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# The Penetrating Power of God's Word

## Hebrews 4:11-13

We have been following the Author in the presentation of his case. He has argued for the utter supremacy of Jesus, *so that we can completely trust Him*. Jesus is superior to the prophets and to the angels, so you must not drift from God's Word nor neglect the greatness of your salvation. Jesus is superior to Moses and to Joshua, so you must not doubt God's Word nor fail to enter the greatness of your rest.

Interwoven through the paragraphs from 3:7-4:11 are the strands of the **proof** of an Old Testament text, the **peril** of a hardened and unbelieving heart and the **privilege** of a rest to enter. Chapter 4:1-11 drives home that God's rest is for us. Entering that rest looks like believing in an obeying way. It looks like trust.

So how can trust be like rest? Trust and believing obedience are an ongoing confidence in God and His Word and His commitment to keep His promises because of Jesus.

So the superiority of Jesus Christ demands that we strive to believe God's Word in an obeying way. In other words, magnifying Christ matures saints *in their believing obedience to the Word*.

The Scriptures contain within them powerful testimonies and descriptions of what the Word is. The Bible is God-breathed. It is a seed from which spring spiritual life producing fruit. It is a lamp whose light turns away the darkness and brightens the path for our feet. It is milk for spiritual babes. It is meat and manna to strengthen and sustain growing saints. It is an anchor for heavenly souls to keep them from sinful drift. It is a guidebook whose directions point us heavenward and whose commandments shape our love for God and man. And it is a sword: the sword of the Spirit.

It is as that metaphor that the Word of God comes to us in this paragraph.

<sup>11</sup> Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.

## The Connections to the Context

*for*

Verse eleven opens with the word *for*. So listen to what he is saying. "Let us, therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience because the Word of God is all that this verse says it is."

So that leads me to ask the following:

### ***Whose Example of Disobedience?***

The example is that of Israel in the wilderness. Israel threw away their opportunity to enter God's rest. They did so because they would not believe God's Word in an obeying way. So our disobedient unbelief follows Israel's example. The clear implication is that we will also suffer their fate. Now, he has made it very clear that he is not equating the rest with any physical or geographical reality. It is the spiritual reality of believing God's promises and moving forward in obedience in a way that enters into the work that God through Jesus Christ has already completed.

### ***Disobedience to What?***

What then did Israel disobey? They did not believe and obey the Word. Look carefully at verse 2. "For we also have had the gospel preached to us, *just as they did*; but the message [word] they heard was of no value to them because those who heard did not combine it with faith [believing obedience]." The unbelieving disobedience then is to the word ( *o logos* ) they heard and we have. What was the word they heard? It was good news: the good news that God would fulfill all His promises to them of salvation, sanctification and glorification. It was good news that they could now begin to possess that which could only be fully realized in eternity. It was not something dimly heard or barely understood. They had been thoroughly good newswed.

So what was the problem? The word did not profit them because they did not believe it. So the exhortation comes to us that we must be diligent to hear the word. We must give all our energy to believe in it, to trust it, to embrace it, to obey it and to be satisfied by it so that we do not murmur and want to turn away from God and go back to the Egypt of sin. So today's text is an argument for why we should be so diligent to enter God's rest by hearing and believing in an obeying way God's word. (Piper)

It is our aim to enter the God's rest so that His worth is magnified.

We do that by trusting God.

The focus of our trust is in believing God's Word and promises in an obeying way.

Therefore, we must hold our mind and spiritual attention to the Word of God.

Peter emphasizes this same truth in 2 Peter 1:2-4. The power of God for everything we need for life and godliness comes to us through the promises of God believed and acted on. This is entering God's rest. This is why so many of you are troubled and stressed and depressed and carnal—you are not believing God's promises and acting on them. One of the most distressing things as a shepherd is to keep giving you the Scriptures, to keep bringing you to the green pastures and still waters of God's Word and to watch many turning to dry husks and muddy waters hoping for something familiar, easier and better. And it is one of our greatest joys to see sheep deeply satisfied with God's pastures and diligently laboring to enter today the rest that future grace will bring.

What is it then that makes the Word important to those with hardened unbelieving hearts and to those who are making every effort to believe God in an obeying way? It is the characteristics of the Word.

## The Characteristics of the Word

(v.12)

### *Its Amazing Attributes*

Two words here are used to describe what the Word of God actually is. They may be metaphors, but they are ways in which we are to think of the Word.

The Word is **alive**. What we handle physically here in paper and ink is not all there is to it. The truth in these words is the very living mind and thoughts of Jesus Christ inscripturated. It may only look like a book, but it is alive. A seed may appear to be just fibrous tissue, but it is alive. And because it is alive, it can be life giving.

The Word is **active**. The word is *energeo*. The Word is an energizing force, a power. It is like a wire conduit. It may appear to be only plastic wrapped wire, but flowing in it is the energizing power of electricity. So the Word is flowing with the power of the Spirit. And because it is active, it can be enabling.

So, all of you. Pick up whatever serves as your Bible (and shame on you if you do not have yours with you.) Imagine. The Word is alive and thrumming with God's power. Your soul is the socket and the promises of God are the plug that brings that living and energizing power into your life.

So what we have in the Word is not merely talk written down, but living power pulsating with spiritual potential. Is that how we think of God's Word? The Author also wants us to think of the Word in another way: As a sword.

### *Its Penetrating Power*

There are two basic sword designs. There is the long, thin rapier design familiar to us in fencing. Even as a weapon it is designed to cut and scratch and pierce. Its chief advantage is speed and weight and reach. It is a sword used with the tip in mind. There is also the short broadsword. It was wider and was fought as an edge. It required much more strength to wield. In some armies in the ancient world, this sword was used primarily to hack and maim and thus was often curved.

The sword described here would be familiar to anyone in Roman days. The Romans had perfected the idea of an edged sword. It was wider out toward the tip than at the base yet had a point to it. As a result, it had a natural swing to it. Yet, it was double edged almost its whole length and was immensely strong and powerfully used for penetrating thrusts. This is the image given to us here of the Word of God.

Now why do we need the Word to be a sharp double-edged sword whose calculating design is for powerfully deep thrusts? Because we have hard, tough fibrous hearts, thickly callused by unbelief and disobedience and self-deception. Like a sword designed to penetrate through the body, the Word is designed to penetrate the soul.

When it penetrates the soul, it assesses and weighs and judges what it finds there. It evaluates our thinking processes and our heart attitudes. It is alive and active and powerfully penetrating to the uncovering of our deepest rationalizations and motivations. It has the Spirit given capacity to get through the surface externals and get at the vital internals of whom and what we are. Its living, penetrating power critiques our unbelief and our disobedience. Its vital truth rips the pleasant mask off the ugly face of sin. (Piper)

This is important to understand at a very practical level. One of the reasons you sin is because you are deceived at some level. You start believing the lies of sin instead of the promises of God. Further, as one writer put it:

Sin whispers through the desires of the flesh and the rationalizations of the mind, your only hope of future happiness is to have an abortion. It whispers that you will not have a chance in the future if you don't cheat on this test. It says that you won't be noticed and liked if you don't dress provocatively. It says, you will lose the one person who seems to care for you if you don't compromise your sexual standards. It says that you won't have job security if you speak up about the dishonest practices at work. It says your life will be wasted in this relationship if you don't get a divorce. It says that only a fool would go on looking weak instead of getting some kind of revenge. Every one of these statements is a lie. It is what Hebrews 3:13 calls the 'deceitfulness of sin.' Now these lies sometimes lodge themselves so deep in the heart as thoughts and intentions that seem unshakably true because of the hardness of deception that encloses them like a dark, sealed casket. ... The Word of God is our only hope. The good news of God's promises and the warnings of His [chastening] are sharp enough and living enough and active enough to penetrate to the bottom of my heart and show me that the lies of sin are indeed lies. ... The Word of God's promise is like throwing open a great window of bright morning sun on the shiny-back roaches of sin masquerading as satisfying pleasures in our hearts. [Piper, *Hebrews*].

So let us make every effort to believe God in an obeying way because the Bible is alive with spiritual power and sharp with penetrating power. It has the capacity to enable us to enter God's rest and the sharpness to expose the deceits of sin and the rationalizations of my heart that cause me to be seduced by sin and not prize God's promises.

The callus hardness of our hearts and the deceitfulness of sin and the sin-rationalizing thoughts and motivations may lie deep and be buried under years of sediment so that we need the word to expose us to ourselves. But this is not so with God.

## **The Accountability to our God**

**(v.13)**

This verse is shatteringly graphic in how it portrays our vulnerability and accountability to God.

### ***The General Statement***

No created thing is hidden from God's sight. The all-seeing and omniscient eye of God sees everything. He knows when we sit down and when we get up. He knows our thoughts before we think them. He knows the when and what and where and why of everything about us. There is no escaping this. So we are utterly open and naked and bare before God.

### ***The Graphic Metaphor***

This next phrase is an idiom in the Greek. The image turns on the word *trachelizo* from which we get our word *trachea* for throat. The word means literally to seize by the throat and to bend so as to bare it and expose the jugular to the knife. The word was first used when bringing a sacrifice. The lamb's neck was bent and exposed to the sacrificial knife. The Romans used the word in their gladiatorial combat when one gladiator would hold and turn his opponent in such a way as to expose his throat to a killing stroke. Thus, the word

came to mean laid bared and vulnerable. We are not only visible to God but we are horribly vulnerable to God.

### ***The Gripping Consequence***

What is the consequence of being visible and vulnerable to God? We will give an account. Curiously, the word translated *give an account* is the word *logos*. We have seen that word in verse 2 (message) and in verse 12 (word) and now verse 13 (account). So the truth of God to us uncovers the truth about us so that we will respond in truth to God.

Words like this are the reason Peter says in 1 Peter 1:17 that we are to live our lives, to conduct ourselves in *reverential fear*.

But I want to say this as well. This paragraph comes to us as a strong and gripping and powerful exhortation. We must make every effort to believe God in an obeying way because the Word penetrates our sin-justifying deceptions and motivations and because we are utterly visible and vulnerable to God. To many, that sounds threatening. And in some ways it is.

To me, it is what I want. I purpose to expose my callused and hard heart to the sword of the living and powerful Word so that I will feel with real pain and with repentant change my unbelieving disobedience. And I will so bend my stiff neck and be gripped by the hand of God's grace so that I am totally vulnerable and open and bared to the laser-like probing of His eyes. I believe in those moments, my believing obedience will be rest.

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## **Reflect and Respond**

This is why the Bible is not like any other book. No other Book has within it the power to penetrate and transform.

This is why, week after week, service after service, we will simply exposit the Bible to you. We will expose it to you. And we will expose you to it.

What is the conclusion of the matter? Let us turn from the deceptive promises of sin and trust the all satisfying promises of God. Because of the Word of God, let us believe God in an obeying way.

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## Notes