in submissive, humble, obedient faith so you don't fall into unbelief, so that your heart is not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*** This is how we can deal honestly with God as he really is and allow him to deal honestly with us honestly as we really are. We come to his word, repentant, believing, submissive, humble, and ready to obey what he says.

And when do we start doing this? Today! If you wait until tomorrow, it may be too late. Someday it will be. Every day you hear and are pricked, but put it off, it is like another coat of varnish over your heart. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. We do it today. And tomorrow. And when October 14 comes, we do it when that day is "today". And we do this every day in between and every day after. Let's pray.