

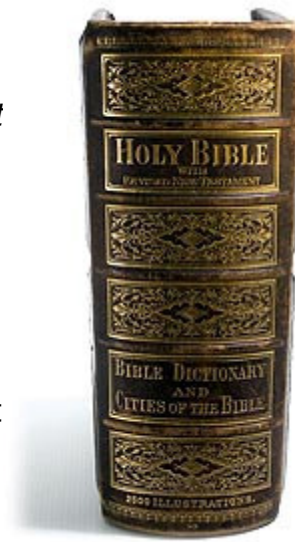
Better Than Any Fad

By Phil Johnson

This is continued from last Tuesday's series on the "fad-driven" church. This article is adapted from the transcript to Phil's 2005 Shepherds' Conference seminar on this topic.

We left off, in the last post with this thought:

Scripture is better than any fad. Preaching the Word of God is more effective than any new methodology contemporary church experts have ever invented. I don't care who thinks preaching is "broken." If we would get back to the clear proclamation and exposition of God's Word, everything that's broken about contemporary preaching would be fixed.



The nature of God's Word guarantees that. And that's exactly what I want to do in the time we have remaining in this session. I want to *preach* to you about the superiority and the excellence of Scripture.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

That's a rich text, full of meaning, but let me take a few minutes to try to isolate what seem to me the three main qualities of the Word of God that are highlighted in this text, and let's carefully consider what they mean.

First of all, it teaches us that—

1. The Word of God is powerful.

The King James Version says, "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword." *Quick*, of course, is the old English word for "living." I was surprised in reading John Owen's commentary on Hebrews that even though he wrote in the 1600s, he had to explain the word *quick* to his readers. He referred to the word *quick* as an improper translation, because, he said, "that word doth more ordinarily signify 'speedy,' than 'living.'" So I don't know when the word *quick* stopped meaning "alive," but it was apparently before John Owen's time.

I grew up in a church where we used to recite the traditional version of the Apostles' Creed, which says, Christ "ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the

quick and the dead.” And that made perfect sense to me. I figured “the quick” were those who made it through the crosswalk, and “the dead” were those who didn’t.

But, of course, *quick* in this kind of context just means “alive” or “living,” and that is what this text is saying. “The Word of God is living.” That’s the correct sense. It speaks of vitality, life, activity, energy. The Word of God has a life-force that is unlike any merely human book. It is not only alive; it has the power to impart life to those who are spiritually dead. Jesus said in John 6:63: “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” First Peter 1:23: “[We are] born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” James 1:18: “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.” Psalm 119:50: “This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.” “Your word has given me life.”

You can take all the great books and all the great literature in the world combined, and they do not have this life-giving power. No book changes lives like the Word of God. You might occasionally hear a person say, “that self-help book transformed my life”; or “that diet book was revolutionary”; or “that book on philosophy changed the way I think.” Rick Warren makes a promise in the introduction to *The Purpose Driven Life* that his book will change your life.

But the life-giving and life-changing power of the Bible is something far deeper than any other book can legitimately claim. The Word of God renews the heart by giving spiritual life to the spiritually dead. It changes our character at an essential, fundamental level. It transforms our desires and impacts us at a moral level no human literature can touch. It brings a kind of cleansing and renewal and sanctification that no other book could ever claim to offer. It resurrects the soul. It has the same creative power in the command of God when He said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.”

The Word of God is inherently powerful. It has a kind of life and vitality that is unlike merely human words. Proverbs 6:22–23 says this about the Word of God: “When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee. For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.” And a familiar passage, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

No other book has that effect. It rebukes us. It chastens us. It comforts us. It guides us and gives light to our path. It preaches to us. It restrains our foot from evil. It frowns on us when we sin. It warms our hearts with assurance. It

encourages us with its promises. It stimulates our faith. It builds us up. It ministers to our every need. It is alive and dynamic.

And the vitality of Scripture is eternal and abiding. In John 6:68, Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life." The eternality of divine life is perfectly embodied in the Word of God. Again, Jesus said (Mark 13:31), "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away." Isaiah 40:8: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever." Psalm 119:89: "For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven." First Peter 1:25: "But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you."

Every page of the Bible has a life-changing power that is just as fresh as the day it was written. We don't have to make it come alive; it is both alive and active. It is always relevant, eternally applicable, speaking to the heart with a power that is unlike even the greatest of human works. The thoughts and opinions of men come and go. They fall from fashion and fade from memory. But the Word of God remains "quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword."

And what is true of the whole is true of the parts. Every part of Scripture is alive and powerful. Proverbs 30:5: "Every word of God is pure." Jesus said "Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" gives life and sustenance. That's why Deuteronomy 8:3 says, "man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live."

I'm always amazed at the passages of Scripture that have been instrumental in bringing people to Christ. I've told you before how I came to saving faith in Christ by reading 1 Corinthians as a senior in high school. The passage that drew me to Christ is not one you would necessarily think of as an evangelistic text. First Corinthians 3:18: "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise." But it rebuked my sin and turned me to Christ.

I have heard people tell how they were awakened to eternal life by verses from the gospels, the epistles, the psalms, and even some of the obscure parts of the Old Testament. I doubt there's a page anywhere in Scripture that has not at some time or some place been used by the Spirit of God to convert a soul. None of it is superfluous. Second Timothy 3:16 again: "All scripture is . . . profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

My friend Joe Aleppo, who is here this week, introduced me to a man in Sicily who came to Christ during a severe paper shortage after World War II because of a single page of Scripture from a Bible someone had thrown away. Paper was almost impossible to come by, so merchants used old newspapers and other scrap paper to wrap whatever they sold in the marketplace. This man went to the fish market and bought a fish. When he unwrapped it at home, one of the papers

used to make the package was a page from a discarded New Testament. He read it, and this man who had been a lifelong Roman Catholic and had never before read a verse of the Bible for himself became a believer. That man's conversion was the beginning of the first significant Protestant movement on the island of Sicily.

The Word of God is *powerful*. The Greek word translated "powerful" in Hebrews 4:12 is *energes*, which is the source of our English word "energetic." It's translated "active" in some versions, and that's a good translation. It speaks of something that is dynamic, operative, and effectual. The apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:13): "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which *effectually* worketh also in you that believe."

The Word of God *always* works effectually. It *always* accomplishes its intended purpose. In Isaiah 55:11, God says, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

Sometimes God's purpose is rebuke and correction; sometimes it is instruction and edification. Sometimes it is blessing; sometimes it is judgment. The gospel is "the savour of death unto death" for some; for others, it is "the savour of life unto life." Either way, the Word of God is effectual, productive, powerful. It always produces the effect God intends.

That's why preachers ought to preach the Word instead of telling stories and doing comedy. That's where the power for ministry resides: in the Word. It's not in our cleverness or our oratorical skills. The power is in the Word of God. And our task is simple: all we have to do is make the Bible's meaning plain, proclaim it with accuracy and clarity. And the Spirit of God uses His Word to transform lives. The power is in the Word, not in any technique or program.

2. The Word of God is penetrating.

Notice how vividly the writer of Hebrews portrays this idea: "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow."

The Word is like a sword—"a two-edged sword." It has no blunt side. It cuts no matter which way you swing it. Not only that, but it also has a penetrating point. It is "piercing." You can swing it like a saber or thrust with it like a rapier. You don't have to be highly skilled to use it with effect. In the hands of an amateur, it will still work. And there's nothing so hard or so deeply concealed that it can't penetrate.

In fact, look at the verse again: the Word of God is “sharper than any two-edged sword.” No human instrument or worldly technique or psychological therapy is more effective than the Word of God to penetrate the human heart. It lays bare the true thoughts and intents of every heart.

I had a friend in college who was describing his efforts to evangelize a fellow student. My friend was convinced—quite incorrectly—that stealth evangelism is the best way to win people to Christ. So he was trying to be as subtle as possible and as delicate and indirect as possible while waiting for an opening to tell this non-Christian student about Christ.

He kept telling me about conversations he had with this guy, and how he was looking for some kind of “opening” to work the gospel in. This went on for months. And it seemed to me that he had already wasted several good “openings,” but he just lacked the boldness to bring up the subject of Christ. It seemed to me that he was waiting for the guy to be like the Philippian jailer and ask, “Sir, what must I do to be saved?” And I could see it wasn’t going to happen. So I said, “Why don’t you just bring up the subject, and tell him in the plainest possible language what the Bible says about Christ?”

And he said, “I just don’t think he’s really open yet.”

But you know what? We don’t have to be “open” for the Word of God to penetrate. It is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” and quite capable of opening even the hardest heart.

We need to have more confidence in the ability of the Word of God to penetrate people’s hearts. This is one of the real deficiencies in this generation of evangelicals. We don’t have enough faith in the power of God’s Word to penetrate a hardened heart. And so some Christians—and even lots of churches—actually back away from proclaiming the simple Word of God to unbelievers in plain language. They think it’s necessary to have music and drama and other forms of entertainment to soften people up and prepare them to receive the Word. And in many cases they never do get around to declaring the Word of God with any kind of boldness.

You hear people today talking about “pre-evangelism.” I don’t know what that is supposed to mean, but usually it refers to some activity or technique that entertains people and tries to make them friendly to Christianity while carefully avoiding the risk of confronting them with the truth of Scripture—as if something besides the Word of God might be *more* effective than Scripture at penetrating their hearts. That is sheer folly, and it is a waste of time. *Nothing* is more penetrating and more effective in reaching sin-hardened hearts than the pure and unadulterated Word of God. All our human techniques and ingenuity are like dull plastic butter knives compared to the Word of God, which is “sharper than any two-edged sword.”

There's a story in the biography of George Whitefield about a man named Thorpe, who was a bitter opponent of everything that is holy. He and a group of his friends—all of them young, rebellious thugs—conspired together to mock and oppose George Whitefield's evangelistic ministry while Whitefield was preaching in Bristol, England.

George Whitefield had severely crossed eyes, if you have ever seen a realistic likeness of him. And these guys used to refer to him as "Dr. Squintum." They called their little gang "The Hell-Fire Club," and they disrupted meetings, mocked Whitefield on the streets and in public places, and generally tried to make his ministry a reproach in their community. Whitefield's preaching had already made a deep and lasting impact in Bristol, and these young ruffians hated him for it. So this guy Thorpe got one of Whitefield's published sermons and took it to the local pub, where the "Hell-Fire Club" was gathered to drink together while they make a burlesque of Whitefield.

Thorpe was apparently pretty good at doing impressions, and he had all Whitefield's mannerisms and gestures down pat. So he stood in the center of this pub and crossed his eyes and began to deliver a derisive rendition of Whitefield's sermon. But in the middle of the sermon, the Word of God pierced his heart, and he suddenly stopped and sat down, trembling and broken-hearted. Right then and there, he confessed the truth of the gospel and gave his heart to Christ. His aim was to taunt and ridicule, but he accidentally converted himself! Or rather, the power of the Word of God penetrated his soul and cut him to the heart. He became a preacher himself and quite an effective evangelist, because he knew so well the power of the Word of God to penetrate hardened hearts.

Notice that the Word of God pierces to the very depths, "even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." It probes to the deepest recesses of the heart, no matter how hardened or how closed the heart might be. In fact, *only* Scripture can do that.

Notice how militant this language is. It sounds like the language of armed conflict—swords and cutting, and dividing asunder of the joints and marrow. It's vivid, destructive-sounding language—the language of warfare and devastation. And it is true that sometimes the Word of God pierces hearts as a judgment, without remedy and without any healing.

But I don't think that's primarily what the writer of Hebrews has in mind. In this context, he is urging his readers to examine themselves, lest they fall away from Christ before they have truly embraced Him with saving faith. He is warning them that it is possible to come close to Christ and yet fall away without entering into His rest—the rest that comes with redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

Verse 11: “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” And our verse comes immediately after that admonition: “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword.” He *wants* them to allow the Word of God to cut through their pretensions and their false professions and reveal the true thoughts and intents of their hearts.

And this is a reminder that there’s a painful process involved in regeneration. In Ezekiel 11:19, the Lord describes what is involved in this process, “I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh:” Spiritual open-heart surgery.

This is the very thing that was pictured in the act of circumcision. According to Deuteronomy 10:16, it pictured the cutting away of the foreskin of the heart. Jeremiah 4:4 speaks of it too: “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart.” That’s why the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 2:28–29, “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit.”

That’s the very imagery our verse in Hebrews 4 calls to mind. It’s the cutting away of that which defiles. Circumcision of the heart. The Word of God is the instrument that makes this possible.

Painful cutting is often the necessary prerequisite for true and thorough healing. That’s what surgery is all about. And that is precisely the ministry the Word of God has in the lives of those who genuinely know Christ. If you have never experienced that painful piercing of the two-edged sword, then you ought to examine yourself to see whether you are really in the faith. Because you cannot possibly know Christ in a true and saving way unless the Word of God has rebuked your sin and cut into your fallen heart and convicted and convinced you of your own desperate need of cleansing and spiritual heart surgery to deal with your sin.

And that, I believe, is the very thing the writer of Hebrews is speaking about here. It’s a wholly beneficial thing. Although the Word of God is like a sword that cuts deeply and penetrates to the very depths, it is a necessary and beneficial incision that ultimately is designed for our own good. And for those who submit to the Word of God rather than resisting it, the cutting and probing of the two-edged sword always results in salvation, rather than destruction.

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