

“Words of Life”
Hebrews 4:1-16
December 30, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

On this final Sunday of the year, I hope to encourage you in your Bible reading for the coming year. The Bible is by far the best-selling book every single year, selling over 100 million copies annually. The Bible has been translated into over 2000 languages. No book in human history is more widely published and translated. It is also the case, however, that many Bibles lie unopened. Resolutions are made this time of year to be more consistent in a Bible-reading plan, only to abandon these plans before the end of February when the more difficult parts of the Old Testament are first encountered. I think it’s important to have a plan for Bible reading, and for those who don’t already have one you like, I’m going to suggest one for you before we end today.

The passage I want us to look at today contains a classic Bible verse about the Bible, referring to it as a sharp, double-edged sword (v. 12). The author says that the Bible is alive and active. I attempted to capture this somewhat in my sermon title. The preposition in that title “*Words of Life*” could mean two different things. It could mean simply that the Bible contains words *about* life, or it could mean that the Bible actually possesses and conveys life. The author of Hebrews 4:12 clearly means the latter, which fact can best be appreciated by considering this verse in its context.

I. The Danger to be Feared

The opening verse of our chapter is surprising. In light of the fact that the most common command in the Bible is the command not to fear, it is more than a little surprising to read the words, “**let us fear.**” Apparently, one of our problems is that we fear the wrong things and must be told not to fear them, and fail to fear the things we should fear. When we fear things like financial and health challenges, we need to hear the Lord’s “Do not fear.” We are his children, not orphans, and he promises to care for us in all things. But there are other dangers in life that we are foolish not to fear, dangers that can do us real harm. It is the latter category that our author is speaking of.

In a word, the danger we are told to fear is the danger of apostasy. That’s a word you don’t hear very much anymore, which is just confirmation that we need to pay more careful attention to this warning. Apostasy means to fall away from the faith, which was a central pastoral concern of the author of Hebrews. He describes this danger at length in Hebrews 3-4 and uses a well-known Old Testament story to talk about it. It’s the account of the wilderness

wanderings of Israel for forty years following their exodus from Egypt. There was an entire generation that celebrated the Passover, was miraculously delivered from their Egyptian bondage, crossed the Red Sea on dry land, received the manna from heaven, and yet failed to enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief. They were guilty of apostasy, falling away. The author of Hebrews wants this congregation to know that the same thing could happen to them. This is a danger to be concerned about. It is possible to experience God's gracious and powerful works among his people and yet fail to enter the ultimate rest of heaven.

Imagine someone we'll call John. He walked the aisle of his church when he was ten years old, prayed a prayer to accept Jesus as his Savior, and has never been troubled since by any lack of assurance. Faith in Jesus was explained to him in a way that sounded like an insurance policy against hell. He accepted Jesus because he thought, "What have I got to lose?" He's not really active in the church where he has his membership. He attends the worship services about once a month on average, when something else better doesn't come up. He's not involved beyond such occasional attendance. Whenever he hears inside his head a small voice of doubt concerning his salvation, he quickly silences the voice with the reminder that he walked the aisle when he was ten. John has false assurance of his salvation, and he is just the kind of person the author of Hebrews is concerned about.

The problem is made more acute by what the author calls in the previous chapter, "the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13). **"But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."** Sin first deceives and then hardens the heart. A deceived person is like the husband I read about years ago who was convinced that his wife was growing hard of hearing, though she refused to admit it. One day, as she was sitting in their family room, he undertook to prove to her that she was hard of hearing. He called from behind her in a loud voice, "CAN YOU HEAR ME?" He heard no answer. So he walked closer to her and repeated the question, "CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?" Again, no reply. Then he positioned himself right behind her and said, "NOW CAN YOU HEAR ME?" She turned around and said to him, "Yes, honey, for the third time, YES!" He was deceived, being convinced that the problem was his wife's when it was actually his. What is mildly amusing in a marriage is deadly in our relationship with God. It was after Satan deceived them that Adam and Eve fell into sin, taking the entire human race with them. They were deceived when they became convinced that something God said was bad (eating of the forbidden fruit) was actually good.

What are some common ways sin deceives us today? It works the same way for us as for Adam and Eve, leading us to judge something good that is actually bad. Sex outside of marriage is an obvious example. Less obvious, but more deadly, is our self-righteousness. Listen to the way Martin Luther writes of this:

For more than anything else one's own righteousness and wisdom deceive one and work against faith in Christ, since we love the flesh and the sensations of the flesh and also riches and possessions, but we love nothing more ardently than our own feelings, judgment, purpose, and will, especially when they seem to be good. For the same reason Christ said, when he healed the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda, that it was impossible for such people to be able to believe: 'How can you believe who receive glory from one another?' (John 5:44).

Luther's words are terrifying. He is saying that it is when you are feeling good about your accomplishments that you are being deceived. It is when you feel superior to others, whether it be from accomplishments, acquisitions, appearance or the adulation of others, that you are in grave danger. But the problem is that of self-deceit, which traps us. If you are truly deceived about this, you are like the anorexic, who truly believes she is grossly overweight when she is actually starving to death. What hope is there for us when the nature of sin is so deceptive? That brings us to our next point.

II. The Remedy to be Received

The way sin works in our lives is to deceive us, causing us not to know ourselves with any kind of accuracy. There is one who sees us perfectly and completely, and the author speaks in verse 13 of this quality possessed by God. **"No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."** But how does God's perfect knowledge of us come to benefit us? Is there some way we can overcome the self-deceiving quality of sin and see ourselves truly? That's where the well-known twelfth verse comes in. God comes to us in his word found in the Bible. As one commentator puts it, "When we are confronted by God's word we are confronted by God himself."

Let me point out two features of God's word as it is described in this verse. First, it is living and active, with the result that it can speak to you about present needs within your life. Though the latest part of the Bible we have was written in the late first century, over 1900 years ago, it speaks with a fresh relevance to us today. It is unlike any other book because it is alive just as God is alive. There are at least two ways I have experienced this living and active feature of God's word. One is the way a very familiar passage of Scripture can come alive with fresh relevance. That happened to me just this week as I was studying this very passage and thinking about this idea of the self-deceiving quality of sin. I thought about my instinctive love of accomplishment and performance, but then saw this as part of my self-righteousness. The word became alive and active in my heart.

Another way I commonly experience this living and active quality of God's word is in the effect it has when preached. It has not been unusual for me to be

accused of targeting people in the congregation with a particular sermon application. I have even had people think that I came to know some secret about them through the violation of a confidence. For example, it has not been unusual for a husband to say, “Has my wife been talking to you this week?” The truth is that I’m not smart enough to do that. What is happening is the living and active word of God is at work in a person’s life.

The second quality of God’s word that is mentioned here is its penetrating ability. It is able to pierce **“to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”** The idea here is the ability of God’s word to get to the places in our lives that are hidden and inaccessible to us. It does so as a sharp, double-edged sword which cuts in two directions. The two directions in which the sword of God’s word cuts are convicting us of sin and reassuring us of God’s promises. We need both, don’t we? There are times when we need to be convicted of sin, and these sins are almost always hidden to our sight. The sword of God’s word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, works to cut us open to see what was previously hidden to us. And then we need God’s sword to cut in the other direction and reassure us of our complete forgiveness through Christ. To say this in words that are familiar to most of you, it is through the double-edged sword of God’s word that we come to see that we are far worse sinners than we ever knew and at the same time far more loved than we ever dared hope.

III. The Word to Become Profitable

The main focus of these two chapters is to speak of how we come to benefit from this living, active and penetrating word of God. It doesn’t happen automatically. It is possible for the powerful sword of God’s word to lie dormant and unused on the ground, and it does no one any good when it is unused. Another problem that is common in evangelical churches is to make the Bible something of a trophy. It would be like taking this double-edged sword and hanging it in a prominent place in your house to be admired by all. A sword is not meant to be admired, but to be used. The battle against sin is raging all around us, threatening to destroy us. It is time to take down the sword and move beyond admiring it and begin using it. I see at least four ways in these two chapters that we are encouraged to use the sword of God’s word.

First, we must listen to it. Speaking of the Israelites in the wilderness who failed to enter the Promised Land, the author says, **“the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened”** (4:2). They did not listen to God’s word in the deepest sense of listening, which is to receive it and believe it. God told them that he would take care of them in the wilderness and bring them into the Promised Land. Over and over again, they doubted him. We must listen to receive and believe, not just to understand.

Second, we use the sword of God's word when we obey it. Three times in these two chapters it is said that the failure of those who fell in the wilderness was a failure of obedience (3:18; 4:6, 11). When we read God's word, we should always be asking the question, "What does God require of me in this passage?"

Third, I notice that our reception and benefiting from God's word is done in community. **"But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"** (3:13). I don't think this means that we are called to preach little sermons to everyone we meet. Rather, it speaks to the power of being around other Christians who take seriously God's word. There is a type of daily exhortation in being around others who are actively believing and obeying God's word. The opposite is also the case. When our associations are primarily with the cynical, their unbelieving and disobedient hearts pull us down with them. Church involvement in a community of serious-minded believers is a great resource.

Fourth, our reading of God's word must always bring us to Christ. The author hasn't moved on to a new topic in verses 14-16 of our text. He is telling us that the goal of God's word is to increase our confidence in our great high priest, Jesus. A priest acts on our behalf in the presence of God. Jesus serves this role for us. Where we need forgiveness, he provides it. Where we need help, he gives it. He is in heaven, which is the place which determines everything else on the earth. Our priest is in the headquarters of the universe. Verse 16 describes the practical difference that makes. **"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."** As the sword of God's word takes us to Jesus, our great high priest, we become more confident people. We no longer need live in fear and anxiety.

CONCLUSION:

If you don't currently have a Bible reading plan, I want to invite you to join others in a modest plan I have put together. This plan will have you reading the foundational chapters of the Bible at a more moderate pace than attempting to read through the entire Bible in a year. There are readings for five days per week, with each day's readings averaging only two chapters. Two built-in off days will allow you to catch up. The entire reading schedule is posted on the church website, under the "Ministries" tab, as well as hard copies being available in the parlor and Welcome Center. We will also print in each Sunday's bulletin the readings for the coming week. Will you consider undertaking this life-changing challenge?