

Exposed—That You Might Find Rest

Hebrews 4:12-13

Halifax: 23 October 2022

Introduction:

Today we will continue our sermon series in the epistle to the Hebrews.

- In chapter 3 & 4, we have found warnings about hardening our hearts to God and His gracious call so that we are unable to enter His rest.
 - Nothing could be more tragic than to live your life, and then, at the last day, have the LORD Almighty expose what you are before Him and swear that you will never be allowed to enter His rest—into the enjoyment of what He has prepared for His people.
- In these chapters, we are urged again and again to take heed of hardening our hearts.
 - Once we resist God in a matter, there is no end to the hardening, unless, by His grace, we repent and turn back to Him.
 - It is a pitiful and dreadful thing to see a sinner so full of deception, so full of his lusts, so full of his excuses and justifications and arguments that he cannot respond to God.
- Last week, we got to Hebrews 4:11 and I decided to spend the entire time on this one verse.
 - It tells us to be diligent to enter God's rest.
 - God's word here impresses us with the fact that we are in a situation that requires effort, expenditure, hard labour, warfare, concentration.
 - We have our own flesh to contend with, the world that makes us think its approval and its provision is a must have, and Satan who uses all his craft to lead us to deception.
 - If we do not fight against these enemies, being ever on the lookout, they will easily take us as their prey. Worst of all, our hearts are deceitful and wicked.

Perhaps you will ask how you will be able to detect a heart that is departing?

- Is there anything that can help us to pick up on the fact that we are going wrong?
 - There is! Today we are going to look at what God has provided for us that we might be alerted to a heart that is declining from God.
 - I know for me, it was when I was in university—in my third year—that I began to use what God has provided for His people to expose them.
 - I began to see that I had an evil heart of unbelief that was departing from the living God—something I had never seen before—I became strangely aware because prior to that, I had always thought that all was well.
- I will read Hebrews chapter 4. See if you can tell what it is that God has given to us to know what is in our hearts—to know the state of our relationship with Him.
 - Give careful attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

Hebrews 4:1-16: Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. 2

For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed

with faith in those who heard *it*.³ For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: “So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest,’ ” although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.⁴ For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh *day* in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works”;⁵ and again in this *place*: “They shall not enter My rest.”⁶ Since therefore it remains that some *must* enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience,⁷ again He designates a certain day, saying in David, “Today,” after such a long time, as it has been said: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day.⁹ There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.¹⁰ For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his

works as God *did* from His.¹¹ Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.¹² For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.¹³ And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account.¹⁴ Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession.¹⁵ For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin.¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

May God bless His Holy and infallible word.

Today I draw your attention to verses 12 & 13.

- Here we have what God uses in our lives to expose the state of our hearts.

Let me read these verses again, Heb 4:12-13:

12 For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. **13** And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account.

The main idea here is very clear—

- **The word of God knows everything about you and it is able to reveal what is in you.**

This is what I encountered in university.

- Even though I had been to church and was thought to be a good boy by most people, I had never really heard the Word of God as the Word of God until that year.
 - I stayed up late, searching the scriptures and praying, because for the first time, God was truly speaking into my life—or perhaps I should say, for the first time, I was hearing Him.

I. But what is meant by “the word of God?”

- Does this speak of Christ, the Son of God, or of the Holy Scriptures?

A. The term is used either way in the Bible.

1. You are probably familiar with Jesus being referred to as the Word of God.
 - John begins His gospel by referring to Jesus as “the Word of God.”

- You know, when he says, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”
 - And then he tells us that He created everything, and in John 1:14, he says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we behold His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,” making it clear that he is talking about Jesus.
 - Jesus is also called “the Word of God” in Revelation 19:13 where it says:
 - **“He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.”**
2. But the Scriptures are also very often referred to as the Word of God.
- There are many examples like that of Acts 18:11, which says of Paul at Corinth, **And he continued *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.**
 - The Bible is called “the Word of God” because God speaks to us through the Scriptures—He used prophets to bring His word to us, and all Scriptures are God-breathed.
 - You do well when you receive it **“not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectively works in your who believe.”** (1 Thess 2:13).
 - Paul gave constant thanks when those he preached to did that.

B. Arguments can be made for either.

1. Some of the attributes that are attributed to the word of God in our text would seem more suited to Christ, but others would seem more suited to Scripture.
 - That it is living and powerful might seem to refer to a person, but that it is sharper than a sword would seem more likely to refer to the Bible.
 - Verse 13, however, definitely seems to speak of a person when it says that all things are naked and open to the eye of Him to whom we must give account.
 - Many say that verse 12 refers to scripture and verse 13 to God or Christ.
2. One argument in favour of the Word of God referring to Christ is that the Hebrew believers in the early church were very fond of this title for Him.
 - And of course this letter is written to Hebrew Christians.
3. I find it very interesting that most of the early church fathers thought it referred to Christ while most of the reformers thought it referred to Scripture.
 - That makes a lot of sense, if you think about it, because the early church fathers were in a battle with the Arian heretics about whether Christ was truly God or not... so they thought of Christ here as the divine logos.
 - But the reformers were not engaged in that battle.
 - They were contending with the Papists, who had taken the scriptures away from the people and set themselves up as the sole avenue by which God speaks to His people.

- The Papists agreed that Christ is God, but they contended with the Reformers, claiming that the scriptures should not be read to the people or translated in their language, lest they distort it.
 - They also argued that the authority rested in the church rather than in the scriptures, but the reformers claimed rightly that the ultimate authority for our faith and life is God the Spirit speaking through the Holy Scriptures.
 - They saw how the apostles preached the word and wrote the word, not just to the ministers of the church, but to all the people.
 - Which is the great issue for us today?
 - The truth is, there is a great rejection, even in the churches, of the Bible as the Word of God, but there is also a great rejection of the divinity of Christ.
 - If the truth be told, most mainline denominations are Arian—they do not believe that Christ is truly the Son of God.
 - I think many of us who are reformed would be inclined to say that here in Hebrews “the word of God” refers to the scriptures because of our heritage,
 - but I also think that there is a sense in which we *need* to see that it refers to Jesus because we sometimes err by responding to the Scriptures in an impersonal, mechanical way (like a manual of instruction) instead of as the voice of the living God speaking to us.
 - We can go to church as if we are only there to gain information from a sermon rather than to meet with our God.
 - I think one thing that has contributed to that problem is our neglect of the Lord’s Supper.
- C. Two things are very important about our query of what “Word of God” refers to in verse 12.
1. First, we should realise that the Son of God and the Scriptures are inseparable.
 - The Holy Scriptures are the way that He, as a living person, speaks to us.
 - This passage ought to be a wakeup call to us if we are reading the Bible or hearing it as an instruction manual and not as the voice of God’s Son to us.
 - It is a cold barren heart that could read these words without considering the person of Christ, without engaging with Him as a divine person who is very near to us.
 - To come away from a passage like this as if we had read an information document is to entirely miss the point.
 - But is that not something you often do?
 - I know that it is something I often do, and I am ashamed that it is so.
 - I tell you, we have a problem with this in our day and it needs to be rectified.
- I said there were two important things about this. The second is closely related to the first.

2. The second is that when the Bible uses the word *logos* as it does here, we should think especially of that which reveals God to us.
 - We could almost call the “Word of God” the “Revelation of God.”
 - When Jesus is called the Logos in John 1, He is clearly being spoken of as God who has been revealed to us.
 - And when we speak of the scriptures as the logos of God, we are also speaking of what reveals God and His thoughts and person to us.
 - In this case, it is the revelation of what He thinks of us.
3. So what we need to see here is that the word of God engages with us—
 - However you look at it, it is meant to bring us into an encounter with our God.
 - His Word is that which brings us into contact with Him.

II. Let’s look at the characteristics of the word of God as described in our text.

A. First, that the word of God is living and powerful.

1. It is living in that it meets us in real time—it connects with us right where we are.
 - I hope you have had this experience where God has spoken to you.
 - Where you read or hear about sin, and you see that you are the sinner.
 - Or where you read about God’s love and you are impressed with the fact that He loves you—even you.
 - The Scriptures are alive and Jesus is alive.
 - He brings encouragement to you, right when you need it, even though sometimes you have to wait long for it and agonise in prayer.
 - He brings conviction to you, right when you need it.
 - He brings you instruction, just when you need it.
2. And the encounter with the word is powerful.
 - The word powerful speaks of energy—the word is busy about us, it is operative in you, it works in you. Some versions translate *living and active*.
 - It can entirely transform you—there is divine energy in it.
 - It can take a drunkard and remove his thirst.
 - It can take an angry man and make him a caring compassionate man who protects others instead of attacking them.
 - It can take a cowardly man and make him as bold as a lion—when he comes to see that God is with him and no one can ultimately harm him.
 - It can take a girl who has no interest in God and make her commit her whole life to God.
 - It can take a woman in despair and give her living hope.
 - Matthew Henry says:
 - “It is so powerful that it can pull down strongholds, raise the dead, make the deaf to hear, the blind to see, the dumb to speak, and the lame to walk. It can batter down Satan’s kingdom and set up the kingdom of Christ.”
3. Sadly, few people know the Word of God as living and powerful.

- a. They have never engaged with its power—never experienced it.
 - To them, it is a dead letter that does nothing.
 - Is that the case with you?
 - If it is, then I encourage you to come to read the word as the word and to pray earnestly that the Lord will make Himself known to you.
 - b. I heard the story this week of John Thorpe that illustrates what the word can do.
 - He was a contemporary of the Wesleys and the famous preacher, George Whitfield.
 - He had not experienced the word as living and powerful.
 - He was in a group called the Hell-fire Club. They made it their business to oppose and mock the gospel. They engaged in immorality and even openly sought to blaspheme the Holy Spirit.
 - But everything changed for John Thorpe.
 - He was in a public house and four members of the club decided to compete with each other in mocking the preaching of George Whitfield—one of the most powerful preachers of the day.
 - Whitfield was a small and unattractive man—being permanently cross-eyed—but he had an amazing voice that could be heard from far away.
 - These men in the hell-fire club were to open a Bible and preach on whatever verse they encountered to see who could do the best impersonation of George Whitfield.
 - Thorpe was the last to take a turn and after crossing his eyes, to peals of laughter, he announced confidently, “I will beat you all.”
 - He opened the Bible and his eyes fell on Luke 13:3, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”
 - He read the verse and immediately encountered the life and power of the word.
 - He was completely overcome and began to truly preach on the text, such that the whole place fell silent.
 - When he finished, he was began to tremble and weep and for the rest of his life became a faithful preacher of the gospel, leading many souls to Christ.
 - c. I do not tell this to say that everyone must have an experience like John Thorpe.
 - We are told of faithful Timothy, who grew up knowing the holy Scriptures that were able to make him wise to salvation. That is glorious.
 - But Timothy certainly knew the transforming power of God’s word.
 - He encountered his Saviour as he served Him and was transformed and renewed by God’s word, day after day.
 - He knew Him as a living Saviour.
- The Word of God is living and powerful.

B. Second, we are told that it pierces deeply.

- Verse 12 says that it is **“shaper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”**
1. It is said to be sharper than any two-edged sword because it can go deeper than any sword of man.
 - It can cut right down inside of your very soul and spirit.
 - That is what the language refers to here.
 - It is not that it cuts the soul and the spirit apart from each other, or that it separates the joints and the marrow—they are not even connected.
 - The imagery here is that it can cut these deep places wide open for viewing—these places that are ordinarily quite hidden.
 2. What happens when it does this?
 - It exposes your motives that you don’t want to fully face, your intentions that embarrass you when you are forced to face them—
 - Things like the joy you have when someone else, even a friend, fails;
 - Or the real intention you had when you made a funny comment—that was really aimed at hurting someone.
 - Or the real reason you walked down one street instead of another—because your corrupt heart was full of lust, and there was something you wanted to see.
 3. It can cut through all the defences that we put up—
 - the tough layers of pride, of false security, of anger, of unbelief—
 - all the shadows, the excuses, the justifications, the evasions, the deliberate ignorance—
 - such as when you knew about your neighbour’s need and pretended that you did not see it.

TRANS> There is nothing else so sharp as the word of God.

C. Third, that it exposes us before Him who will judge us.

- Verse 13 says: **“And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give account.*”**
1. It is one thing to have the sword *show* you what is deep inside of you, but it is quite another thing to have God *judge* what is there.
 - You might see an ugly motive or intention deep within your spirit, but it is not so ugly to you
 - I talked about being embarrassed when God’s word exposes your true motives, and such embarrassment often happens—we say, “It was so wicked of me to rejoice in my friend’s failure.”
 - You can evaluate to a certain extent; but verse 13 speaks of having *the LORD* evaluate what you have done or not done.
 - You come off like Isaiah when he saw the LORD high and lifted up: “Woe is me, for I am undone, a man of unclean lips.”

- What seemed fairly acceptable to you, after it is brought before Him seems wretched and inexcusable.
 - Perhaps you have experienced this with other people—perhaps you are telling a story about what you did to someone and the other person doesn't laugh.
 - They think what you did was very cruel and unacceptable—and suddenly you realise that they are right.
 - How much more do you come to that kind of reality when the LORD reveals to you what He thinks about your conduct?
2. The point is, it is not just that there is a book that is exposing some things about you.
- It is that everything about you is completely wide open before God, and it was wide open the whole time and He sees it for what it really is!
 - What the word had to penetrate and cut open in order for us to see it, God saw all along.
3. In the final analysis, the only one whose judgement really matters is not yours but His!
- He is the judge of all the earth and we have to give an account to Him for everything we have ever done.
 - All things are naked and open to Him. Nothing slips under the cracks or get missed or forgotten.
 - All of this true—very true and very significant.
 - But how rarely we think about it! God is watching. God sees it all. God remembers it all. God will judge it all.
 - This is the reality.
 - It will change your life to face it.

TRANS> At first, we may want to avoid this sword that searches us out, and forget about this holy Judge who knows everything about us. It is too unsettling...

III. But think about how useful it is to have this Word and this Judge if you want to enter His rest!

- A. You might not even notice that you are hardening your heart and departing from Him.
1. You have made your excuses and have supported what you are doing in your own conscience—and you could keep on going down that path all the way to destruction.
 - What starts as a little departure can lead to more departure from God.
 2. What could be better than to have a word that can show you what is in you and a Judge who can tell you if what you find is good or evil—and just how evil?
 - If you are wise, you will come before Him like we see in Psalm 139, and ask Him to search you and try you.
 - This is the way you can find what is there and what needs to change.
- B. Now someone will say, “But why would anyone want to discover such things?”

1. It is indeed uncomfortable. I grant you that!
 - It is uncomfortable to have Him search you out!
 - But it is greatly to be desired!
2. It is to be desired because He is not only a holy Judge, but also a powerful and gracious Saviour.
 - He went to the cross to atone for your sin—so you can be pardoned.
 - He poured out His Spirit to sanctify you, so when your sin is exposed, you turn to Him to deliver you!
 - Just as you would want to know that you had cancer if you knew that there was a complete cure for you,
3. And do you remember what we learned in the Song of Solomon?
 - When He sees a spark of true repentance, a tiny drop of godly desire, a grain of love for Him,
 - and He takes extreme delight in it!
 - It is the result of His gracious saving work in you that He gives to you when you look to Him.
 - Those sparks and those drops and those grains are a sure evidence that you are destined to enter into His rest!
 - And our gracious God is happier about that than you are!

Conclusion: So what is the takeaway?

- Don't be afraid of exposure! Come to the living Word!
 - It is so much better to be exposed now when you can flee to the Saviour than on the day of judgment when you will be exposed without a remedy.
- Spend time in His word, prayerfully before His face.
 - Live your whole life, before His face as a holy judge—yes indeed—but also as a gracious loving Saviour who is ready and able to help you.
 - Welcome Him as your judge so that you can welcome Him as your Saviour.
 - Why should you miss out on the blessing of so great a salvation? of knowing and walking with such a holy and gracious God?