

Hebrews 4 (Part 2) :12-13 • The Character and Power of the Word

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Calvary Chapel Ontario

All right, we're in Hebrews chapter 4. This is the second part. We're going to take two whole verses this morning, so we'll be done here in about five minutes. You know better, don't you? Yes. We're in verses 12 and 13 of Hebrews chapter 4, so look in your Bible, and follow along as I read:

¹² “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ 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.”

Stop there. We're going to pray. Heavenly Father, open our hearts to the ministry of your Word this morning because this is an important word, about the Word, and we want to really be paying attention. We want to hear, Lord, from you today, and we want to open our hearts to all that you want to say to us. We give you our attention, we give you our hearts, and we ask it in Jesus' precious name, amen.

These verses, particularly verse 12, is often just quoted on its own. But if we're going to think about the context of how these verses appear, we're going to remember that for the last couple of Sundays we've been talking about unbelief.

Do you guys remember? And the author of this letter has been reminding his readers how unbelief hindered the people of Israel through their history. In fact, kept them from entering into the promised land. And we talked last week how that was a reference to keeping them out of the rest of the Lord.

They were not able to enter God's rest because of their unbelief. And it is within that context now, that very context that he shares these two verses, particularly about the Word. And he writes what he writes here, beginning in verse 12, speaking of the Word. He then speaks about the Lord himself in verse 13.

And frankly, both of these verses are written in the letter of Hebrews chapter 4, in the context of his argument, to show how the Lord exposes unbelief. So we're

still kind of, at least in the context, we're still kind of talking about unbelief because, how is it exposed? It's exposed through the Word, and it is also exposed by the Lord Himself.

The Word has the power to separate true and false, and uncover and expose the motives of human beings, and nothing, of course, is hidden from the Lord Himself who constantly sees everything and looks into our hearts as you and I would look through a pane of glass and so forth. The question I want to ask though this morning is, why is he giving these warnings?

I think that's always an important question to ask whenever you're reading the Bible. It's one thing to read through the scripture and say, well, there's what it says, but to ask yourself the question, why is he saying it? Why in fact is he giving this warning?

Well, it's simple actually. As we remember that the author is addressing Christian Jews, right, who were being tempted to return to the Mosaic law because of the intense persecution that they were receiving at the hands of their fellow Jews.

So the whole idea of returning to the Mosaic law was to throw off the persecution, and the heat, from the decision they had previously made to follow Jesus Christ and to put their faith in the cross of Christ. And it is very possible that the believers who were being tempted to move in that direction had somehow convinced themselves that their decisions came from a purely spiritual motive.

But the author is kind of reminding them here, that between the Word of God and God Himself, a person's true motives are always going to be seen in the end. It doesn't matter whether you and I think what we're doing is right, or not. We can do...the Bible says (Proverbs 14:12 ESV paraphrased) ¹²“*There is a way that seems right to a man, but (in the end it leads to death) its end is the way to death.*” Right? That's in the Proverbs.

So what you and I think, isn't all that terribly impressive because God always gets the last word on what you and I think. And that's kind of what he's saying here. The Word of God is living and active, and it divides, and it separates, and it cuts to the quick, and it ultimately, reveals.

And what the author has been doing here throughout the course of not just this chapter, but right along, is he's been showing them that the way they're being tempted to respond to their difficulties, their persecutions, is really not that

different from the way their forefathers responded to the Lord in years past. He's kind of explaining to them that they're responding with the same unfaithful attitude, of unbelief, as their forefathers had responded to the Lord with.

And it's kind of interesting in many ways, this letter, the letter of Hebrews is very similar to Stephen's speech, to the Sanhedrin, and to the Jews (**referring to Acts 7**). On the day that he was stoned to death, at the conclusion of that speech. Because you'll remember what Stephen essentially did was, he recounted the history of unbelief of the Jews, their history of unbelief. And really the only difference between this letter and Stephen's speech is that the writer of this letter is addressing Christians. Stephen was addressing unbelievers.

But honestly, the message is not all that dissimilar. So, there you go. That's essentially why the author is laying out these two verses. But what's...I suppose we could stop there, but there's so much more to understand because even though we now understand the contextual reason that the author gave us these two verses. There's more to these verses than just the context.

In fact, this is one of those interesting situations where you can take these verses out of context. People...I've told you this before, people say all the time, "Well, you can't take the Bible out of context." Yes, you can.

In some situations, particularly where it speaks of God, His nature, and things that are unchanging. Because if God is unchanging, then He's going to be unchanging regardless of the context. In other words, if you say God is love, then God is going to be love regardless of the context. If you say God is just, He's always going to be just, He's never going to cease being just, you see, so the context doesn't matter.

So there are certain places where you can take verses out of context. And frankly, this is one of them, because the Word of God is always what it is, regardless of the context. Your Bible, and although the Greek word here is Logos, which is used sometimes to refer specifically to Jesus. Here it's being spoken of as the inspired Word of God.

So, we're going to take a look at this, and we're going to see what these verses really kind of have to say, particularly verse 12. So, I always like, whenever we're going to dissect a verse, I like to put it up on the screen so that we can all kind of look at it together. And what I'm going to do as we go through here is, I'm going to be highlighting various aspects of this particular verse. But once again, it says,

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Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

*“For the word of God is **living** and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*

Once again, the context is Jews who are being tempted to leave Christianity to go back to the law, but this stands regardless. This stands.

So as we begin to look at this verse in a little more, up close and personal, focus. The first thing that he tells us is that the Word is living. So we'll highlight that word in the text there.

(Highlighted LIVING on the slide – see above)

And what we learn, when we see and think about that word, living, is we learned that the Bible isn't simply a collection of historical stories or positive tales or...you can't compare it to any other book. You can't compare it to even a devotional, and definitely not Readers Digest, or some other book that you might have picked up off the shelf. Because although those books are great and encouraging and have devotional content, this one (pointing to the Bible) possesses life. It is living. It is alive. The Word of God is alive.

I got to tell you, every so often I get a note from somebody who's been watching or listening or whatever, and they'll say, “Pastor Paul, you just make the Word of God come alive.” And I go, “No. The Word of God is alive. I don't make the Word come alive. It makes me come alive. It's quite the opposite.”

The Word of God is living. And when you...when you hear it, and when you combine it with faith, it makes you come alive too. And that's really what they're saying to me. And I know what they're saying, so I don't write and correct them. I know what happened. They...they heard the Word and they embraced it by faith and they came alive.

And that is always an exciting thing, to see the Word of God imparting life. And the Word of God is also, in the sense that it is alive, it never goes out of date. There's another funny thing people will write and tell me, “See, Pastor Paul, I was going through your study in 2 Samuel, I think it was like six years ago,” and they'll say, “It's incredible how relevant it is for today.”

Of course, the Word of God is living. It's always alive. It doesn't go to sleep. It doesn't die. It's alive. It doesn't matter whether it was six years ago. Hey, I've read sermons that were written 600 years ago. One of my favorite authors, George Mueller, I have a whole book of his just little messages he gave about 150 years ago, and it's just like, it's just like yesterday. A.W. Tozer passed away in the early sixties. I love reading his stuff. It's alive with the Word of God because he quotes the scriptures all over the place and it's alive.

So, I've always kind of likened the living Word of God, and it's probably a dumb example, but I've kind of likened it to when you eat yogurt with that living bacteria in it, acidophilus, I used to stay away from yogurt because of that. I thought, I'm not putting that in my body. And then I learned that it was it's in there anyway. I mean, it's in your body and it's good. It's good for you. It's actually good for you.

It's, it's good things. And now I eat way too much frozen yogurt, from time to time, but (points to audience) we're still going today, Livy. But I promised her we'd stop by Kiwi Loco later today. I can do it in the name of, I'm going to go get some acidophilus today, it's good for you.

But, you know, you're putting something alive into your body that's what the Word of God is doing. You're putting something alive... When you read the Bible, when you hear the Word of God being taught, you're putting something alive, spiritually alive into your heart. And it's going to make a difference, believe me, the Word of God is living.

But not just living, verse 12 goes on to tell us that the Word of God is active (refers back to slide). So we highlight the next word there (ACTIVE). Your Bible, if you have a New King James says, "*powerful*". The Greek word here is actually where we get our word energy, believe it or not. And this is a fairly important word because you know it is possible for something to be alive and inactive, okay? Like kind of we all get during the winter; we're alive, but very inactive.

But the word of God is actively alive and it is moving. It is actively transforming lives. I have to tell you, I have developed such a deep appreciation over the years that I've been teaching God's Word of just the ability of the Word to dynamically change a person's life.

I mean, radically change a person's life as they regularly expose themselves to the Word of God. It's really truly amazing, and I'm talking about people who are listening to teachings and studying the Word of God every day. And I wish that

I could share with you every email I receive. I do share some of them with the staff on Tuesdays and Fridays, because most of them are just incredibly encouraging, simply from the standpoint of what happens when people really, truly expose their hearts to the power, the living power of the Word of God.

It is a living dynamic that transforms people's lives. It changes who they are. And I'm not talking about your average Christian who pops into church a couple of times a month. That's not what I'm really referring to.

I'm talking about people who are in the Word every day, every day, who are exposing their hearts to the Word every day. And I have personally witnessed the transformations of people, as they have gone from being very fearful about life in general to becoming people who are walking in God's peace. That's a cool transformation to see.

I have watched as people have gone from legalistic to walking in liberty. I told you guys, we just started supporting an orphanage in Kenya where the pastor of that orphanage wrote me and talked about how he had been brought up in this legalistic doctrine, most of his life, and started listening to our YouTube channel and he ran smack dab into grace. And realized that he'd been missing what the Word of God had to say, and he went from legalism to liberty, and the freedom that we have in Christ and he's a changed man.

I have watched people go from living in bondage to living in freedom, and that's a kick let me tell you. One of the other things too is, I've watched people go from a place of being completely uncertain and unsure about their personal salvation to a place of great confidence and doing what we talked about last week, resting in the finished work of Jesus on the cross.

And it happens. It happens again and again and again. But do you know what the key is? In each and every case, these are people who stop talking about their problems and they start getting into the Word of God and just absolutely dousing their hearts with the scriptures and digging into it. And I mean, headlong jumping in with both feet and just being enveloped by the Word.

So many times, we Christians, we dangle our toes into the water of the Word, and we wonder why we're not changed. We wonder why we're still dealing with the same fears, the same apprehensions, the same sin, the same challenges, and we're playing games. We've never done a cannonball into God's Word and just been enveloped and opened our heart completely to It.

Because you see when that happens, when you do that, when you open your heart really to the Word, and to that active power of the Word of God, the reason It transforms lives is because It forces us to make decisions. Have you ever noticed that? The Word of God...you're either going to make...well...and your decisions are either going to be to close the book and never open it again, or you're going to get into It and you're going to start to make some decisions about your life.

Because here's the deal, the Word of God never leaves us as we are. It's not going to leave you the way you are. "Well, doesn't God love me the way I am?" Yes, and He loves you enough not to leave you there. Right? And the Word of God is going to constantly push you. It's going to push you. And as It does, we find that It shapes our lives. It begins shaping us in ways that we realize we needed desperately because it has life in It, and it has activity, power, resident in It. And that's why the author goes on to talk about the next thing that we see in the Word, and that It is:

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Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

*"For the word of God is living and active, **SHARPER THAN ANY TWO-EDGED SWORD, PIERCING TO THE DIVISION OF SOUL AND OF SPIRIT, OF JOINTS AND OF MARROW**, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

So to help us understand this element and characteristic of the Word of God, the author now employs the metaphor, of the Word being like a sharp sword, which is a fairly common depiction of the Word through the scripture. But think of...instead of thinking like one of those big broad swords, or something like that, you see in Lord of the Rings or something.

Think of it actually...the Greek actually speaks of a smaller sword, but I want you to think of a surgeon's scalpel. Because that's frankly a little closer to what we're thinking about here because it's a very fine, sharp point, but the purpose isn't just to cut. It is to divide. It is to separate.

That is the point of the Word. And It separates things that are otherwise very difficult to separate. You with me? And that's why he mentions, metaphorically, the idea of separating joints, or if you will, bones from marrow, which is essentially all part of the bone. But he mentions something that is very very difficult to separate, but It can do it.

So, in a spiritual sort of sense, what does the Word of God separate for you and I? Well, It separates truth from lies, it's how we know; It separates light from dark; It separates right from wrong; and It separates good from bad, and It does a very good job, especially in those areas where we're struggling to perhaps make the separation, but the Word of God makes it.

But one of the most challenging things that the Word of God is capable of separating, is that section that we see here on this highlighted area.

(Refers back to slide above)

The fact that It pierces even to the division of soul and spirit. You guys know that your soul and your spirit are the two unseen elements of your overall makeup, you are also a body. And I can see those right here, right now, sitting in those chairs.

But what you can't see, and what I can't see is your soul, nor can I see your spirit. And it is very hard to identify the soul because at times it looks very much like the spirit. And it is very difficult to identify the spirit because sometimes it looks very much like the soul.

And I'm here to tell you that there's a lot that goes on in churches today that is passed along as spiritual, when in fact it comes from the soul of man, simply mimicking the spirit, and it's very difficult to tell. And you get a pastor up there and he's getting everybody, hooping and hollering and into a lather.

And people walk away from church and go, "Whoa, did you feel the spirit today?", and it was the soul. And we can do things with music too, we can make you cry with a song. But the soul, as you know, is the seat of your emotions, your intellect, and your will. And that's many times what's responding. And we can respond in a very soulish sort of a way, which is really the natural man. And we can assume that was a spiritual, "Oh, I just was brought to tears today."

Now that doesn't mean that when God doesn't move truly spiritually, or when there's a spiritual happening, that the emotions might not go along with it because they may very well. But the problem is we sometimes experience emotions and we think that's the spirit.

Well, how are you going to know? The Word of God can penetrate. Even to dividing soul and spirit, the Word can make that division. It can discriminate between that which is the spiritual man and that which is the soulish natural man.

Kind of funny, back when Sue and I were living in Great Falls, right, there was a church that actually advertised on the outside of their church, “Soulful Energy.” And I don't think they understood what they were actually saying because that's just, that's the carnal man. That's the...it's like, it's kind of like coming here for an emotional something....yeah.

(Slide)

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

*“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and **DISCERNING THE THOUGHTS AND INTENTIONS OF THE HEART.**”*

Finally, we learned that the Word of God is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart. It just has a way of penetrating; the Word can penetrate that outer facade that you and I like to project to other people, and it can reveal all the junk that's deep inside. And that's not comfortable, is it?

I mean, that's not enjoyable. I think of sitting in front of the Word of God, a lot of...I think of it like going to the dentist, you know the dentist's chair, is a place of judgment. You know that, right? You go to the dentist, and you know that either the dentist or one of his minions is going to ask that terrible question, “So, have you been flossing?” And you know at that moment you're faced with a choice. I can lie through my teeth, pun intended, or I can say, “No, not really,” and feel like an idiot because that's the way you feel when you've kind of been exposed. You feel a little bit, kind of like an idiot. And the Word of God brings judgment into our lives in a very sort of similar way. It penetrates. It exposes. It reveals.

And at that point, I can run from that revelation. Just like from the dentist, I can say, “Oh yeah, I've been flossing every day.” Got both fingers crossed behind my back. Or I can say, “No, I haven't been flossing, like I should have.”

And we can say to God, “Well, that's not no big deal.” When the Word convicts me, I can say, “Well, it's not that bad,” or “I'm never going to do it again,” or whatever the thing might be. Or I can say, “Yes, Lord, that's a sin I confess it. I ask you to forgive me.”

Those are challenging things, aren't they? Those are hard, but the Word of God exposes. It tells us what's really going on, what's really going on. The NIV rendering of that phrase literally says, (Hebrews 4:12 NIV) “...it judges the

thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” It judges. And you know how much we love judgment.

But I love how the Word can look into our hearts; because frankly, one of the things I really try to challenge people with is, be careful, be careful looking into your heart on your own. Don't do that. I...seriously, I really encourage Christians not to look into their heart on their own. Because if you look too deep you're going to get really discouraged, and then that's going to be the enemy's playground because he loves to condemn.

And believe me, there's plenty in our hearts for him to condemn. Okay, plenty. So you be very careful about personally waltzing into your own heart, throwing open the doors, and trying to make sense of what you find there. That's kind of God's job, and He does a very good job of it. If we will expose ourselves to the Word and let Him through His Holy Spirit, He chooses what we're going to deal with and when you're ready to deal with it.

Because you go looking in your heart, I'm telling you, you're going to find junk, okay. You're going to find darkness and you're going to find junk, and you're not going to know what to do with it. The Holy Spirit will help you work through what He exposes; when He exposes it; and He'll help you to understand what to do with it. But it takes the power of the Word to sort it out, you know; to sort it out and to expose it in a way that really discovers what's going on.

It is not uncommon for people to say to me, “You know...I've been...I've just been investigating my life and I'm just so discouraged.”

It happens a lot, and certain personalities are more introspective than others, you know that. Some people they never stop to think about much of anything. But there are some personality types, and they're usually those who are very tenderhearted.

And I believe that there are people for whom God has given a gift of being sensitive, but not inward. He gave them the gift to be sensitive that way (points outward), that direction toward others, and toward God (points upwards). But unfortunately, sin turns everything inward. And I mean everything, every gift God gives gets turned inward by sin.

And so, for those very, very tenderhearted sensitive people, they become very introspective, and they begin kind of putting out this “All Points Bulletin”, right, over their entire existence. And just about the time they've investigated themselves to the point of exhaustion, they'll write me a note and go, “Pastor

Paul, what am I going to do?” And I'm like, “Just chill. You are focusing on the problem. You need to focus on Jesus.”

Turn those radars that God gave you, outward, get them pointed there (points upwards). He's the solution. You're not going to find the solution in your heart (points to heart), you guys. You're not going to find it in your heart. Your heart is a murky mixture of darkness and junk. The Bible tells you it is deceitful and it's beyond cure (Jeremiah 17:9 NIV paraphrased). You focus on Jesus Christ. That's where your focus needs to be. Get it off yourself, get it onto Him. Start looking heavenward. That's where your answer is going to be.

And ultimately the Word exposes us to God. I know I'm not focusing a lot on verse 13 here. But again, as verse 13 says, “*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.*” And I know that can be a very frightening prospect, were it not for the cross. Did you hear me? Were it not for the cross? That would be...verse 13 is one of those verses that absolutely could terrify you, paralyze you, were it not for the cross.

I would personally hate to experience what the Word does in my life without the cross. Because whatever the Word finds in me, and believe me, the Word finds plenty. Whatever the Word finds in me that is contrary to God, wrong, sinful, false, whatever. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that if I confess that as sin, I know He's going to forgive me. I know, in fact, I know He already has. But I need to confess that and bring that to the cross and it's a beautiful thing, and that's where we end this morning. We end with a promise. The promise that I quote a lot from:

(Slide)

1 John 1:9 (ESV)

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

(Pastor Paul paraphrases the slide) If we confess our sins, and these are the things the Word brings up in our life, there's a promised response. He is faithful. And He is just. Because He already condemned His son in your place, and so He's going to be just about it, but He's going to forgive you for your sins and He's going to cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

And that's frankly one of those verses you can't hear too often. It really is. This is...this should be most everybody's life verse. We just need to keep coming back to it.

So the Word of God, I open up a Bible and what happens? It convicts; It shows me where I'm wrong; It shows me where I've allowed falsehood and sin and worldliness to enter into my life. So, what am I going to do? Just sit around and feel condemned? "Oh, I'm so terrible."

No. He showed me that because He loves me, and He wants me to be free. And so He says, "Son, now that I've shown you, bring it to the cross and I will forgive you and cleanse you of all unrighteousness."