

The Word of God
Hebrews 4:12–13
November 12, 2023

Few things test my self-discipline quite like the annual book swap we have here at the Woods. Because every day I show up to work tables of free books sit a mere 20 feet from my desk crying for a shelf to call home. This year I walked out with only one, a book published in 1965, priced *then* at \$3.95, called *A Treasury of the World's Great Speeches*. From Cicero to Caesar to Luther to Bonaparte to Lincoln to Douglass, this anthology is a reward in regard to rhetoric, a feast for those famished by the frivolous, an oasis for those that opine on oratory.

The book includes over 100 speeches. At the close of a number of them, the author provides commentary on the speech's characteristics. For example, after one of Napoleon's he writes, "As a military orator, Napoleon was unsurpassed. He invented a style of eloquence reminiscent of Caesar, brief, declarative, familiar, and yet imperial in its bold sweep and cadence."¹ Other times the author gives additional historical context, to set up the speech or to detail the effects of said "great" speech. For example, after Dostoevsky spoke on the brotherhood of man in 1880, Dostoevsky wrote his wife, "When at the end I proclaimed the world-wide unity of mankind, the whole hall was in hysterics; when I finished—I cannot tell you the roars and yells of enthusiasm; people in the audience who were unknown to one another wept, sobbed, embraced each other and swore to teach others to be better men in the future."²

Of the countless speeches made by authors, generals, politicians, coaches, religious leaders, bosses, or parents throughout human history, we could say, "When this person speaks, here are a few characteristics of his or her speech." Or we could say, "*This* is what happens when this person stands up and talks, particular effects follow."

The book of Hebrews began with the truth that God has spoken. To be more specific, it began with the truth that God has spoken to us in His Son (Heb. 1:2). And, *since* He's spoken, in chapter 2 the author admonished those listening to **pay much closer attention to what we have heard** (2:1). God speaks. We hear.

Further, throughout the book are references to what He'd said in the past, each introduced with verbs of speech. 1:5: **For to which of the angels did He ever say?** 1:6: **And when He again brings the firstborn in the world, He says.** 1:8: **But of the Son He says.** 2:6: **But one has testified somewhere, saying.** 2:11: **He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying.** And then in chapter 3 the author introduces Psalm 95 with this language, **just as the Holy Spirit says** (3:7).

Today's passage is something of a conclusion to this entire section that began in chapter 1.³ God has spoken. He's spoken in *each* of these texts. And He's spoken of His Son in each of these texts. But then, to zoom in somewhat, today's passage is *also* the conclusion to the author's study of Psalm 95, where the author of Hebrews has been applying God speaking *to those hearing* by emphasizing this phrase, **Today if you hear His voice** (3:7; 3:15; 4:7).

This passage concludes the broader context, and the more narrow. As it does so, it answers in part the questions, "What are the characteristics of what God has said?" and "What are the effects of what God has said?" We'll add another, "If that's true, what are we to know and do?"

¹ Houston Peterson, *A Treasury of the World's Great Speeches*, 282.

² Peterson, 575.

³ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 214.

1. Today, if you hear His voice, know His word is living and active (v. 12a)

Though we know verse 12, it's good to be reminded that it begins with the word, "for." That means verse 12 isn't a silo unto itself, it's part of an ongoing argument. So, we need to hear verse 12 in connection with what's preceded it. What's the author been writing about? What's this "for" connected to? To speak generally we could say it's connected to the truth that God has spoken. We made that case above. But to be more specific, in chapters 3 and 4 the author's preached something of a sermon on Psalm 95. And *as* he's preached and applied that Psalm, he's reminded those reading Hebrews that though God has spoken, everyone didn't hear rightly. Referring to the wilderness generation in 4:2, he writes: **the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.** God spoke. They heard. But they didn't believe. And as Hebrews sermon on Psalm 95 goes on, the effects from that unbelief are spelled out, that is, those that fail to believe also fail to enter God's rest.

However, on the *other* hand, Hebrews 4 maintains that others believed what God has spoken. And *just as* there were effects of unbelief, there are effects of believing. Hebrews 4:3: **for we who have believed enter that rest.** In fact, those that believe enter a rest surpassing that which Joshua led the people of God into (4:8). This *better* rest is God's rest, the perfect rest He enjoyed in Genesis 2. Hebrews 4:9 states quite assertively, **So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.**

So, to review, God spoke. If you *don't* believe what He's said, *this* happens. And if you *do*, this *other* thing happens. It's reasonable to ask, "How can *so much* be determined by what He's spoken?" Now we can read verse 12: **For the word of God is living and active.**

Maybe you're constantly evaluating statements based on who said this or that. A child tells you, "Johnny told me that Suzie said that we don't have to do our homework." Maybe that's true. Or maybe Johnny doesn't have a clue. That's the most harmless example. Due to the proliferation of untruths in our day, we've come up with relatively new terminology—like "hot take"—to describe those that speak quickly, provocatively, and often wrongly. In this climate, you hear something and rightly ask, "*Who* said it?" That's, unfortunately, how we have to live in the world where everyone wears a mic.

However, that question—who said it?—isn't a bad question, in essence. We might ask it here in Hebrews 4. Who said, **there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God?** Who said, of those that don't believe, **they shall not enter my rest (4:5)?** Verse 12 answers: God declared it. It's the **word of God.**

There is a point at which our thoroughly practiced skepticism can become sin. Because there's a flip side to the "hot take" posture we've acquired through extensive training. The flip side is that we *do* know people that have good track records with their words. I think of Phil Corbitt, a former church member that was also my mechanic. For years he took care of our cars. I didn't suspect that he was trying to squeeze me for an extra nickel. He didn't have that reputation. He hadn't led me astray in the past. So, when he told me I needed to replace my timing belt, I did it. I've had the same experience with those in the body regarding my health, a house issue, parenting, marriage. They often know more—or have more experience—about or around a particular thing. I have no reason to believe they're motivated to deceive me. In fact, they've demonstrated the opposite, 15 or 16 years of care. So, when they tell me something about this or that, I don't knee-jerk respond, "What do *they* know?"

"Who said it?" goes both ways. We have categories for *not* trusting what someone's said, based on a variety of factors. However, "who said it" shouldn't *always* lead to doubt. If the Person that speaks has never misspoken, then being sure to hear Him can actually deliver us from doubt.

This four-word phrase—**the word of God**—is key to our understanding this entire book and key to living our entire life. Who said it? Do you trust Him? Has He lied before?

Hebrews 4:12 goes on to describe characteristics of God's word. 4:12: **For the word of God is living.** An interesting thing about reading those great speeches is that while we might appreciate the verbiage, there's still a significant degree of detachment from those words. I can read the historical background to Napoleon's speech, try to put myself in those soldier's boots—I can be *deeply* motivated by the rhetoric—but I'm still not going to take up arms for France. In one sense those words are dead.

On the other hand, I can read the historical background to 2 Samuel 7, then hear King David's prayer, and respond in an entirely different way. When he says, **Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far? or Now, O Lord God, You are God, and Your words are truth** (2 Sam. 7:18; 28)—when I read *those* passages, though I've never been to Israel nor been a King—it's as if I'm reading my own history. Those words spoken thousands of years ago can speak *directly* to a moment in my living room. The word of God isn't bound by time. It doesn't have a shelf life. The word of God is living.

How? To begin, the word of God is living because it created life itself. We can go to the beginning of life without leaving the book of Hebrews. Hebrews 11:3: **By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God.** In the beginning the word of God created life. We can *also* describe this moment right now—and its connection to the word of God—without leaving the book of Hebrews either, where the author writes that He, **upholds all things by the word of His power** (1:3). The word of God created life. His word also sustains life.

And His word lives because He *Himself* lives. Hebrews 3:12: **Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.** He created life. He sustains life. He conquered the enemy of life. He gives life. He *is* life. If anyone's *words* could be described as living, it would be *His*.

Further, it's not only living because He lives, it's living because the living One lives within His people. When Christ conquered death, He sent His Spirit, so that *He* might continue to interpret what He'd previously said. That's what Jesus assured: **When He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you in to all the truth** (Jn. 16:13). His words are alive because the Spirit lives within us.⁴

Do we sense that and delight in it? His word continues to come to us, speak to us, enlighten us, and guide.

The word of God lives. That's one characteristic. Verse 12 goes on: **For the word of God is living and active.** As we'll see, these characteristics seem to build upon one another.⁵ To connect this one to the *living* word, "active" speaks to God's word being able to effect the purpose for which He spoke it.⁶ In other words, when God speaks, what He speaks occurs. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, **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 from 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** (Is. 55:10–11).

If we're tempted to ask, "Is this word *that* effective?" maybe we should follow that question with a few more. Did the wilderness generation enter after God said they wouldn't? Were God's people delivered from Pharaoh's hand? Were Abraham's descendants as countless as the stars in the

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 440, writes, "The Holy Spirit does not, after the act of inspiration, withdraw from Holy Scripture and abandon it to its fate but sustains and animates it and in many ways brings its content to humanity, to its heart and conscience."

⁵ Cockerill, 216.

⁶ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 176.

sky? Was a baby born in Bethlehem? Was He pierced through for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities? Did He rise from the dead?

God speaks. What He says comes to pass. His word is living and active.

And it's not merely active in the past, it's active and effective *today*. Imagine I said, "Tell me the five times in your life you were so sideswiped by a circumstance that you don't think you'll ever fully get over it." I had a close friend with one of those moments this past week. The circumstance he faced was tragic and grieving, to understate it. But when I called him to ask how he was, he said, "I'm ok. I've been reading Lamentations; I've been reading Psalm 80. The Lord's helped me."

The World's Greatest Speeches are not sufficient for *those* moments. The word of God, however, remains living and active.

It'd be worth reflecting on this: when you've *consistently* submitted yourself to the Scriptures, in what circumstance has the word of God *not* been active in your life? If you've *kept* coming to it, longing to hear from God, have you come away dry at the end? If you have, then please tell someone. Let them walk with you *through* that. Because, whether in joy, in grief, in thankfulness, in loneliness, in despondency, in peace, in the absence of peace—in *all* those seasons—the word of God has something to say.⁷

So, today, if you hear His voice, know that His word is living and active.

2. Today, if you hear His voice, know His word knows your heart (v. 12b)

Verse 12 goes on: **the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**

Again, each characteristic seems to build upon the previous one noted. *This* is what the author means by living and active. The word of God is not simply sharp, it's sharper than **any two-edged sword**. So, being *that* sharp, without a dull edge, what can it do? It can pierce **as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow**.⁸

Why this particular imagery? Is it intended to make us think the soul and spirit are differing entities? No,⁹ all four terms might be considered *together*, with joint and marrow pointing to the physical aspects of humanity while soul and spirit refer to the aspects of the inner person. Taken together, the imagery seems to capture all the human existence.¹⁰ It concerns *all* that we are.

If that's the *scope* of the word's work, the balance of the verse gives us the *aim* of this piercing word, saying that this living and active word is **able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart**. The word of God is so sharp it goes where no one else can. Like the sharpest scalpel, it divides the seemingly indivisible,¹¹ cuts *beneath* the surface, and reaches the recesses of the human personality.¹²

No one else may see or hear what's going on between your ears, or in the nooks and crannies of your affections. The word of God can, and often does, expose that which is otherwise hidden. It reveals.

Maybe the scalpel language is helpful. If we study the balance of God's word, we know that He exposes *so that* He might transform. He often cuts in order to heal.

⁷ If we're tempted to ask, "*when* is it active," maybe consider a different question, "when is it *not*?"

⁸ Is there a significant difference between soul and spirit here? No. O'Brien, 176; Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 106.

⁹ O'Brien, 176; Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 106.

¹⁰ O'Brien, 177; Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 135.

¹¹ Cockerill, 216.

¹² O'Brien, 176.

About a decade ago I read a book called *Son of Hamas* by Mosab Hassan Yousef. He was the son of a founding member of Hamas—who became something of a double-agent—and then eventually believed the gospel through the ministry of a British missionary. With the news of the past few weeks, I decided to flip through that book one day last week. When I did, I came upon an excerpt where Yousef describes being captured and interrogated by a group of men that had previously tortured him. And he writes this, “When I saw them, even those who had tortured me during my previous stay, I was surprised to discover that I felt no bitterness whatsoever toward these men. The only way I could explain it was using a verse I had read: Hebrews 4:12 says that ‘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.’ Somehow,” Yousef continues, “. . . his words seemed to be alive and active and working inside me. I don’t know how else I would have been able to see people as people, not Jew or Arab, prisoner or torturer.”¹³

The word cuts. The word reveals. And the word can heal. That’s how alive and active the word is. It is able to go where no one else can, to effect the purpose for which God spoke it.

So, today if you hear His voice, know that His word knows your heart. If that’s true, note third:

3. So, do not harden your heart, because He speaks what He already knows (v. 13)

Verse 13: **And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.** Though verse 12 focused upon the word of God, verse 13 shows us there’s no separation between His word and His person. The One that sees our heart is the One that speaks to us. His word is able to go where no one else *can* go because He sees what no one else sees.

If we hear His voice, why would we harden our heart? Where do we think we can go? To whom will we flee? Adam and Eve tried to hide. Maybe we’re tempted to do likewise. Be reminded: He knows when we sit down and when we rise up (Ps. 139:2). No creature is hidden from His sight.¹⁴

In fact, **all things are open and laid bare.** So, it’s not *only* that no creature is hidden, **all things** are exposed. He knows *all* persons; and He knows all persons *completely*.¹⁵ Maybe we haven’t hidden in totality, run from Him *in toto*; instead, we’ve attempted to cloak this or that aspect. This imagery—**all things are open and laid bare**—was used in wrestling for bringing an opponent down with a decisive hold. In that sense it goes beyond being exposed to actually being helpless.¹⁶ Again, if He sees *all* things—if all our days, all our inner thoughts, and even all our intentions are visible, how futile would our hiding be?

This ought to humble us deeply. God sees. And God knows. The phrase **laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do** speaks to accountability before Him. The One who sees is the One that judges. Be warned by Hebrews 4. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart.

¹³ Mosab Hassan Yousef, *Son of Hamas*, 204.

¹⁴ O’Brien, 177, to be exposed by the word of God is to be examined by God Himself.

¹⁵ Cockerill, 218.

¹⁶ O’Brien, 178.

Conclusion

But we find hope here too. As John Piper writes, “Where God’s word is at work, God is at work.”¹⁷ And while these truths about God’s all-seeing eye do pin us to the mat, “tapping out” is precisely what leads to deliverance. Hebrews 4:13 is *still* in the context of God declaring: those who believe enter My rest.

How is that possible? Hebrews 4:12 and 13 have exposed us. These assurances can *only* be explained by how Hebrews 4 ends: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

God’s word pierces, exposing weakness and revealing need. And *for* that weakness, *for* our need, Christ came, so that we might find grace and receive mercy.

To conclude, what are the *characteristics* of what God has said? His word is living. It’s active. And what are the *effects* of what God says? God’s word exposes the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

If God’s word is marked by *those* characteristics—living and active—and if it has *those* effects, what should we do? We don’t harden our hearts. There’s nowhere to hide. In fact, we pay *much closer* attention to what we’ve heard (2:1), listening intently, asking that He might reveal Himself *in* His word to us. And to the degree the Scriptures reveal about *us* what God already knows, we cling to the One who came for us, suffered in our place, and conquered death. That He—*the* Word of God, *living* and *active*—might continue His speaking, interceding on our behalf.

¹⁷ John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, 219.