

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Consequences of God's Word (Part 1)

Hebrews 4:12-13

12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

In John 18 is recorded a segment of the trial of our Savior before Pontus Pilate. In this exchange Pilate questions Jesus concerning His status as “King of the Jews.” In verse 37 Jesus goes on to tell Pilate, *“You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”* And to this comment, Pilate utters words that have depicted the natural man’s crisis, saying in John 18:38, *“What is truth?”*

Ever since the fall in Genesis 3, man has had to wrestle with this very question, “What is truth?” There have been times in which some have come closer to understanding and communicating the truth than at other times, but we can be sure that ultimately man, that would include each and every one in this room, apart from the regenerative and restorative power of God within, struggles with the very idea of truth.

We are said to live in a relativistic age. By relativistic I mean that everything is relative, or based upon one’s own circumstances or perceptions of reality. To be relativistic is to say that there is no final truth, no one sure word that is true for all people for all times. In our culture we see an ever-growing distrust of final truth and this distrust leaves people in a dilemma. For if there is no truth, no ultimate authority and word to stand upon, then there is no purpose, nothing to aim at and no hope for the heart.

What is truly tragic however, is that the very place in which truth is to be declared and upheld, within the pulpits of the churches of God of truth, a sad and sorry cynicism for God Word has rather taken root. The church, and specifically the so-called Bible believing crowd has adopted the seemingly lowest view of truth, a view that sees the “truth” of God’s Word as optional at best and outright inconvenient at worst.

And while man has always struggled with the idea of ultimate truth, there have been times in history in which the people of the Church would not tolerate such low opinions of God’s Word. Rather than looking to the Word for entertainment, amusement or pleasure, they would have their souls laid bare and

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

healed by the Word of God implanted. Consider this prayer from a seventeenth century believer and ask yourself, “Have I heard anyone so pray concerning God’s Word?”

O thou elect blade and sharpest sword...who art able powerfully to penetrate the hard shell of the human heart, transfix my heart with the shaft of thy love.... Pierce, O Lord, pierce, I beseech thee, this most obdurate [hardened or stubborn] mind of mine with the holy and powerful rapier of thy grace.

This is not the shallow praying of which we might so readily be accused to today. This is the prayer of one who desires godliness, who longs for holiness and most earnestly seeks after God, knowing that it will cost him his life, knowing that he will be painfully cut through to the core of his being; but also knowing that only by such divine surgery will he ever be healed and will he ever truly come to walk in the fullness of the pleasures of God.

As we come to our text this morning, I present to you two main considerations that are most obviously revealed to us. In verse 12, where we will concentrate our thoughts today, we are shown the Word of God; and in verse 13, which we will consider next time, we see the God of the Word. But before we delve into the text, let me remind you to carefully remember the context in which these verses are found. These beloved verses are so often read out of their context that we miss the most important lesson they seek to teach, which ultimately is *following God through obedience to His Word*.

Remember then that these verses are found within the author’s warnings against apostasy, that is falling away from the living God. Our author has been teaching us concerning entering the “rest of God” in an effort to encourage a beleaguered and persecuted church population to refrain from the temptations of falling away. In other words, as things were getting difficult for the church, the temptation of many was to give in and give up on faith in Christ. When we read then in verse 12, that word “For...” “For the word of God is...” we are to know that the author is referring right back to Hebrews 4:11 which says,

Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.

The “disobedience” he warns of is simply a disobedience to the Word of God that inevitably leads to some form of dismay and destruction. What our author is doing then is answering an important question, the question being, “How can we keep ourselves from falling away from God, “through following the

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

same example of disobedience” as that of the Israelites?” Or, “How can we know whether or not we are like those who disbelieved God and His Word?” Hebrews 4:12-13 give us the only answer – we must allow the Word of God to test and try us, to cut through our professions, pretensions, pretexts, and our own personal purposes so as to reveal the true condition of our hearts. For I submit to you, beloved, that *it is only as we lay our hearts bare before the Word of God that we will come to see the deserved wrath of God due us because of our sins and then also the blessed refuge from this deserved wrath as provided in the person and works of Jesus Christ.*

The only protection against falling away from God is coming close to God and we come close to God through His Word; and as we draw closer to God by the Word, our sinful sicknesses and need for spiritual surgery is exposed - and then, by faith, such tumors of transgression are removed, causing some short-term pain, but providing us with true eternal health. Let us consider then these two key points, the Word of God (4:12) and then the God of the Word (4:13).

I. The Word of God

Our text begins with a stunning statement, *“For the word of God is living and active...”* Whenever there is a shred of doubt in one’s faith; whenever the temptation to give up on following Christ rears its ugly head, whenever the mocking or persecution of unbelievers persists to bring you soul into dismay, then you must turn to the Word of God. Here the Word of God is presented as something with which we must contend. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

Isaiah 55:11

So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

This tells me that God’s Word is effectual, that it does something to those who heed it. And so, we may safely conclude that the only ones among these first readers of Hebrews and also among us who are not affected in some way by the Word are those who labor at not listening to the Word. These are those with hardened hearts.

And yet, this book, a copy of which most of you hold in your hands, is a book unlike any other. It is a book that when read by skeptics in order to refute its truths, have rather been confronted by such truths and transformed into ardent believers. Men like Augustine and Luther were brought to faith by God’s pricking their hearts with just one verse of the beloved Text. We know that even today

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

there is a concerted effort to smuggle God's Word into countries where it is banned and people go to great lengths to shared copies of Scripture at the peril of being beaten, jailed, or even killed. And yet thousands risk everything for the truth and hope found in the Word of God. Why would so many risk so much for such a Book? Why does this Book have such a radical effect upon our lives? The author of Hebrews give us no less than four reasons as to why the Word of God is so significant.

1. It is a living Word

"For the word of God is living..." This is a most peculiar phrase, is it not? How is it that a book can be said to be "living?" Is your child's storybook, or your teenager's math book, or your favorite novel "dead?" How is the Word of God "living"? To begin with, we must know that the word living here means just that, "full of life" or "alive." To call the word of God alive is to place it on the same level as God Himself. In Hebrews 3:12 the author used the same word to describe God as "living." And now, the very words He has uttered are declared to be like God Himself, "living."

The author placed this adjective first in our text, in the emphatic position, as theologians like to say. This means that the author wanted his readers to know that the words they had received as Holy Scripture were not outdated or irrelevant to the difficulties they were under. The point is that because it is **"living"** the Word of God will continue in every age to be completely relevant. It is truth – truth that always and accurately addresses the needs of man. This is not so with other "books." With science come new discoveries and theories. With philosophy come new thoughts and ideas. With fiction come new stories and characters. But God's word is eternal and settled (Psalm 119:89); and it is sure (Psalm 19:7). A preacher once told the story how back in the early seventies, when the translation called *The Living Bible* became popular, that a lady, so excited over her new copy, came up to him and exclaimed, "Look! I've got a *Living Bible*!" He quietly replied, "Madam, I've had one for 50 years." The point is that there has never been a time when this word is not **"living."**

As a pastor I fairly regularly receive emails and mailings about a variety of materials meant to help in Bible Study. A number of these materials have the most audacious claim saying that they will "make the Bible come alive," or "make the Bible relevant." Some of these materials come beautifully packaged and bound; they may have as their translation Old English or modern slang; but whatever is between the covers, I have come to know that it is this Book alone that is *always* alive and *always* relevant. While others concern themselves with

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

making applications from the Bible, the Bible itself, this living book, always *applies itself to man's situation.*

2. It is an active Word

We continue to read, ***“For the word of God is living and active...”*** In addition to the word's ability to always speak truth to men and women of all ages, this word is also said to be active – that is powerful or energetic. The word for “active” is the Greek word “*energes*” from which we get our English word energy. In other words, the Word of God is a storehouse of power that is not only able to work but will ***always*** work its work where it is proclaimed. The apostle Paul would say concerning this word in Romans 1:16,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel [the word of God] for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...

Because God's Word is both energy and power, we must not be afraid to bring Scripture into every conversation we have. If we believe God's word is active, that it does work, that it will powerfully perform for the glory of God, then we must proclaim it everywhere. To be as David who declared in Psalm 145:21, *“My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD...”* When the Metropolitan Tabernacle was being built in London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon rented the Crystal Palace for the worship services to accommodate the thousands that came to hear the young preacher proclaim the Word. Anxious to make sure that the acoustics were adequate, Spurgeon slipped into the auditorium and thinking that no one was present, uttered, *“Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!”* Little did he know that a workman far away in the gallery heard that ***“living and active”*** word and was brought under conviction and soon to conversion by faith in Jesus Christ.

So many times, when presented with an opportunity to speak or share God's Word, I can find myself trying to figure out just what to say and how to say it to be most effective. I need to simply let the word of God speak. For it not my preaching that is the power of God for salvation to all who believe; nor is it your well worded exposition of God's Word that is active; rather, it is God's Word itself that works the wonders of God.

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

3. A sharp and piercing Word

Our author continues, ***“For the word of God is...sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow.”*** The key point of what is communicate here is that the word of God penetrates deep down into the inner recesses of the human heart.

The Word of God is compared to something – a sharp, two-edged sword. Here we are supposed to see that unlike any instrument that man can devise by human ingenuity can penetrate the very heart, the very spirit of man. The only instrument able to do so is the Word of God. The sword, or *machaira*, is a short straight sword of the Roman soldier and was known to be an efficient weapon. It possessed *two-edges*, top and bottom meaning that it would never failed to cut. Listen, beloved, God’s Word will never fail to cut. This means that some who hear the message of the divine sword are cut to the depths of the reality of true life in Jesus. As Christ said in John 6:63;

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.

Yet to others who hear the message of the divine sword are cut to the depths of the reality of death. As Christ said in John 12:48;

...the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.

The idea is that God’s word penetrates to the deepest recesses of our human existence. Our text says, ***“piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow.”*** As one preacher has put it, “At the depth of one’s being, the word of God goes with all of its cutting, living, energizing power. It performs divine surgery where no eye can see. We are skilled at pretending to be what we are not. Chief among pretensions is that of being a Christian. Millions pretend to know Christ and be part of his kingdom. They go through the motions of church membership and maybe even activity in church. They might even be fooling themselves! But the word of God penetrates through the pretensions, through the motives, through all the reasoning to expose hearts that have been hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and minds ruled by unbelief.”

We are far too often however like a character named Eustace. In C. S. Lewis' Narnia series, there is a story about a dragon. The book is “The Voyage of the Dawn Treader”, in which the company is on a long voyage across the ocean. They come across an island that later on they call “Dragon Island.” They call it “Dragon Island” because the boy, Eustace, a rather stubborn and obnoxious sort, stumbles into a cave in which there is a dead dragon. He is just delighted

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

because he goes into the cave and he finds the dragon's hoard of gold and jewels and all sorts of things and he says, "Ah, ha! This is mine. The dragon is dead, I can have all this." He takes a big bracelet and puts it on his arm. But there is a magical power that he doesn't know about. He falls asleep among the hoard of gold, and when he wakes up -- he has become a dragon. The gold circlet he has put on his arm is now on a dragon's foreleg and is terribly painful and throbbing as it cuts into his flesh. And he goes back to his friends and they are frightened and they chase him off by shooting arrows at him. Eustace is lonely and there is nobody to turn to and so he scratches and claws at, trying to get the dragon skin off, but to no avail. He cries great big dragon tears. He is all by himself in the mountains.

So then Eustace finds his way to a pool in which he looks and he sees his dragon face and into which his dragon tears drip and suddenly there appears to him Aslan the lion, who in Narnia is the Christ-figure. Aslan comes to him and says, "You will have to let me help you." But Eustace says, "No, I can do it myself, that's o.k. just watch." And he starts clawing again at the skin and he takes off one or two layers and he thinks he has done it. He looks in the pool again and there is the same old dragon skin under the old layers.

And Aslan says to him, "You really have to let me help." And he unsheathes his great sharp lion's claw, and he starts right below the neck and he cuts deeply into Eustace's dragon skin and Eustace thinks surely he is cutting him right to the bone. And he is afraid he is going to die because it hurts so terribly. Aslan rips the skin open and helps him get out of it, and places him then in the pool of water and says, "Now you need to get under the water." Eustace goes under, and he comes back up and he is a new person. He is Eustace again. His skin is soft; it is boy skin! Eustace had been delivered from the dragon skin by the deep penetrating and piercing work of Aslan's claw, a picture as well of the two-edged sword of God's Word. Was it painful? Yes. You see, Eustace had to repent; he had to get stripped of what was before. He had to come to Aslan and let him help. But finally he was free and he was again a human child.

If we want to be God's children, we need the Word of God to deeply penetrate our hearts and reveal to us areas in which we are dragon-like rather than Christ-like. The Word of God become both the mirror which allows us to see that we are still clothed in dragon skin as well as the agent that deeply cuts away that skin so that we will not "follow the same example of disobedience" as those who would not obey the Word and allow the Word to perform its healing effects.

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Beloved, let us also give thanks that we, like Eustace, do not need to be *open* for the Word to penetrate! The two-edged sword of God's Word is able to pierce through any barrier we try to put into the way. When God determines to run you through with this sword, there is no shield that can deflect its living, powerful and penetrating power. One of my favorite preachers of old is George Whitefield. The story is told of a certain Mr. Thorpe, who lived in 18th century Bristol, England. Mr. Thorpe was part of a band of men who called themselves, the "Hell-fire Club." Their reason for existence was to mock and deride the work of the famed evangelist, George Whitefield. On one occasion, as the "Hell-fire Club" gathered at a pub for such mockery, Mr. Thorpe offered his brilliant imitation of Whitefield, whom he and his friends would call, "Dr. Squintum," because of Whitefield's eyes. He delivered his sermon with Whitefield's every gesture, quoting Scripture and Whitefield's exposition, when suddenly amidst the laughter he had to sit down. Thorpe was pierced through with conviction and was converted on the spot! He became an exemplary Christian leader in Bristol.

I must ask you, has the living, powerful Word of God so pierced through to the inner recesses of your soul? Has it brought to you conviction of sin and a real conversion of life? Ask the Lord to peel away the dragon skin of disbelief, of doubt and of disobedience and He will, by His Word, perform such a needed surgery to your soul and healing will take place.

4. A discerning Word

One truth that must not be forgotten as we read through the book of Hebrews is that many of the first readers thought that they were believers but actually were not. Some had nurtured a heart of unbelief amid the outward trappings of worship and church life. At stake was that they did not even know of the eternal danger that awaited them because they had deceived their own hearts. So now, the author tells us of the fourth aspect of the Word of God, namely that it could discern whether such faith was fantasy or foundational. ***"For the word of God is...able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*** The word for "judge" here is the Greek word *kritikos*, from which we get our English word *critic*. Here we are told that only God's Word can rightly *critique* what is going on in our hearts. Beloved, please listen to what I say. There are perhaps some here this morning who have deceived their own hearts into believing that they are Christians. The call this morning is to search your hearts in light of God's word and yet some are tempted to keep such teaching at arms-length, knowing that to do so is to open their lives to the probing, questioning, discerning energy of the Word. But what is at stake is not whether or not you

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

respond to judgment of God's word, but whether or not you even know that the Word has judged you!

What makes this so difficult is that more often than not, a person is not noticeably or outwardly rebellious against the Word of God. The problem is that such a person is unable to judge his own motives and will not do so apart from God's Word. Is it not so? Are we not tempted to pass off areas of unbelief as spiritual immaturity; to forgive our own passion for the world as nothing more than a lack of spiritual discipline; and to excuse our own disinterest in knowing the Word as simply a lack of reading skills. We are more apt to say, "I am a "doer" and not a "thinker"." Now before us is the truth that God's Word is alone capable of probing deeply into the heart and discerning the condition of the soul.

Our text says that the Word knows every thought and intention of the heart. But just what is the heart? In the Scriptures, the heart is the seat of human personality. It is the real you, the person deep inside. How many of us are guilty of smiling and cordially responding to someone when in our hearts we are seething with anger or resentment toward that person. Outwardly you are all sugar and spice, but inwardly you are arsenic and venom. We tend to pride ourselves on our self control and consider ourselves at peace with men and with God, but God sees that heart as wicked and dragon-like. God's Word does not seek then to work on the outward, but on the inward. It is here, in what you think and how you think that God's word will cut away all the pretense, and strip the all the excuses, and check all the motives, and uncover all the deceit, and expose the reality of the heart. So I ask you, what does the word of God discern about your heart right now?

Why does this living, active, piercing, and discerning *word* wield its way to the deep fount of your life? I say to you so that you might be *certain* that you belong to Jesus Christ. Read and think upon and obediently respond to this Word. James tells us, "*receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls*" (James 1:21). May we know the truth, that God's Word is able to judge our very thoughts and motives, may they be thoughts and motives that bring glory to God.

Soli Deo Gloria

Copyright © 2005 Edward K. Godfrey. This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, 2300 South 13th Street Rogers, AR 72758.

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ
Hebrews 4:12-13: The Consequences of God's Word (Part 1)
November 27, 2005