

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## GOD'S POWERFUL WORD

Hebrews 4:12-13

By

Steven J. Cole

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Hebrews Lesson 13

God's Powerful Word  
Hebrews 4:12-13

Expository preaching has fallen on hard times. Many are saying that people who are used to television and other modern media cannot handle a 40-minute sermon. Sadly, many pastors are heeding that advice. "Seeker" churches advocate 15-minute talks built around some felt need, accompanied by short dramas to hold people's attention. They say that we should never mention sin or anything else that will make anyone feel uncomfortable! The aim is to make everyone feel good in church.

That approach to ministry is an inherent denial of the power of God's Word to convert sinners and build up God's people by exposing our sin and pointing to God's grace at the cross. History contains numerous testimonies to the power of God's Word. A guilt-ridden monk named Martin Luther got saved by studying Romans 1:16-17. When people praised Luther for his role in the Reformation, he deflected the praise to the Word. He said (in Eric Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester* [Fortress Press], pp. 200-201), "And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip [Melancthon] and [Nicholas] Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

In a similar manner, God brought the Reformation to Geneva through the biblical preaching of John Calvin. In *Calvin's Preaching* [Westminster/John Knox Press], T. H. L. Parker shows the amazing expository ministry that Calvin carried out in Geneva. He would normally preach two different sermons on Sundays, and then different sermons each weekday on alternate weeks. His sermons normally lasted one hour. The weeks that he didn't preach at the church, he was teaching ministerial students at the seminary. In addition to his heavy preaching load, he met weekly with the church leaders, visited the sick, counseled those in need, maintained an extensive correspondence, and wrote his many commentaries and books (pp. 62-63)! Think what he could have done with a computer!

I have read several books of Calvin's sermons. His style is to explain the text in simple terms that ordinary people could understand, even though he preached directly out of his Hebrew and Greek Testaments, without notes. After Easter Sunday, 1538, the town fathers banished Calvin from Geneva. They later realized their mistake, and brought him back in September, 1541. Calvin picked up with the next verse after the one he had taught in 1538, as if it had been the previous Sunday (p. 60)! His theme invariably was to show God's majesty and holiness, our wretchedness and spiritual poverty, and the riches of grace that God in His fatherly kindness has made available to us through Christ (pp. 93-107).

Hebrews 4:12-13 is one of the great biblical texts on the power of God's Word. The author has been warning the Hebrew church of the danger of cultural Christianity. His text has been Psalm 95, which refers to the tragic example of Israel in the wilderness. Although they had come out of Egypt by applying the Passover blood, had come through the Red Sea, and had been sustained in the wilderness by God's provision of water and manna, they did not trust God nor obey His Word. As a result, they failed to enter God's rest, which was a picture of salvation.

In verse 11 the author warns, "let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience." Verse 12 begins with "For." The connection is that Israel in the wilderness had God's Word, but disregarded it. We should not follow their example of disobedience to the Word. It will do a powerful work in our hearts if we hear it, allow it to expose our sin, and obey it. Since God sees and knows everything, including our very thoughts, we would be fools to disobey His life-giving Word. To do so would only bring certain judgment. Thus,

Because God's Word is powerful to expose our sin and God Himself sees everything, we must be diligent to have our hearts right before Him.

Many early commentators interpreted "the word" here to refer to Jesus Christ, whom John (1:1) calls "the Word." Granted, the author begins Hebrews by stating, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (1:1-2). But in the immediate context, he has been showing how Israel in the wilder-

ness did not hear (in the sense of obey) God's voice (3:7, 15; 4:7). They had the good news preached to them, but they did not unite it with faith and obedience (4:2, 6).

In this context, "the word of God" refers to all of God's spoken revelation, including that which came through His Son. We have it recorded in written form in the Scriptures. If we heed God's Word, it will keep us from the cultural religion that brings sure judgment. The author is extolling the power of God's Word to bring us into a personal experience of His rest, or salvation.

1. God's Word is powerful to expose our sin (4:12).

The text asserts four things about the power of the Word:

A. God's Word is living.

Since God is the living God (3:12), and His Word cannot be separated from Him, that Word is a living Word. It can never be exterminated. As Isaiah 40:8 proclaims, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." Since God is the author of life, His living Word imparts life in two ways.

1) God's Word imparts new life to dead sinners.

Because of sin, we all enter this world dead in trespasses and sins, alienated from God (Eph. 2:1, 12). A dead sinner can no more will himself into spiritual life than a dead corpse can will himself into physical life. But God is pleased to use His Word to impart new life to dead sinners. James 1:18 states, "In the exercise of His will [not *our* will] He brought us forth by the word of truth ..." 1 Peter 1:23 says, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God."

If you want to see sinners converted, get them to read and listen to God's Word. John (20:31) stated very plainly his purpose in writing his gospel: "these [signs] have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

Many years ago, Marla's sister, Sandie, was living a godless life. In her words, she was "living with her boyfriend, drinking, smoking, and cussing." One of the first times we were together, I asked her when she was going to become a Christian. She sputtered,

"Probably never!" I asked, "Why not?" She said, "Because I don't believe the Bible." I asked, "Have you ever read it carefully?" I pointed out that Marla and I were both reasonably intelligent people, and we believed the Bible. Finally, after a lot of pestering, she agreed to read the Bible. She ended up reading it cover to cover in two months and became a Christian. I had the joy of baptizing her.

When I emailed to ask if I could use her story she said, "Yes you may definitely use my story. I still thank you and Marla for not giving up on me. If it had not been for your persistence and getting the word of God into my hands, I would probably be dead and in hell today because of my sinful life style in those days. And you can quote me."

## 2) God's Word imparts renewed life to His saints.

All of us that have known God's salvation for a while have gone through dry times when God seemed distant. God uses His Word to renew and revive us. David wrote, "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul" (Ps. 19:7). The entire 176 verses of Psalm 119 extol the benefits of God's Word. Repeatedly the psalmist cries out, "My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me according to Your word" (119:25). "This is my comfort in my affliction, that Your word has revived me" (119:50; see also, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159).

It only makes sense that if the living God, has spoken to us in His written Word, then we should seek it like a treasure and devour it as a hungry man devours a meal. Being the word *of God*, it is both a word *from* God and a word *about* God. It is our only source of knowing specific truth about God. Creation reveals His attributes in a general way, but the written Word is God's disclosure of Himself in a way that we could never know through creation alone. And invariably, when we see God as He is, we also see ourselves as we are, as Isaiah experienced (Isa. 6:1-5). While this shatters us at first, it is always for our ultimate healing and growth in holiness.

As the living Word, God's revelation also speaks to our current needs and situation. As we have seen, the author often quotes Scripture by saying, "He says" (1:5; 2:11-12), or "The Holy Spirit says" (3:7). Even though the Bible was written many centuries ago, the Spirit of God still speaks directly to us through it. It is never

out of date or irrelevant. It speaks to the very issues that we face in our modern world. I would encourage you to read the Bible not in a random manner, but consecutively, from both the Old and New Testaments. You will find, as I have, that God will often use what you have read either that day or within a few days of reading it.

#### B. God's Word is active.

We get our word "energy" from the Greek word translated "active." It means that the Word is effectual. It accomplishes what God intends for it to do. As Isaiah 55:10-11 states, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth out of My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." I claim that verse every time I preach! If I am careful to preach God's Word, and not my own, He promises that *it will* accomplish His purpose.

You may wonder, "What about people who hear and reject God's Word?" Jesus explained that these people are only fulfilling another word from God to Isaiah, "You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them" (Matt. 13:14-15, citing Isa. 6:9-10). As John Owen explains, "Sometimes Christ designs by His word the hardening and blinding of wicked sinners, that they may be the more prepared for deserved destruction" (*Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning* [Kregel abridgement], p. 74).

In my first year here, I was preaching through 1 Peter and came to chapter 3, where he instructs wives to be submissive to their husbands, even if the husbands are disobedient to the word. That week, a single woman in her 30's came to see me. She said, "You should never preach on that on a Sunday morning." I asked her if I had misrepresented what the text says. She replied, "No, you taught what it says." I asked, "Did I say it in an arrogant or condescending manner?" She replied, "No, you had the proper tone of voice and manner of speaking."

So I asked, "Then what was the problem?" She said, "The problem was, I brought a friend with me who is an ardent feminist. She was offended and will never come to church again!" I said, "Ah! Well, I've been doing this for a few years now, and I know that one of two things will happen. Either your friend will be convicted of her rebellion against God and come to repentance. Or, she will harden her heart and be all the more guilty on the day of judgment. But either way, God's Word will not return to Him void, without accomplishing His purpose." The woman didn't like my answer and left the church.

C. God's Word is sharp and piercing.

It is "sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow..." Some use this verse to draw distinctions between soul and spirit, but that is not the author's intent. (What then does the distinction between joints and marrow mean?) Rather, he is using figurative language to show that God's Word is sharp and it cuts deeply, to the very core of our being. Unless your conscience is hardened beyond remedy, you cannot read God's Word or hear it preached faithfully without getting cut in the conscience.

God's purpose in cutting us is to bring healing, not to leave us wounded. Sin is like a cancer growing inside of us. Untreated, it will be fatal. The sharp sword of God's Word, as J. B. Lightfoot put it, "heals most completely, where it wounds most deeply; and gives life there only, where first it has killed" (*Cambridge Sermons* [Macmillan and Co.], p. 162). David Livingstone, the pioneer missionary to Africa, offered to teach one of the chiefs to shoot a rifle and also to read. But the chief replied that "he did not wish to learn to read the Book, for he was afraid it might change his heart and make him content with only one wife, like Sechele" (another chief who had been converted) (George Seaver, *David Livingstone: His Life and Letters* [Harper & Brothers], p. 177). He wanted to get five wives before he dared to read the Bible!

The Bible is a dangerous book! It will cut you! When it makes your conscience go, "Ow!" don't harden your heart. Let God do surgery by cutting out the cancer of sin that the Word has revealed.

D. God's Word is an authoritative judge of the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The word "thoughts" refers to negative thoughts related to emotions, such as anger, which a man may wish to keep hidden from others, but which God knows (B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 103; H. Schonweiss, in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown, 1:106). "Intentions" refers here to "morally questionable thoughts" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, 4:971). The heart refers to the totality of the inner person. We get our word "critic" from the word translated "judge." So the idea is that God's Word is able authoritatively to act as critic of our innermost feelings and thoughts, showing us where we are wrong.

I've had the experience after I've preached of a husband coming to me, looking around to make sure that no one is listening, and asking nervously, "Did my wife talk to you about what went on in our household this week?" I chuckle and assure him, "No, I had no idea what was going on, but God did!" His Word penetrated into the secrecy of that home and heart, revealing things that were not in line with His righteousness.

So in verse 12, the author is showing how God's Word is powerful to expose our sin, never for the purpose of embarrassing us, but always to bring healing. We cannot rid our lives of sin if we aren't even aware of it. The Word cuts down to our inner thoughts and feelings, revealing to us the things that are not pleasing to God, so that we can repent of these things and receive God's restoration.

2. God Himself sees everything, including our deepest thoughts and motives (4:13).

The author moves from God's penetrating Word to God Himself, who sees everything. It is impossible to hide from God! Adam and Eve tried to hide from God after they sinned, but they could not do it, and neither can we. The word "open" means "naked." Have you ever dreamed that you were naked in public? What a relief after a dream like that, to wake up and realize that it was only a dream! But we stand naked *on the inside* before God!

"Laid bare" is used only here in the New Testament, and rarely anywhere else. It means to expose the neck, perhaps as a sac-

rificial victim's neck is exposed just before the knife slices the jugular vein. The idea of the two words together is that we are naked and helpless before God. There is no escape from His omniscient gaze. Sin is always stupid, because even if we fool everyone on earth, and think that we got away with it, we didn't fool God!

3. Since we all will give account to God, we must be diligent to have our hearts right before Him.

The final phrase of 4:13 means either "Him with whom we have to do," or, "Him to whom we must give an account." We know that one day we all will stand before God to give an account of the deeds we have done in this body. Therefore, we should have as our ambition to be pleasing to Him (2 Cor. 5:9-10), not just outwardly, but on the heart level.

If that thought terrifies you, keep reading! The author will go on to show how Jesus is our sympathetic High Priest who invites us to draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to help in our time of need (4:14-16). But you must make sure that He truly is *your* High Priest, in the most personal sense. There is no group plan of salvation. It's not enough to be a part of the company of God's people. We must be diligent *personally* to enter God's rest through faith in Christ and obedience to His Word. Every true believer will develop the habit of judging sin on the thought or heart level, out of a desire to please the Savior who gave Himself for us on the cross.

## Conclusion

I close with five practical action steps:

(1) *Treasure God's Word above all worldly counsel!* I am amazed at how Christians will pay psychologists hundreds of dollars for advice that is devoid of God's Word, but they won't consult the Bible for wisdom on how to live! You say, "But I needed advice on some practical relational problems." Why do you think the Bible was written? The whole thing is summed up by, "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor." That's pretty relational! It's not only sin to neglect God's Word and turn to the empty "wisdom" of the world (Jer. 2:13). It's also just plain dumb!

(2) *Read, study, memorize, and meditate on God's Word.* It will not do you any good if you don't know what it says. You need to

memorize key verses because you will not obey it if it's not in your heart (Ps. 119:11). You won't stop at work or at home to say, "Just a minute, I know there's a verse that applies here, but I need to get out my concordance and find it!"

(3) *Apply, trust, and obey God's Word.* The point of Bible study is not to fill your head with knowledge about the end times or theological arguments to support your favorite views. It is to change your heart and life! Always study it with a view to obedience.

(4) *Live with your heart exposed to God's Word.* Don't cover up any sinful thoughts. If the Word convicts you, stop and confess the matter to God. If need be, resolve to go to anyone you have wronged and ask forgiveness. Remember, God knows every sinful thought you'll ever have, and He still sent His Son to bear the penalty of your sin!

(5) *Drink in all of the biblical preaching you can absorb.* Don't get sucked in to the "preaching lite" movement! Calvin commented on verse 12, "If anyone thinks that the air is beaten by an empty sound when the Word of God is preached, he is greatly mistaken; for it is a living thing and full of hidden power, which leaves nothing in man untouched" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], 22:102). Be diligent to saturate yourself with God's Word with the aim of obedience, so that you do not fall as the stubborn Israelites did in the wilderness!

### Discussion Questions

1. Since we know that sin destroys us, why do we persist in covering it up, rather than exposing it so that God can heal us?
2. Why is the "seeker" church movement inherently flawed?
3. What principles underlie sound biblical application?
4. In one sense, the Pharisees "knew" the Word. Why didn't it profit them? How can we avoid their mistakes?

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