

Hebrews 4:12-13

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[0 : 00] Good morning. If you want to go ahead and turn to Hebrews chapter 4. 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.

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.

Father, thank you for this word from you. By your spirit, enlighten our eyes to understand.

In Jesus' name. I consider it a great privilege to be a part of a congregation that highly values the Bible. When you look through the pages of scripture, you see how often the word of God is extolled.

[1 : 33] Is lifted up. Is shown to be an important part of what God does. And he has given it, his word, a major role in the preservation of the church and of our faith.

And so it seems obvious that we would, that we who claim to follow Christ, love God, would place the same value on the word that he does.

But this is not true of every church. Many, even those with a rich gospel heritage, have lost that perspective.

Those folks who study church trends and life have outlined what they call the four stages of church decline. In the first stage, the gospel is central.

That's the good church. In that stage, the Bible has a central role in defining the issues of life.

[2 : 49] The Bible sets the agenda for what the leadership, what the congregation does. In the second stage, the gospel is assumed.

When the gospel is assumed, the Bible takes on a secondary role. Its message, its emphases, its agenda are replaced with those of the culture, the latest trends, current events.

And then by the third stage, the gospel is lost and the Bible has very little place at all. And in the fourth stage, the church is withered into complete spiritual indifference.

Now, most of what many of us have experienced or observed would probably be considered the first or second stage.

At least, that's my experience. But I do not believe that the downtrend is inevitable. Churches do persevere.

[4 : 05] Churches do persevere. Revivals do happen. And that's because the Lord is present. And he's left his spirit in the church to give it strength, to lead and guide it, to help it guard against the drifting from the gospel.

God has given us the privilege of participating in that preserving work of his spirit. When we belong or participate in a church that highly values the word of God.

God wants you to hear his spirit. This morning, I believe God wants you and me to hear his voice through his word. And to respond with a faith and obedience that are appropriate.

And a renewed determination to make and keep his word central in our hearts.

God wants you to appreciate the role he has given to the word in the church. And in appreciating that, then benefiting from it.

[5 : 28] Not only in salvation, but also in transformation. And effectiveness. Now, Hebrews chapter 4, verses 12 and 13.

This is a passage that highlights the importance of God's word. It's a reminder of the role that God has given to his word in strengthening and preserving faith.

By bringing about repentance and growth. It's a passage that calls you to do everything you can do to keep the word central in your life.

To trust it. And to respond appropriately. So this morning, I'd like to look at three aspects of the word of God given here in the text.

That God says are reasons why you should keep the word of God central in your life. So first, let's look at verse 12 again. The first part.

[6 : 31] For the word of God is alive. Or living. Word of God is living. Alive. Now, the context is very important to understanding the reason this passage occurs here.

So, I will come back to it. But to begin with, I'd like to look closely at the main point. And that is that God wants you to value his word because it is alive. God's word is living.

In a grammatical sense, the word alive here is the emphasis of this verse. It occurs first. So, if you looked into the Greek, you would see living for the word of God.

In other words, the word of God is living. But it begins with living. It's emphatic. This is the point that the author wants to draw our attention to.

The idea of the word of God being alive. And simply speaking, this is the main reason why we should value the word of God. Because it is a living word.

[7 : 43] The other descriptors in the text really flow out of this. The idea that the word of God is alive might seem a bit strange to us.

But it makes sense when you see it in light of whose word it is. 28 times in the ESV, the phrase, the living God occurs.

Three of those times are in the book of Hebrews. In a basic sense, the word living when attached to God simply refers to the fact that unlike the idols of the nations, the idols that surrounded the Israelites and so on, unlike those gods, our God is alive.

The psalmists and even the prophets mock the nations, saying those idols have eyes, but they can't see.

They have ears, but they can't hear. They have mouths, but they neither speak nor breathe. This contrast is true, but I think there's something more to the phrase, the living God.

[9 : 14] Because when you understand God in all of his attributes and who he really is, you realize that God is life itself. This life, God's life, is not derived as we understand life, derived from anything outside of himself.

He's not dependent upon breath to live. He's not dependent upon electrochemical processes in your nervous system in order to think like we are.

And he's not dependent upon calorie intake for energy. God's life itself. Life is his nature.

I think understanding this aids our understanding of what is being communicated here about the word of God. God's good news to us is a message about life.

But it's more than that. The gospel itself is a living message. The word of God is living.

[10 : 35] The proclamation of the word is life. And when it is proclaimed faithfully, it imparts life. In the same way, I believe this is how we should understand and view the written word, the Bible.

It is a living document. Early on in my Christian experience, I was given some advice about how to study the Bible. And it was found in this old, small book of Falling Apart, probably written 100 or 200 years ago.

I don't even know who the author was. But I looked through it and it said there's two ways to study the Bible. And both are important. First, you should study the Bible just like any other book.

There are common elements that need to be understood. There's genre and grammar and structure and historical context and idiomatic language that you need to try to understand.

In this way, the Bible is just like any other book. And we should be diligent to seek to understand what is being communicated. But second, it advised, you should study the Bible unlike any other book.

[11 : 58] You see, the Bible is not just a collection of ancient stories and conventional wisdom. It's not simply a collection of practical principles.

And it's certainly not like a magic book full of formulas to follow or pronounce in order to gain health and wealth and success in life.

The Bible is God's very word spoken and recorded in the context of human experience. I think it's very interesting.

As we've been going through Hebrews, you see that the author of Hebrews quotes an Old Testament passage back in chapter 3 in verse 7. But when you look there, what does he say?

He says, therefore, as the Holy Spirit says... Oh, he made a mistake. Didn't the Holy Spirit say that? Past tense? Past tense? It's not what it says.

[13:03] And the passage begins today if you hear his voice. And what he's doing is taking that word written so many years before and saying it applies to you, to me now.

Today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts. Well, how can he do that? Is he just speaking metaphorically?

Or... I don't think so. He's indicating that God was presently, at the time he wrote this, giving the very same warning to the readers of his book.

God speaks to us in his word. You can expect God to speak to you in his word. And his word is life. It's your food. It's your drink. It's your energy. It's your strength. It's your wisdom. It's your guidance. It's your comfort. It's your comfort. This is the very thing God wants you to make every effort to understand and depend upon.

[14:23] And in order to do this, you must value it. But the passage continues, doesn't it? Not only is it alive, but it effectively accomplishes what God intends.

That's the second aspect we see. God wants you to value his word because it is effective. Look at verse 12 again. For the word of God is alive, living, and effective.

Now, some versions have the word active or powerful instead of effective. But really, the word effective carries the idea best.

By effective, it means that it accomplishes something. It's effective in what it is designed to do. Sure, it's powerful. But the point is that it's powerful to accomplish what it's sent to do or what it's given for.

I think the best argument for that is in the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 55 and verses 10 and 11. He records, And shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

[16:04] That's how God views his word. That effectiveness is observed in creation. Isn't it amazing that God just said, let there be light and there was light?

He just spoke and it happened. It did just what he said. In Ezekiel 37, God had the prophet speak his word over the bones that typified Israel.

And when he did that, those bones came back to life. And it's observed also in Lazarus' resurrection.

When Jesus said, come forth. And what happened? He came forth. And even in the story that we heard this morning for you children.

All Jesus had to do was say, peace, be still. And it happened. That's the effectiveness of God's word.

[17:13] It's powerful and effectively accomplishes his will. Now, the word of God has many aspects to this effectiveness. There are several metaphors in the Bible that highlight these.

And I'll list just a few. And some are the ones that I found. Psalm 119, 105. The word of God is a lamp that gives light. The light of his instruction and direction.

In Jeremiah 23 and verse 29, God's word is called a fire that consumes and a hammer that shatters. Referring to its capacity to destroy false representations of God and his truth.

According to James, the word of God is a mirror that reflects the real person. And the apostle Peter says that the word of God is a seed that births new life and milk that nourishes the people of God. But in this passage in Hebrews, the word of God is compared to a sharp double-edged sword that pierces and separates and discerns.

[18:23] Look again at verse 12. For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword.

Piercing to the division of soul and spirit of joints and marrow. And discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. That is how in this chapter the word of God is described.

And I think we would be right to ask why a sword is used in this context. It's understandable in Ephesians 6, 17 where the word of God is called the sword of the spirit.

And is part of the armor of the Christian in the fight for the saints in the war against those powers of darkness that seek to undermine our faith. And it's understandable in the book of Revelation where the sharp two-edged sword proceeds from the mouth of Jesus himself to slay those who reject his kingdom.

Chapter 19. But here in Hebrews, the idea seems a bit different. It's more like a fisherman's knife. Although the word is sword, but it's a small sword.

[19 : 50] Instead of an instrument of war. The imagery of the division of soul and spirit and joint and marrow reflect this. Maybe you can think of it as being filleted.

The last part of verse 12 makes this point. And I think that's what the image leads up to when it says, Discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

It's one of the chief characteristics of the word of God to then expose us. To expose our motives. We sang about the fear we have of being exposed.

But that's a good thing. According to the scriptures. Sin is very deceitful. And according to the Bible, we can't even always know our own hearts.

1 Corinthians chapter 4. But the message of the gospel exposes us. It distinguishes between religious practice and faith.

[21 : 04] It exposes the difference between the desire to be recognized and self-sacrificing charity. It demonstrates the great contrast between lust and love.

And it reveals the difference between works that are produced through a need to be acceptance and those that are generated through gratitude and grace.

God knows us. God knows us very well. And he's given his word to help us.

You see, the deceitfulness of sin is just that. It's deceitful. That means we can't always see it. It's powerful. It wants to lead us astray.

Cause us to drift. Urge us to harden our hearts. It says, God really can't be trusted. You know a lot about this.

[22 : 10] Anyway. It whispers, Your happiness is more important than the life that's inside. It attempts to minimize the effects of small sins.

Of white lies. Neglect of prayer and worship. It attempts to make greed and self-preservation appear as responsibility.

But the word of God exposes all of this. This role of the Bible, of the word of God, fits the context of Hebrews.

And it's reinforced by the following verse. Verse 13. God's word is alive. It's effective. And thus, it requires a response from us.

And that's the next aspect of the word of God that we want to look at in this passage. God wants you to value his word. Yes, because it is alive and effective. But also because valuing his word is what you need to do in order to respond appropriately.

[23 : 23] Look at verse 13 again. Now, in this verse, there is a switch from the sword metaphor to a focus on God's omniscience and his eyes that are able to see everything.

But the point is the same. It's just a reinforcement of what he said previously. Nothing is hidden from God.

Your innermost thoughts, nothing. We are all exposed from him. We can't hide anything from him. Your thoughts, your motives, nothing. You are completely vulnerable and exposed before him. And God wants to remind you of this so that you can respond in faith. I mentioned earlier that the context is important for understanding the reason why these verses are here at this point in the book of Hebrews.

And until now, the author has been emphasizing the superiority of Christ over angels and over Moses. But his intent in highlighting these things is clearly and predominantly to warn the readers against replacing Jesus with anything.

[24 : 52] In chapter 2, he warns against drifting away. Verse 1. In chapter 3, he warns against falling away from the living God.

In verse 12. Then again, in the verse before today's text, in verse 11, we see another warning against the same disobedience that brought judgment on the Israelites in the wilderness.

Each of these warnings is in the context of the word of God. The warning against drifting away refers to what we have heard.

Be careful that we don't drift away from what we have heard. The message of the gospel. God's word. In verse 12 of chapter 3, the falling away is described as an evil, unbelieving heart.

Unbelieving what? Unbelieving of the word of God. Of the promises that God made to them. To the Israelites.

[25 : 55] And the disobedience mentioned in verse 11 of chapter 4 is the response of those same Israelites to the promise of rest. Which in verse 6 is called the good news or the gospel.

So in every case here we have a caution, a warning about leaving, about not trusting God's word.

So the focus of the word of God or on the word of God in verses 11 or 12 and 13 aligns with this emphasis. But it also directly relates to the exhortation in verse 11.

You see, in view of the Israelites' failure to receive God's promised rest, we, on the other hand, are encouraged to strive to enter that rest. Well, what does that mean? What does it mean to strive to enter rest?

That sounds like an oxymoron to me. What does it mean? But when we consider that this rest there is a type of our eternal rest, the promise of the gospel.

[27 : 13] And when we consider the context of what is being warned against here, then striving to enter should be then understood as simply being diligent to hear and to trust the word of God.

That's what he's calling us to do. Not neglect it, but earnestly seek to hear it, to understand it, and to believe it.

I think it's likely that in the short period of our time together this morning in the worship and even in reading these few passages in the Bible, that the Spirit of God has used the word of God to draw your attention to some area of lack or of trust or some area of fear or some desire that you know that will not trust you or draw you close to the Lord.

And I think he's doing that because he loves you. And he wants you to turn to him and expect in faith that he can help, that he can change you and me.

If that isn't happening, we're really in big trouble. But the encouragement is that he does it so that we would respond appropriately.

[28 : 47] At the end of verse 13, there is this phrase, to whom we must give account. And if you take it at face value, it appears to be a sense in which, you know, listen to what I'm saying because one day you're going to be held accountable for everything that you've heard and all the things that God has called you to and whether you responded right or not.

And it's possible that that is what is intended. But other versions have something a little more vague.

With whom we have to do instead of to whom we must give an account. And the lack of agreement on the translation here is simply because this is one of those idiomatic phrases that isn't easy to be translated into English.

If you looked at a literal translation of this, you would read, to whom, for us, the word. If that sounds odd to you, you're in good company.

I think it should sound odd to all of us. What in the world does that mean? To whom, to us, the word. Well, there is some similarity here with the word being used in other texts in the Bible with accountability, with the concept of accounting.

[30 : 19] But it's normally used in a different sense and with a different verb. So really, it's just hard to say that to whom we must give an account is what he's trying to communicate.

Of course, those people who have studied this are much smarter than I am and maybe they see things that I don't. But other people aren't convinced either.

It's possible that what is presented here is a play on words that reaches back to the beginning of the text. The word, this passage ends with that.

Remember I said it says to whom, to us, the word. And it's possible that that is a play on words that reaches back to the beginning of verse 12 where living is the word.

That there is some sense in which we're to see a relationship between the living word of God and for us the word.

[31 : 32] Those that see that in the passage consider this a response. One scholar put it this way.

He said, now the ball is in our court, so to speak. In other words, God is saying all this about his word and now the ball is in our court. Well, however you look at this, the idea of a response is inevitable.

And I think that last understanding would agree with the rest of the book so far. It's essential that we hear and respond appropriately with trust in the word of God.

How have you responded to the gospel? How have you responded today when that word pricked your heart, filleted your heart?

How did you respond? Did you respond like a sacrificial animal waiting to be cut by throwing your head back and saying, yes, God, that's me.

[32 : 49] Help. That's really what the word refers to there when it says we're exposed. It's the same word that's used in these sacrificial rites where the sacrifice is laid open, ready to be cut.

Thankfully, God won't do that to those that humble themselves in that way. I think Psalm 139, in Psalm 139, David represents this idea very well.

He portrays God's intimate awareness of him in the first six verses. And there he says, O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in behind and before. You lay your hand upon me.

[34 : 04] Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high. I cannot attain it. And in light of this knowledge, he responds in the last two verses with this word.

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

God is not God what God wants from each of us today? To have that kind of responsiveness to his word?

That kind of responsiveness to the word that exposes us? To those who ultimately reject God's word, it becomes a sort of judgment.

But to those of us who believe, we have the assurance that God is at work to make us a vibrant, gospel-centered, Christ-exalting, spirit-sanctified church.

[35 : 17] And it's truly a privilege to see that happening. So in review, let me repeat what I've said are the points, the main points of this passage.

God wants you, it's all about response. God wants you to respond appropriately to him in faith. God wants you to believe his word.

He wants you to value his word because it is alive. He wants you to value his word because it is effective. And he wants you to value it because valuing the word of God is what you need to do in order to respond in faith.

We might say, well, I believe in God, but there's some things that I just not sure of in the Bible. And we can listen to the culture around us.

And we can hear what they're saying about different issues. And we have a choice when we see that comparison. Where do you put your trust first?

[36 : 43] No matter how well reasoned the arguments are about marriage, about life, about children, about sexuality, about human preference, about life.

In the womb, where do you place your trust? To respond appropriately means to trust what God is saying to you now.

Today, if you hear his voice, still applies. And the only right choice is to humble yourself before God's exposing sword. Trust in Christ's work on your behalf.

Trust in his ongoing work to conform you into his image. and trust in his word to be effective in your life.