

Sermon 11: Hebrews 4:11-13: Heeding God's Word

OUTLINE

God's living word
God's penetrating word
God's judging word

INTRODUCTION

God's word could be compared to a swiss army knife, a tool fit for every purpose. Given who breathes it out; its nature as God's word; and its purpose to help us in every situation as Paul says, 2 Tim. 3:16-17, 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.' The word of God is described in so many ways. Think about the metaphors the bible uses to describe God's word. The word of God is greater than any earthly treasure, Ps. 19:10, 'More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold.' And it satisfies the heart better than any food can satisfy the palate, 'sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.' Speaking of the heart it is said to revive the soul, and rejoice the heart, Ps. 19:7-8. Speaking of food, the word of God is compared to bread that sustains us in the wilderness, meat to strengthen the mature saint, and milk to help the young believer to grow. It is something that can do us good as God's word is spoken of as a type of birth canal that causes us to be born again by a living word, James 1:18. In the parable of the sower it is compared to seed that results in eternal life and fruit. The word is compared to water which Christ Himself uses to wash His bride of sin, Eph. 5:26. It is a light that shines in the darkness to bring salvation; it is a lamp for our feet instructing us in how to walk; and dispelling darkness from hearts and minds. James describes it as a mirror in which we can see our sins and ourselves clearly. But it is also something dangerous, as it is described as a fire and a hammer, Jer. 23:29, 'Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?' Today we are confronted with this dangerous aspect of God's word, as a sword. It is a sharp, double edged, irresistible thing that is strong enough to raise the dead, turn away satan, or penetrate the impenetrable, the sinner's heart. It is the standard by which we will one day be judged.

We are in the third part of a series of strong exhortations that are based on Ps. 95. We have seen strong warnings against unbelief and that God's word must be heeded; we have heard the strong warnings to strive with persevering faith and not fall short of God's rest; this last section ends with a reminder of the nature of God's word, the word that we must heed, and the word that will one day hold us accountable. Our section starts with v11, 'Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience'. This verse highlights that our response to the call to hear God's voice calling us to not fall short of His rest in unbelief requires a response of persevering faith. We see this strong word of striving. This has the same root word as zeal and has connotations of eagerness/haste. Think of it in the same way as Paul says it in Phil. 3:13-14, 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.' We stressed last week, that this is not working for salvation but from salvation, that this is the evidence of an already saving faith. This is motivated, not by a fear that feels insecure in their salvation or scared that God

is going to lash out or not keep His word, but a faith informed fear of God's warnings. This striving we have stressed is how God works in us both to will and to do as we will and do; and how this striving is not alone but we are fully supplied. The text before us moves on from this thought with a reason for saying all of this in v12, 'For,' and this brings us to the concern of our section. Strive to enter rest, do not give way to unbelief because of the word of God. It is this idea we are opening up under three headings, God's word is living; God's word is penetrating; God's judging word.

God's living word

V12a, 'For the word of God is living and active'. Before the author moves on to the specific functions of the word exposing the heart and judging sin, we first have some more general characteristics of the word of God put forward. We have here aspects of God's word that make it different to the words of man. Take the best thing that human beings have ever written and compare it to God's word. We could say that it was affecting as our minds and hearts were moved, we could say it was lively; but no word of man can be living as God's word is living; or active as God's word is active.

The reason the word of God is living is because God attends His word. His word is written by the Spirit and is the sword of the Spirit to affect God's will. His word spoke the universe into being; Christ's word at Lazarus's graveside drew him from death and the tomb; and God is speaking through His written word. This is the point of the author of Hebrews as he quotes Ps. 95 affirming that God is speaking today through His written word, a word of warning to avoid unbelief. Is. 55:10-11, 'For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.' In fact the word active is *ἐνεργής*, *effective, productive of due result*.¹

This has several implications for us. Firstly, there are those who make a division between God and His word. There are those who Christians make too much of the Bible and we need more of the Spirit. We see here that God attends His word, that this is a false division, if we would have God work richly in our lives, then we need to have a word rich life. Col. 3:16, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.' This is how you are continually filled with the Spirit.

Secondly, if God attends His word this means that He enables us to keep the word He commands. Not only does He speak it but attends it with His power to enable us to obey it. We are not left to keep God's word with only our own strength to draw on. His word because it is accompanied by His Spirit is able to succeed in that for which it is sent. Do not see these calls to strive and persevere as heavy burdens that we are left to do on our own, appreciate that the same God that commands us helps us through that same word.

Thirdly, let the word work. Put the word out there and God will do great things. Here are two examples, the first is in the bible. Remember the boy king Josiah. We see in 2 Kings 22 where when tidying up the neglected temple that had fallen into disuse, the book of the law was discovered. It was read to the king and he

1 Alexander Souter, [*A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 83.

tore his clothes and this began a great revival in Israel. The word did the work. The second example is from history, think of the Reformation. Erasmus put together a Greek Bible along with a fresh Latin translation and with the new technology of the printing press, the word of God translated without the problems of the Latin vulgate opened many eyes. Martin Luther was one who came to see things more clearly from the word. Commenting on the work of God in the reformation he said, 'I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it, I did nothing. The Word did it all.'² I could multiply examples of men and women and children who have read the word of God and it was living and active and converted them. Satan loves to attack God's word but our confidence is in it, let us let it loose as Luther did.

God's penetrating word

V12b, 'sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow.' There are positive references to the word of God as a sword, like when it is part of our offensive armour in our fight against principalities and powers. But the sword is also an instrument of judgement. The government holds the power of the sword to put criminals to death; to bring force against insurrections; and hold off attacking nations. There is the word of God as a sword that we wield which is the power of the gospel for those who believe. But there is also the word of God as a sword when it is wielded against the sin in our lives. Jesus in His kingly role as judge is shown to have a sword. Rev. 1:16, 'from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.' With which He will judge the nations, 19:15. This sword will be applied to those who are appear to be part of the visible church, the vine but who are not actually spiritually one with Christ, grafted into it. It is these branches that do not bear fruit that will be cut off and thrown into the fire.

The description of this sword is impressive. There is no sharper weapon than the word of God. It has a blade that cannot dull, the word of the Lord abides for ever, Is. 40:6-8. It is a deadly sword, double edged is an indication that it cuts twice as much as a regular sword doing double damage. It is irresistible in its penetrating power, there is no armour that can withstand it. The author uses distinctions from the material world, joint and marrow; and the immaterial world, soul and spirit, to show that the human heart is laid bare before God's word. This is pointing to the function of God's word as a mirror, to increase the knowledge of sin.

There are two ways we want to think about how the word of God as a slaying sword against our sins. Firstly, if you are a believer you have already tasted this penetrating power of God's word in the conviction of sin that is part of what the Holy Spirit does in the life of any sinner in bringing them to saving faith in Christ. We see something of this on the day of Pentecost when Peter convicts the Jews of rejecting and crucifying their own Messiah, convicted of their need for salvation and being complicit in the death of Christ we are told that they were cut to the heart. Acts 2:37-39, 'Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"'³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the

2 R. Kent Hughes, [*Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*](#), vol. 1, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 120.

name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” Here we see the sweet pain of God’s convicting word, the wound that heals. Not all conversion stories are the same but there will be some common ingredients in all true conversions. There will be sensibleness of sin, an understanding of our unworthiness before God and His judgement against sin; there must be an understanding of Jesus who became man in order to save us from our sins, that His cross is absolutely necessary to pay our sin debt; the Spirit who opens our eyes uses the truths of God’s word applying them to us in such a way that we are convinced of sin, righteousness and judgement, that Jesus is our only hope. Part of this process included God penetrating the excuses, cutting through the lies, exposing the underlying intentions and desires of our hearts. Those moments when it felt that God was speaking directly to you in a sermon; or when it felt like all the thoughts of your heart were laid bare; when the full weight of all your sins came crashing in humbling you and showing you that Jesus alone can save such a sinner. This is one of the ways the word of God penetrates sinful hearts. On the day of Pentecost, three thousand were cut to the heart. There was a great wave of conviction that gripped not just one or two but thousands amongst those who heard. Church history is full of this mass conviction as well. David Brainerd was a missionary to the red Indians in the 1700’s, he gives the following account: “The power of God seemed to descend upon the assembly like a mighty, rushing wind, and with an astonishing energy bore down all before it. I stood amazed at the influence, which seized the audience almost universally; and could compare it to nothing more apt than the irresistible force of a mighty torrent or a swelling deluge that with it’s insupportable weight and pressure bears down and sweeps before it whatever comes in it’s way. Almost all persons of all ages were bowed down with concern together, and scarcely one was able to withstand the shock of this surprising operation; old men and women, who had been drunken wretches for many years and some little children, not more than six or seven years of age, appeared in distress for their souls, as well as persons of middle age.... They were almost universally praying and crying for mercy in every part of the house, and many out of doors, and numbers could neither go nor stand. Their concern was so great, each one for himself, that none seemed to take any notice of those about them, but each prayed freely for himself.” (The Revival we need, O. J. Smith, p52-3). Similar testimonies are given by John Wesley, George Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards, and others. When we pray for revival and pray for the word of God to go forward this is part of what we are asking for.

But the second way in which the sword applies to us is in addressing the sins of our hearts as believers. This is the way the author is pressing it here. He as a believer knows first hand what it feels like to be on the surgeons table, and unlike surgery on our bodies, you need to be awake and feel every pain when doing surgery on the heart. The removal of every cancer of sin is felt as it feels like putting to death a puppy you have fed by your own hand because you gave your heart to that sin. Some of our sins lie so deep within; they have grown into our very identity and sense of self; they prop up our sense of security; we may have set our hopes upon them; we may have a long love affair and sacrificial service history towards them. And as God takes His blade and penetrates the seared conscience; as He peels back the excuses; as He hacks through the bones of recalcitrance; as He strikes exposed nerves. We feel the pain. We want to draw back from it but we also know its goodness and rightness and long term sweetness. We see our need, feel our unwillingness, fell ourselves about to beg He stop, but we know He must go on. Ps. 139:23-24 articulates the desire we

want to triumph over our desire to draw away, '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!' it is no wonder to me that after one of the most beautiful psalms describing the virtues of God's word, we see this desire for the word to do its painful work, 'Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.' Embrace the pain of God's cutting word. Do not shrink back from it. If it points out a fault or a flaw don't do the knee jerk thing of anger or blame or excuses, listen, submit, repent, ask for God's help to change. God's word is living, it is active, it is the sword of the Spirit, He is not a cruel Father who wishes to traumatize you, the pain highlights a problem that we can now address with obedience and repentance. In the instance of these Jewish believers thinking about giving into apostasy. Let the cowardice be exposed, let the willingness to betray the one who has done them no wrong even though He has done so much for them, sting. Let them feel foolish for their willful blindness to Christ's sufficiency. Let them feel embarrassed for being as bad as that generation that fell in the wilderness. It is the penetrating power of God's word as it cuts us to the heart that helps us back into our obedience.

God's judging word

V13, '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.' You will notice as we get into this last verse the language moves from describing God's word to describing God. The close association of God with His word is underlined. Many have taken this shift to agree with earlier statements about Jesus as the word of God and the Logos. The point of this verse is to underline that God's word is God's standard. The commandments of God's law that He urges us with today, are the same laws that will test our works on the day of judgement. It is similar to something Jesus said in John 12:48, 'The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.' In fact the law is able to discern our innermost thoughts because it is God's word and He knows our innermost thoughts. Remember that if you feel convicted by God's word, He too is aware of all those inner sins and thoughts that His word has exposed. This is a key verse about the omniscience of God; and the omniscience of God has particular relevance for the judgement. Earthly justice is imperfect because the judge cannot read hearts and minds, because the judge was not present when the crime was committed. God does not have these problems, He knows all including our inner thoughts. Everything lies naked and exposed before Him. The word for exposed is, 'τραχηλίζω (from τράχηλος, 'neck', probably referring originally to the bending back of the head in sacrifice so as to expose the neck.'³ Many delight in the thought that God will render perfect justice on that final day because they are worried about what others deserve. The author of Hebrews is applying this point that we might look into our own hearts. We have heard God's word, we are accountable, if we turn away from it, if we refuse to heed its warnings to believe upon Christ, to hold fast to Christ, then he is telling us that the wrong you know you are doing now is an indication of what sort of sentence you will receive on that day. These are strong words

3 Alexander Souter, [*A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 263.

directed not at the saint who is seeking to honour God and live a holy life but falls and gets up again, these are words of warning for those who know the truth about Christ but are willing to turn away from Him anyway. On the one hand the word of God is a wonderful gift that illuminates, encourages, promises, exhorts, the very vehicle of the Spirit at work in our lives; but on the other it is also full of warnings and those who do not listen to it do so at their peril.