

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

Heart Surgery
Hebrews 4:12-13

In honor of God and His Word would you stand with me as we read together Hebrews 4:12-13:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.
Hebrews 4:12-13

Several weeks ago I told you about my rock-climbing experience at Rocky Butte. What I didn't tell you was the rest of the story. Several asked me after the service, "Well, did you make it to the top?"

As you'll recall, I had reached the half-way point as I scaled that 30 foot cliff. Suspended in midair, I searched in vain for the slightest foothold for my feet or niche for my hands in order to push or pull myself to the next level. But all I saw was a daunting sheer and steep cliff. Simply put, I was stuck. I knew I couldn't go up and my trainer wouldn't let me go down. But he did tell me what I was doing wrong and he praised me for what I was doing right. From his advantageous position below, he was able to point out footholds and niches in the cliff that I failed to see. I was too close to the problem. Thanks to his words of counsel and encouragement, I got unstuck and made it to the top. And there I was able to rest.

As we journey of the Christian life towards our promised "rest" (as described in the preceding verses), we sometimes feel stuck, just like I did half-way up that cliff. If you're like me, there are times when you just can't see the next move, or seem to get a handle on a particular weakness or temptation. There are times when you feel *stuck*.

The book of Hebrews is written to believers who are *stuck*. They have failed to move on to new levels of maturity. They have become content with the status-quo. To help address this problem, the speaker (and remember, this book was a spoken message delivered to the early church) reminds them and us of what will dislodge us and get us unstuck. In doing this, it also reminds us that our biggest problem is without, but within. It all comes down to a problem of the heart. And these verses tell us how God addresses that problem, performing "heart surgery" using the scalpel of his word.

It's interesting that as Joshua was about to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land, God gave them an important command. He pointed Joshua and the people to this same "means of grace" that would see them through and keep them from getting "stuck" as they conquered the Land.¹ Do you remember what God told them? It's found in Joshua 1: 8

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

You will be “prosperous and successful.” For Israel, this meant to enter the land and to inherit the promised “rest,” which, of course, is the theme of the preceding verses. And the way to do this was to listen to, meditate on, and obey God’s word. This would keep them from getting stuck.

And the same is true for you and me. These verses in Hebrews are saying exactly the same thing. They begin with the little word “for.” It’s been said that “God swings big doors on little hinges.” This little word “for” is one of those little hinges which ties these verses to what precedes. If we are to enter God’s rest (i.e. his rich reward for work well done) in the future, we cannot ignore God’s word in the present.

But how is it that God’s Word can have this kind of impact on our lives? How does God’s word dislodge us and get us unstuck? We’re told why and how in the very first word of the verse.

GOD’S WORD IS LIVING

In the language of the writer, the first word of the verse is not the word “for,” but the word “living.” As English speakers, we always seem to think our way of wording phrases makes the most sense. I mean, after all, it just makes good sense to put the subject first, then the verb, and then the object. But when I learned another language, I had to get over such an arrogant attitude. The Greek language has its own characteristics, one of which is to place right at the beginning of the sentence the word or words which are to be emphasized. Here’s how verse 12 reads literally, “*Living* is the word of God...”

Jesus said, “The words which I have spoken are spirit and are *life*” (John 6:63). Other books are interesting; but the Bible is living. Other books were given for our information; the Bible was given for our transformation. We are bombarded on every side by all kinds of alternatives to this Book, the Bible. Some of us have even replaced the Bible itself with books (...even very good books!) by well-known Christian authors. While I am a firm believer in good Christian books, there is no replacement for God’s Word. There is no other book outside the Bible that is “living.” Martin Luther once said, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.”ⁱⁱ

No only does it have feet and hands. It also has eyes! The very next verse, still speaking of God’s word, says: “Nothing is hidden from God’s sight.” More literally it says, “Nothing is hidden from *his eyes*.” Whose eyes? – the eyes of God’s word. In other words, God’s word is so closely identified with God himself, that the two are inseparable. No wonder God’s word is living! When you open this book, you are hearing God speak.ⁱⁱⁱ

GOD’S WORD IS ACTIVE

Because God’s word is living, it is also active. “For the word of God is living and *active*,” he writes. The word in the language of the writer is the word from which we get our word “energy.” It’s the very same word that describes the power of God “at work” in raising Jesus from the dead! (Ephesians 1:20)

Now that's a popular word these days. People talk a lot about sensing "energy" in a person or among a group of people. The Word of God is like that. It's full of "energy." It's not passive and inactive. No, it is active and energizing.

I received an email the other day from someone who is not a believer in Christ, but has attended our Sunday service on a couple of occasions. He gave a very honest, candid evaluation of what he experienced. One thing that he said was that there was a lot of "energy" among us. I don't think it comes from us, in and of ourselves! After all, as I said last week, many of us look so tired! Where does that "energy" come from? I believe it comes from the Spirit of God working through the Word of God as well as in us, the people of God. That's *energy*!

And little wonder, because throughout the Bible God's Word is powerfully active. God's word *creates*: "The universe was formed at God's command" (Hebrews 11:3). God's word *sustains*: "[he] ...sustains all things by the word of his power" (Hebrews 1:3). God's word gives *new birth*: "For you have been born again...through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). God's word *sanctifies* (i.e. makes us holy): "Sanctify them through your truth," Jesus prayed; but then added, "your word is truth" (John 17:17). God's word *purifies*: "How shall a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (Psalm 119:9). God's word *burns and breaks*: "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29).^{iv}

No wonder you and I are told that if we are to enter God's promised rest, then we better let this Word of God play a far greater role in our lives. Because this living word is *energy*!

GOD'S WORD IS PENETRATING

Not only is this Word of God living and active. It is also *penetrating*. Notice how the verse describes the penetrating effect of this Word: "Sharper than any double-edged sword, it *penetrates* even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12)

God's Word is here described as a "sword."^v But this is not a long sword, often wielded with both hands. In the Roman military the long sword was used for things like chopping off heads or splitting people in two. But the sword mentioned here is more like a dagger, a knife or even a type of surgical scalpel.^{vi} It's handy and aggressive. Furthermore, it is double-edged. There is no side that is blunt. As such, it never fails to penetrate cleanly, quickly and deeply.^{vii}

God's word is like that. Here it "divides soul and spirit." Just what does that mean? Is there a difference between the two? The concepts of "soul" and "spirit" in the Bible are at times difficult to distinguish. This is probably the case because the Bible does not compartmentalize the various aspects of personhood. We are holistic and complex as individuals, and the various parts of our makeup overlap and mutually influence each other.^{viii}

Generally, however, we can define the "soul" as the seat of our motivations and emotions. These can be positive or negative. David says in Psalm 35:9 "My *soul* will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation." But in Job 10:1 we read, "I will speak out in the bitterness of my *soul*."

On the other hand, the human “spirit” is that in man which gives him the capacity for spiritual expression and relationship with God. We can describe it as an antenna turned toward God. We recently had to replace our antenna which, from its looks, had weathered the rains of the Northwest for the last fifty years! So I ordered a new antenna over the web. Without the antenna I had nothing but snow-like static on my TV screen. But as soon as I took that new, sleek, compact antenna and connected it to my cable, presto...I once again had an image!

We all have a human spirit, an “antenna” so to speak, with the *capacity* for relationship with God. But for the man, woman, or child who has not yet received God’s Spirit who gives new birth to our spirit, then that human spirit is like my old antenna; rusty, broken, and ineffective. In fact, for the person who doesn’t know Christ, it’s like having no antenna at all. It’s there, but disconnected. Sin has done its damage, just like the rains of the Northwest. But when God’s Spirit comes into our lives at the moment of our new birth, he gives new birth to our human spirit. This is called “conversion” or spiritual rebirth. It’s like getting a new antenna. Has that happened in *your* life?

However, even as Christians, you and I often have a difficult time distinguishing between our natural, innate motivations and emotions (our “soul”) and our spiritual impulses (our “spirit”). And sometimes we get them all mixed up. What’s the solution? The discerning power of God’s Word helps us to discern the difference between the two!^{ix}

An example of this may be Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember, he cried out to the Father: “My *soul* is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). Was that emotion from Jesus’ soul – the sorrow of facing death – sinful? No, not at all; it was simply an expression of self-preservation. If you leave this building and attempt to cross the street, but then discover a semi truck barreling down on you, what do you do? If you have any sense at all, your drive of self-preservation kicks in and you step back to get out of the way! This sense of self-preservation is simply an integral part of who we are as the image of God. It’s an expression of our soul. And it serves us well.

However, Jesus’ sense of self-preservation (an expression of his soul) could have kept him from fulfilling the will of the Father, which was to suffer and die and purchase our salvation. But the word and will of the Father enabled Jesus to distinguish between the natural, normal expression of the soul (self-preservation) and the expression of the spirit (self-sacrifice).

Our problem, however, is the sinfulness that taints us all. And sin influences the natural impulses of our soul. We have the God-given natural impulse for sexual expression. That’s our soul. But sin distorts that and leads us into immorality. We have the God-given impulse for relationship. But sin distorts that and leads us into co-dependency and abuse. We have the God-given natural impulse for self-preservation, but sin distorts that and could lead us to deny Christ rather than suffer for his sake. We have the God-given impulse for justice, but sin distorts that and leads us to take justice into our own hands.

How does God’s Word help in this? It penetrates deeply into our lives, helping us distinguish between our God-given, innate, natural desires and emotions (our soul) and the higher spiritual purposes that God has for us (our spirit). As the light of God’s Word shines in our heart, and as the hammer of God’s Word softens our hearts, we begin to distinguish between the soul and the

spirit. How? By letting God's Word sit as the ultimate judge of our hearts, desires, aspirations and decisions.

That's why God's word is described in this verse as a "discerner" or "judge" of the thoughts. The word in the language of the writer is *kritikos*, from which we get our word "critic."^x But if we would allow the Bible to "criticize" us a lot more, we would "criticize" it a lot less.

When some of us as families went to the Portland Beavers game summer before last, I enjoyed watching the umpires make their calls. In a split second they had to make a judgment call as to whether a pitch was a ball or strike or whether a batter running to first base was safe or out. And sometimes they made mistakes...or at least the crowd in the stands thought they did! But that's how the Word of God works in our lives. It's like that umpire calling "Safe!" or "Out!" telling us that somewhere we've gotten off the pathway to righteousness. The difference is that while umpires at baseball games can only deal in appearances, God's Word cuts right to the heart and never makes a mistake.

Here we have the real object of God's surgery, it's the heart. In fact, God wants to perform "open heart surgery" on our hearts. It's from the heart that spring our thoughts, attitudes and even the various expressions of our soul that we've mentioned. If God can change your heart, then he's changed *you*. Our problem, however, is that we sometimes have a "hard heart," that is, our hearts are calloused. It's little wonder that three times in these two chapters we read, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (3:7,8, 15; 4:7).

GOD'S WORD IS INESCAPABLE

God's word is living, active, penetrating, and lastly inescapable. You just can't get away from it. Let's read together again verse 13:

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Do you think you can hide from God what's going on in your heart? How foolish! This verse literally says that you are "nude" before God. That's what the word "uncovered" means. And not only that, but before God's word we are "laid bare." This is a word that means "to overthrow an opponent." It was a term used to describe the wrestling matches of the day. A wrestler would grab his opponent by the neck, place him in a hold that was hard to break, and then throw his opponent to the ground. In other words, before the Word of God you and I are exposed as powerless. We are "nude" and "defeated." The Word of God exposes us and pins us to the ground! And just like Israel in verse 13, we can "fall" under the judgment of God's word.^{xi}

The speaker leaves you and me pinned to the ground, looking into the eyes of the living God to whom we must give an account. Maybe you have a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness in light of this passage. Maybe you feel down on the mat, gripped by God's piercing Word, nude and conquered before God's penetrating eyes. What hope do we have?

That's where the next passage comes in. We have a High Priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. We can come boldly before his throne of grace to find mercy and help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

A few weeks ago, I was talking with one of our Life Group leaders, Roy Hyer. He shared with me what he had learned from listening to an audio recording of this book of Hebrews again and again. One thing he learned is how this helped him to fit verses like Hebrews 4:12-13 into the context of life.

A few weeks ago Pastor Stevens mentioned that Hebrews was a sermon. Later one evening I listened to Hebrews on my ipod. And 30 minutes later I listened to it again on the stereo with Pat. I was surprised at the things I missed the first time around. I shared this with the pastor and he asked me to share with you how reading Hebrews again and again impacted my life with Hebrews 4:12-13 as a backdrop. I read the two verses and I could not fit those two verses in context of what I heard. I shared this with my Life Group and we prayed about it. Later that day I listened to Hebrews again with these two verses, as my focus and I got even more frustrated. How did a discerning judge who was laying my life open and bare fit in with the rest of the book of Hebrews? The next day I listened again, the fourth time. About half way through the book it hit me. I was so focused on the two verses I missed completely what God was trying to get into my head and my heart. With a lump in my throat I realized that this was a love letter. It is said that love is blind, but that is not true. I saw that God in His great discernment looks into my heart and sees the new creation he has made. He sees past all the baggage I carry. Furthermore He loves me and intercedes for me as my sympathetic high priest. He showed me how others have run their race. He has given me a race to run and is my own personal coach and trainer. Hebrews also reveals a personal relationship, that of a father and son. Because He loves me as a father He corrects me as I stray away from His perfect will for my Life. He promises me that He will never leave or forsake me. He loves me far more than I will ever fathom. I listened again for a fifth time and saw how much He loved me in the many contrasts of the Old and New Testaments. And as I listened for a seventh time it becomes even clearer what a loving father we have. Also, I found that the more we spend time reading His Word without the motive of dissecting what is said and listening to what He is trying to say to me, the more I realize His love.

What about you? God is telling us one thing in these two verses: Open yourself (soul, mind, body, spirit, heart) to the surgical scalpel of God's word. Let it penetrate daily and deeply. Let it transform your life. Let it lay you bare. And then run to Jesus for his mercy and grace in time of need.

ⁱ Remember, this promised rest is *not* salvation or entry into heaven. Our eternal salvation comes purely by God's grace through faith. This rest is rather hearing Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into your Master's happiness." This rest is the rest of reward for work well done in the name of Christ. But how do we enter this end-time rest? Last week we pointed out that we enter by *active faith*. We don't want to follow the example of that first generation of Israelites whose bodies fell in the wilderness. They failed to enter the rest (i.e. the reward) of the Promised Land because they did not mix with faith the word of promise that they had heard. We too have

received a word of promise...that there is a “rest” prepared for us as we complete God’s will in our lives. But to enter that rest, God’s word to us must be mixed with active faith.

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther, "Martin Luther--The Early Years," *Christian History*, no. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ This book is living because it is direct communication from a living God. Have you noticed that just about every time the writer to the Hebrews quotes an Old Testament passage he says, “Just as *God* says...” or “As the *Holy Spirit* says...”? Sometimes he says, “Someone says somewhere....” Is he having a “senior moment?” Can he not remember who said what and where it is said? No, he hasn’t forgotten the name of the human author or the chapter and verse where the citation is found. It’s just that for him, that’s not really significant. What’s important is that in the Bible, *God is speaking*. That’s also probably why he doesn’t even identify himself in this book as the author of Hebrews.

^{iv} Cf. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:10-11

^v The double-edged aspect of this “sword” may refer to both the life-giving and condemning aspects of Scripture. Compare “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63) and “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day” (John 12:48).

^{vi} It’s the same word that describes the sword that Peter used when he cut off the ear of the High Priest’s servant in John 18:10

^{vii} For a discussion of the terms, see Barth, *Ephesians 4-6*, 776.

^{viii} Here in these two verses we see five aspects of personhood mentioned: soul, spirit, body (joints and marrow), mind (thoughts, attitudes), and our heart.

^{ix} For the following insights, I am dependant upon class note of Dr. Zane Hodges.

^x There is a lot of criticism of the Bible these days. In the scholarly realm, it’s called “higher criticism.” Among casual readers of the Bible, it’s seen in unstudied conclusions like: “I can’t believe the gospel accounts; they contradict one another;” “The Bible is confusing, therefore it can’t be true;” or “The Bible is just a book like any other book, written by men.”

^{xi} It may be that the speaker here is thinking of the gymnasium as he uses both terms “uncovered” or nude and “laid bare” or conquered. We know that the wrestlers often competed naked!