

PM Hebrews 4 The Power of the Word of God

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 40, that can be found on page 724 of the Church Bibles. So Isaiah chapter 40, and we'll just read the first eight verses.

Isaiah 40, reading from verse 1. 1. 1. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

5. 6. 6. 7. 7. 8. 8. 9. 10. 10. 10.

11. 11. 11. 12. 12. 12. 12. 13. 14. 14. 15.

15. 15. 15. 15. 16. 16. 17. 17.

[1 : 10] 18. 18. 20. A voice says, cry, and I say, what shall I cry?

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows on it.

Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Amen.

Our next psalm for singing is Psalm 119. We'll have our New Testament reading now from Hebrews chapter 4.

And in this reading we will have our text for this evening, which we'll be looking at later in verse 12. But we'll read the whole of the chapter together. Hebrews chapter 4 verses 1 to 16.

[2 : 22] That's found on page 1205 in the Church Bibles. Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

For good news came to us just as to them. But the message that they heard did not benefit them, because they were not unified by faith with those who listened.

For we who have believed entered that rest. As he has said, as I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.

Although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way. And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.

And again in the passage he said, They shall not enter my rest. Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience.

[3 : 36] Again he appoints a certain day. Today, saying through David, so long afterwards, in the words already quoted.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works, as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joint and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

[4 : 51] Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. Let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

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.

Amen. Amen. I ask you to turn back to Hebrews chapter 4 again. Hebrews chapter 4.

And as I said before, our text for this evening will be taken from verse 12. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of

joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

So as we gather here at the beginning of a new year, the first of the first 23, on the first Lord's Day of the year, I thought it might be good to go and consider beginnings, and to consider the foundational things, and to ask, well, where does a Christian begin?

[6 : 19] And there are so many places we could go. We could go to Genesis 1-1, the very first page of the Bible. In the beginning, God created the heavens of the earth. And that would be a really good starting point.

But then you think, well, we could perhaps go back a little bit further, and we could say, well, what about God's decrees? Maybe we could explore God's decrees in eternity past. And then you think, well, you could go back further and say, well, let's study God, all his attributes, his character and his nature.

Of course, there's nothing before God. He's eternal. Or we could look at it another way, and we could consider something in the New Testament. When we open up Mark's Gospel, the first words of Mark's Gospel are, the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And then in 1 Corinthians 15, there is this wonderful and well-known text. For I deliver to you as first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Now, all of these will be really good beginnings to study, and I might study them in time. But for our time this evening, we're going to be studying, as a starting point, God's Word.

[7 : 36] And we're going to see what God's Word has to say about God's Word. And we take our cue, actually, from the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith, I'm sure you'll know, is a doctrinal standard which we hold to as a church.

It's a summary of what the Bible teaches, and it's quite a detailed statement of faith, along with other Reformed confessions, like the 1689 London Baptist Confession, and the Savoy Declaration of the Congregationalists.

All these documents, they all start the same way. You open them up to page 1, chapter 1 of Holy Scripture. And there's, I think there's about 10 points on different things regarding Scripture.

Because, after all, we would not know God at all personally if we were not taught so in His Word.

We wouldn't know anything about His decrees. We wouldn't know anything about creation.

We wouldn't know anything about Christ and the Gospel if the Bible wasn't given to us to explain to us who He is and what He has done. And the key verse for us in this is Hebrews 4.12.

[8 : 43] It's a great verse which tells us what God's Word is and what it does. So we'll look at it together in four quite simple parts, really. So we've got part one, it's living.

Secondly, it's active. Third, it's compared to a sword. And fourth, it's a discerner. But just before we get into that, just the phrase, the Word of God, what is actually meant here?

I take it to mean primarily the Scriptures. But there is some discussion among some great men about whether this is referring to Christ Himself. Because we know in John 1.1, it says, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

So from that point of view, it could mean Christ. And some commentators, I think John Owen goes this way. But I think in context with the rest of the passage, the writer takes his readers back to these Old Testament quotations about remembering His Word and to strive to enter rest and not falling into disobedience.

And other times when the word, Word is mentioned in Hebrews, it does seem to refer more to the Word of God rather than Christ. But we should never forget, when we focus on Scripture and we focus on God's Word, that Christ can never really be separated from His Word.

[10 : 07] He always precedes it. He always goes before His Word. And we'll see that as we go through this text. So let's look at our first point and how it's described.

Firstly, it's described as living. God's Word is alive. It's a living book in the most true form. And I'm sure if you've opened up the pages of the Bible, I'm sure you all have, you've experienced this. No other book speaks like the Bible. It's just as relevant today as the day that it was written. And that can't be said about any other book.

We know that it's a book that's eternal. As Christ says in Mark 13, 31, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. And as we read earlier in Isaiah, the Word of the Lord stands forever.

But not only is the Bible itself alive, but it has the ability to actually impart life. This is what makes the Bible so special.

[11:10] And children, I'm sure some of you will know the catechism question. You'll know the reason why the Bible is so special. Because who wrote the Bible? Chosen men inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Or I think Ellis maybe says, holy men taught by the Holy Spirit. So it's the author who is the key. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, wrote these words.

We read in 2 Timothy 3, 16, that all scripture is breathed out by God. And breath, as we know, is the very essence of life. You don't need to be a doctor to know that if you're not breathing, then, well, you're not living.

And the breath of God is able to bring things to life that are not alive. If we think back to creation, when God formed Adam and Eve, well, he formed Adam out of the dust of the ground.

And he breathed into his nostrils that breath of life. Well, the Word of God contains that same life-giving power through the work of the Holy Spirit. As Christ says in John 6, 63, it is the Spirit who gives life.

[12:19] The flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life. And no other book has ever been given this life-changing power.

Think of all the people who have been converted through just reading just little bits of text of the Bible. And it always has an effect on people. I know that there's a lot of people who do like to read self-help books and they can be quite popular.

I was in a garden centre a few weeks ago and I saw a New York Times bestseller, Jordan Peterson's Twelve Rules for Life. And there's a review on the front of that book by the Times newspaper.

And it says, It's life-changing and inspirational. And I don't doubt for a minute that there'll be some helpful advice in there, but it's not really going to change your life one bit.

Not now, and especially, and most importantly, not for eternity. It cannot make you a new man because it doesn't have the power. It is a dead book.

[13:22] God's word alone is living and active and can actually give you life. It can turn a man's cold heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

It can cause somebody who's dead in sins and trespasses to be born again, to love God. And it can cause someone who loves sin, who wallows in sin, to actually hate sin and desire righteousness. We read in 1 Peter 1.23 that since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

So God's word is living. But we also read here, secondly, that his word is active. The Greek word here, and I can't speak Greek, but I'll give it a shot, is an air gaze, and that's where we get our English word energetic from, that an air part of it.

And that means that God's word is always busy, it's always at work, and it's always effective. If you could turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 2, and we'll see a very important text on this.

[14:36] 1 Thessalonians 2.13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, and this is the part, which is at work in you believers.

So whenever the scriptures are read, or heard, they go to work, and they always have an effect. Isaiah 55.11 says, So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth, it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I purpose.

So like I say, when we're reading, or when we hear preaching, or the Bible read, the word goes in through our eyes, and our ears, it goes in our brains, and it goes right down into our hearts, and it has an effect.

And it can have a number of effects on different people. We can bring a man straight to repentance and faith, but then we see a man like Pharaoh in Exodus, when Moses and Aaron brought the word of God before him.

It hardened his heart, because he was so hardened in sin, and it made him angry. And it's sad to see, but a hope for every one of us here, it will bring about that fruit of conviction, and rebuke, and chastening, that it would keep our feet from sin, that it would cause us to focus on Christ, encourage and strengthen our faith, and comfort us, and bring joy and thankfulness, as it ministers to our every need.

[16:17] Because we read earlier in 2 Timothy, that the section about all scripture is breathed out by God, but that verse continues, and it goes on to say, that it is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, and equipped for every good work.

So we see the word is active. Thirdly, we see it here described as a sword, a sword sharp on both sides, and it has a piercing point.

And this is imagery that we see a few times in the New Testament, particularly in Revelation, and then we see it in Ephesians as well. But in Revelation, in chapter 1, 16, we see in the vision that John had of Christ, that when he saw Christ, he saw from his mouth, came out a sharp and two-edged sword.

And again, that other place is in Ephesians 6, 17, that great passage about the whole armour of God, that the Christian is to wear. And we see all this equipment laid out. We see the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the readiness of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation.

But the last of all, and the one and only weapon, that a believer is given, is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Everything else is given to him for protection.

[17:39] The word of God is the only thing that he can go on the offensive with, to fight spiritual warfare, to go out to the world and speak the truth of the gospel. And this sword has the ability to go right down into the most innermost parts of a man and cut with extreme precision.

We read here that it pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow. So this is sort of impossible precision from a human standpoint.

It's described almost like a surgical tool, like a very big scalpel, that makes precise and vital cuts that are necessary for saving lives.

And some of you may know, if you've been through surgery yourself, that it can be very painful. But it's necessary. And all that sharp cutting away is not meant to kill us, but it is actually meant to heal us.

The same is true for the word of God. It can cause great discomfort and great pain, particularly initially when we first hear it. It can cause pain to our pride and our ego and our self-righteousness.

[18:46] But only then can we be healed by the saving work of Christ. Turn again with me to Acts chapter 2. And we'll see this actually happening as the word is preached.

This is Peter on the day of Pentecost. Acts chapter 2.

And we'll pick up the reading in verse 32. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are witnesses, being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit.

He has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool.

Then let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified.

[19:56] Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brothers, what shall we do?

And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit for the promises for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. So we see there in verse 37 that they were cut to the heart. The King James Version actually says they were pricked in their heart. Their consciences were pricked.

They were convicted, causing them unease. They became very aware of their stance before God as being under judgment as a sinner and the ones who crucified Christ and they knew right there and then from hearing the word they needed to be saved.

And a great example of this in history is a man called John Thorpe. I don't know if any of you have ever heard of him. But he was converted in the 18th century because I'm sure some of you, particularly the children, you might know about George Whitefield, Mr. Whitefield, the man who preached outside.

[21:12] Well, he was an amazing open-air preacher. He had a strong voice and it would carry, you'd say, for at least a mile. And he was greatly used by God in the 18th century.

And he preached to thousands of people all over Scotland, England and Wales, in Ireland and even over in America. And so many of his hearers were converted. But at that time as well, there were a lot of ungodly men around who didn't like the preaching of the word and they would bang on drums and they would blow trumpets so as to stop the people from hearing George Whitefield's preaching. And there was this one man called John Thorpe and he was part of a particularly horrible gang, a notorious gang who would meet together and do horrible sins. They would actually go out, they would make what they would say, they would draw pictures of the Holy Spirit and they would publicly blaspheme the Holy Spirit.

They would meet together privately also and commit the most horrible sins. But they also were very cruel to George Whitefield. They took the mickey out of the way he talked and particularly because he was very severely cross-eyed, they gave him the nickname Dr. Squintum.

And one day, John Thorpe and all his friends were all in a pub and they all decided to have a competition about who could do the best impression of George Whitefield in like a cruel, insulting parody.

[22 : 36] And four contestants were chosen but the last one up was this man, John Thorpe and he was known for his silly impression. He had all of George Whitefield's mannerisms down to a T.

So he got up in the middle of that crowded pub, he crossed his eyes and he was ready to give a mock sermon. So he stands there and the Bible flops open to Luke 13 and his eyes were drawn to verse 3 where Jesus says, I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

And then all of a sudden he became very serious. All the joking stopped and instead of delivering a mock sermon, he actually delivered a real sermon on that text.

And then the place fell into silence and when he finished, he sat down on a bar stool trembling and he was converted right there and then in that pub. It's often been said that, I read somewhere that he accidentally converted himself but we know really it was the word of God that penetrated inside his own heart independent of his own will.

It was the spirit empowered word. And then he did go on to be a minister of the gospel in time and I very much recommend you, I think it's in George Whitefield's biography but there's some things online about John Thorpe.

[24 : 03] So anyway, what a great testimony to the power of God's word to an unbeliever. So let's go back to our text and finally we'll look at our first point as we see God's word as a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of our heart.

Another word we could use here for discerner is it's a discoverer. It discovers us, it finds us out, it knows us better than we know ourselves and it's often said that out of all the books that you could read, the Bible is the only book that really reads you and this is so true, it tells us so many things about ourselves, perhaps things we didn't know and I wonder, has this ever happened to you when you came under the word of God, did you ever feel that cut, that prick in your heart, that sword going deep down inside you to the hidden places, to expose things that nobody else knows about you, the things you kept secret from those closest to you and you, maybe some things you didn't even know were sins until God's word showed you and then you became aware and aware that God knows.

Have you ever read in Matthew 5, Matthew 5 in verses 21 and 22 when the Lord speaks to us about anger, when he opens up the Ten Commandments you have heard it said to those of old, you shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgment but I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says you fool will be liable to the hell of fire and then later on in that chapter verse 27 you have heard it said you shall not commit adultery but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart and this goes on to speak of divorce, of false oaths, retaliation and how we don't love our enemies and there's so many other places we could go if you ever seen yourself in the parable of the prodigal son even or in the parable of the rich fool, the man who just wanted to build and build with no thought to the Lord or perhaps the parable of the sower and you saw yourself as one of the soils who wasn't listened to God's word or the parable of the tenants and you felt that fierce and piercing prick inside you and thought wow this is actually talking about me right now.

And then in 1 Corinthians 6 9 and 10 we read or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?

[26 : 48] Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who practice homosexuality nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor revilers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Has the word convicted you that that is you or even was you before you came to Christ? Because in verse 11 we are given the healing balm.

And such were some of you but you were washed you were sanctified you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ by the spirit of our God.

So not only do we feel the pangs of our sin the words revealing to us our sin but we feel that cut when we realise the truth of the gospel that after we have done all that Christ came to die for us and that he died in our place suffering the punishment that should have fallen upon us he actually on that tree paid your fine and gave you his righteousness if you repent and you trust in him and realising that all this is for your good and for your healing because Ezekiel 11 19 we are told the end result of all this surgery is this and I will give them one heart and a new spirit that I will put within them I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh this is open heart surgery this is conversion and regeneration to be born again to be given a new heart by God and then as believers as we come under the word week by week and day by day to be continually as we read the word having it cut away more and more sin and daily make us more and more Christ like so how do we apply these things finally well first let us treasure God's word acknowledge it as the most precious thing to commit to the reading of it to commit to the memorisation of it and of the study of it and to see it as the best use of our time Psalm 119 72 says the law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces then secondly let us have confidence in the ability of God's word rather than our own word particularly when speaking to others knowing that nothing from our own thoughts or our own minds has the power that scripture has and then thirdly and lastly let us pay attention to the word at work in our life to make us more appreciative of Christ and to make us more and more holy in thought and conduct and so to close some final words from 1 Peter 1 24 which is actually quoting our original text in Isaiah 1 Peter 1 24 and 25 for all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass the grass withers and the flower fades but the word of the

[29 : 59] Lord remains forever and this word is the good news that was preached to you amen amen the ■■■■■