

Striving for Christ

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[0:00] Well, for a time this evening, turn with me, if you will, to the letter to the Hebrews, and chapter 4, and at verse 11.

Hebrews chapter 4, verse 11. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that 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 joints 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.

Well, I'd like us to consider two things in light of this passage, and indeed there are going to be various reference points across chapter 3 and chapter 4, but we are going to hone in on the passage I've just read from verse 11 to verse 13 of chapter 4.

[1:17] Two headings, striving for Christ and subscribing to Christ. Striving for Christ and subscribing to Jesus Christ.

Well, let's begin by focusing in particular on the words of verse 11. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Well, I'm going to begin by quoting three very well-known verses of Scripture. And these verses may resonate with us in a particular way.

Let's begin with Philippians 1 verse 21. For to me, to live is Christ. And then back to the Old Testament, the words of Nehemiah chapter 8 verse 10.

Go your way, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. And then finally, the words of 1 John 5 verse 4.

[2:35] For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. Well, three positives. But then the question arises, do texts like these imply that the Christian life is a doddle?

That's the question. A spiritual journey perhaps that passes without incident. A walk in the park, as some would say. Does the Bible convey to you and I that the Christian life is going to be smooth and struggle-free?

Well, some would argue that it does. Advocating a prosperity theology. Promising a life of health and wealth. Now, I've been to Africa.

I've been to Uganda. But my knowledge of Swahili is poor at best. But if I were to say to you, Akuna Mutata, then you would understand, I'm sure, that phrase.

You've heard it before. Made famous, of course, in the 1994 production of The Lion King. Akuna Mutata in Swahili means no worries.

[3:59] For the rest of your days, it's our problem-free philosophy. Well, some would adopt this kind of philosophy as the Christian's motto.

Do you subscribe to that this evening? Well, the writer to the Hebrews begs to differ with that kind of prosperity theology.

The writer to the Hebrews makes it very clear that the Christian life is not without its struggles and trials. It's hard work being a Christian.

Because the believer, the Christian, the disciple must strive if he or she is going to progress in the faith and ultimately make it to heaven.

Now, have some of us discovered this reality for ourselves? It has been said that whilst the entrance fee to the kingdom of heaven is nothing, the annual subscription is everything.

[5:13] And how true that is. Nothing in that, as the hymn writer puts it, nothing in my hands I bring simply to the cross. I cling, but this cross demands my soul, my life, and my all.

Now, we are told in verse 9 of chapter 4 here that A Sabbath rest awaits the people of God.

The heavenly Sabbath rest of which the book of the Revelation speaks time and again. An eternal resting place without tears, without death.

Indeed, where death is no more. Where mourning and crying and pain no longer apply or exist. But, the writer to the Hebrews says, we need to get there first.

And the root is not without its potholes. It's not without its pitfalls. If we long to be with Christ, which is better by far, so we must be prepared to strive for Jesus Christ.

[6 : 33] In other words, no pain, no gain, the writer to the Hebrews is saying. Do you remember that moment in Acts chapter 14?

Paul is at Lystra. Paul is stoned and he's as good as dead. But, remarkably, he gets to his feet again.

And he continues in the faith. And he continues to testify to the grace of God. But he says this. Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

And if we undertake a little forensic analysis of the word strive here in verse 11, then we discover that it's a weighty word.

To strive here is to make every effort, giving of oneself without holding back, spare no effort, the writer is saying, with respect to entering the Sabbath rest.

[7 : 44] That is heaven itself. It speaks of working hard at something. An effort that is strenuous.

And he says that because the Christian life is labor intensive. It requires due diligence and persistence and perseverance and a focused obedience.

And it's the opposite of disobedience. The kind of disobedience spoken of here, particularly in chapter 3, the kind of disobedience the people of Israel fell into.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that they no longer find themselves thriving, but staggering and stumbling in their wilderness, waywardness, and covenant non-compliance.

They heard much, we read in chapter 16, verse 16 of chapter 3, yet they rebelled. Steeped in unbelief, ultimately they are denied access to the promised land.

[8 : 54] Verse 18. And it's a warning from the history of Israel to the Jewish Christians of the writer to the Hebrews day and generation.

Sons and daughters of Abraham with whom this historical account would have resonated. But the question then arises, are you and I exempt from this warning?

Does this exhortation not apply to you and I as well? Well, of course it does. God's word is timeless and always timely.

So what are we to make of the words of verse 11 as we look at the historical context of the Israel of God? Well, there are many overlapping features between the wilderness way spoken of here and the path of discipleship in Jesus Christ.

The writer to the Hebrews is saying, let us strive. Let us strive without digressing. Let us strive without diversions.

[10 : 17] Let us strive without losing our way. Without following in the footsteps of demons. Let us strive without losing our way. Let us strive without losing our way. We are to take care lest there be in any of us an evil, sinful, unbelieving heart leading us to falter and fall away from the living God.

Verse 12 of chapter 3. And you might say, well, all of this is very sobering. And it is. But it's life, isn't it? It's the Christian life more to the point.

Because for any of us to say this evening that the life of the believer is a breeze, that it's storm free, is to be deluded.

To suggest that you can make it to heaven with just a pair of slippers on your feet is to miss the point. The battlefield terrain that is the Christian life requires protective footwear so that the believer, the Christian soldier, can strive forward and not slip or backslide.

Paul, as he speaks to the church at Ephesus in chapter 6, verse 15, speaks of the shoes of gospel readiness. A reference to the Roman soldier's sturdy military footwear giving the soldier stability and protection at the front line, lest he should fall.

[11 : 53] So the question arises, how can I strive without stumbling? How can I strive without fear of falling? Well, the writer points us, of course, to the author and to the finisher of our faith later on in this letter.

Who is he? He is our great high priest. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. If we are to strive for Jesus, if we are to live our lives for him, if we are to commit without compromise to the path of discipleship, then we are to subscribe to Jesus Christ, and in particular to his word.

If we share in Christ, verse 14 in chapter 3, and if we are to hold fast to our original confidence or assurance firm to the end, then we are to subscribe to him.

How do we do that? Well, again, the writer tells us with an open Bible. And that takes us on to our second point, where the writer speaks at length of how we are to subscribe to the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.

For the word of God is living and active, and so on. There is a link here, isn't there, between the word spoken of and the word referred to by Paul as he writes to the church at Colossae.

[14:04] In Colossians chapter 3, verse 16, Paul says, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly, not sparingly, but with substance.

Let it be substantial, not superficial. Let the word of Christ lodge in you abundantly.

So I want to ask a few questions as we engage with this passage. What of your subscription to the scriptures tonight?

Are you engaging with your Bible these days? Do you take the word of God seriously enough to subscribe to it, not just on a Sunday, but every other day of the week?

[15:14] It is our only rule and authority for glorifying and enjoying God in Christ.

This passage exhorts us to find security in the word of God because this word provides us with strength and with safety and with stability and a sanctuary for the soul.

Your Bible, the word of God, is everything you need to strive for the sake of Christ as you face your own trials and tribulations in this life.

So what do we subscribe to? What are the key characteristics of your Bible, of the word of God?

Well, an answer is given to this question in this passage from verse 12 onwards.

The first thing we read is that the Bible, the word of God, is living and active. Now that's powerful in more ways than one.

[16:43] Your Bible, the word of God in your hand, remember it is always live and its current is always active and that current runs through all 66 books of your Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Its charge does not diminish. Your Bible, the word of God, will never, ever cease to be. It will never experience any kind of outage, no temporary suspension of power with the word of God because its power, its voltage, is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

Do you appreciate, do I appreciate, that the Bible, in one's hand, carries more power than all of the nuclear power stations the world over combined?

And this word of God has stood the test of time. As I said previously, always timely.

It is timeless. It is the word of God. Peter refers to it in his own letter, 1 Peter 1.23, as the living and abiding word of God.

[18:20] If I were to ask you tonight, do you take holiness seriously? Is godliness something you aspire to?

Do you, do you subscribe to sanctification? Is it something that is important to you? And you might say, well of course, yes these things are important to me in the Christian life.

But if we are seeking, holiness, a closer walk with God, then the writer to the Hebrews is telling us that we must subscribe to Holy Scripture.

Hold fast to the word of life, Paul says to the church at Philippi, Philippians 2.16, so that when all is said and done, I may have cause to glory, Paul says, that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

This word of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks, along with Paul and Peter and John, they are all singing from the same scripture song sheet.

[19:39] the word saves, it sanctifies, it safeguards. The word which arrested your own heart and spoken to your soul at the outset of your own Christian life, the word you submitted to back then is the same word you and I tonight are to subscribe to in the here and now in our struggles and in our strivings.

If we are serious about sanctification, about becoming dead to sin and alive to righteousness, then if I am to say in a paraphrased fashion, the world behind me and the cross before me, no turning back, then I need to be serious about scripture.

scripture. If I believe that the work of God's free grace is administered through designated means of grace and every means of grace revolves around the living and active word of God, then all the more reason for me to be an active subscriber of every means of grace that God has designated so that I might grow in grace and in the knowledge of the author and the finisher of my faith, Jesus Christ, am I subscribing to every means or every avenue through which grace is channeled to my

soul?

You know, some subscriptions expire when the service which is subscribed to is no longer being tapped into.

You know, the kind of thing I mean. It might be an app on your smartphone. It might be an online service that you are no longer logging onto or engaging with.

[21 : 47] And what happens? You receive a notification that goes something like this. Your subscription has expired and you are encouraged to renew your subscription.

Well, on a more serious note tonight, the question the writer to the Hebrews is challenging us with is this. Has your subscription as my subscription to the word of God expired somewhat?

Is it time to resubscribe? Is it time to renew my commitment to the word of God? Is it time to blow the dust of that reading plan again and re-engage?

Is it time to review and revise one's subscription to the scriptures? Well, if we are to strive, verse 11, so verse 12 onwards, we must subscribe.

To engage, we must be equipped. And again, the Bible is everything we need if we are to strive. We're told that it's sharp, it's piercing, it's incredibly discerning, and so it is.

[23 : 09] Where is the writer to the Hebrews coming from when he says that the word of God is sharp, indeed sharper than any two-edged sword?

sword? Well, again, he's thinking of the Roman soldier. The Roman soldier's sword was much celebrated. It was apparently an outstanding weapon in and of itself.

The sharpest around, in fact, the Roman soldier's sword was razor sharp and paralleled as a hand-held weapon of war.

Its distinctive feature was that it had a two-edged blade, giving the soldier an advantage on the battlefield. And this two-edged sword in a Roman soldier's hand could pierce and penetrate like no other sword.

The Roman soldier's sword was a class apart. Granted, the writer says, word of God is sharper still.

[24 : 19] Sharper than any two-edged Roman soldier's sword, the writer is saying. So it's as if he's saying, take the very best sword from the Roman soldier's arsenal and God's word will have the cutting edge, so it will.

It pierces into the deepest recesses of the soul, to the very marrow, to the very core, to the very nucleus of a person's being.

So much so that as it pierces, as it penetrates, one's thoughts and intentions are pierced and discerned and disclosed. How powerful is that?

The New Living Translation gives a very helpful translation of what is said here. The word of God. cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are.

[25 : 32] Charles Haddon Spurgeon, long before the days of the PA system, he would meet in a building, perhaps not unlike this.

And he would begin, long before the service would commence, by trying to determine the acoustics within the building. And he would stand in the pulpit and in the empty church he would repeat passages of Scripture.

There was one passage in particular that he would bellow. and his assistant would stand at strategic points in the church to determine how well Spurgeon's voice was carrying.

And Spurgeon would quote these words of Scripture, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And he would repeat these words several times.

Well, that'd be known to Spurgeon on one occasion, there is a contractor. contractor, repairing the ridge of the church. And the contractor on the ridge of the roof of this church is eavesdropping.

[26 : 49] And the words of Scripture as Spurgeon bellows these words, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. These words begin to resonate and echo and rebound of the walls of the church and the ceiling.

And little by little these words begin to pierce this man's soul sitting up there on the ridge of the roof. And as God's Spirit begins to awaken his soul, there is a concern activated and a personal conviction salvation for his own soul.

All of the above is stirred up in this man's heart. What is happening? Well, Spurgeon speaks of how God's living and active word touches and transforms this man's life in a moment.

Perhaps that's how some of us came to faith. perhaps in your own experience you remember where you were when the Spirit of God was striving with you.

You remember that moment when the Word of God pierced you. Well, you remember it well. it was life-changing. It was powerful.

[28 : 25] It didn't just touch you. It brought the transformation that only grace can bring into our lives. Perhaps at that point you too felt naked and exposed.

Verse 13, before Almighty God. that moment when the truth of the Gospel entered your soul with its cutting edge.

Do you remember it? And you're saying, how can I possibly forget it? When God's Spirit convinced you that you were sinful and miserable without Jesus Christ in your life.

When with an open Bible your mind was enlightened in the knowledge of Christ and the thoughts and the intentions of your will renewed, persuaded you were and enabled you were to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior.

But then you might be saying to me, well that was a long, long time ago. And perhaps it has been some time and these days you struggle and you stagger and you stumble as you strive as best you can as God enables you in the Christian life.

[30 : 04] And you're saying under your breath it's all uphill. and the writer to the Hebrew says all the more reason to cling to your Bible to keep you on your feet.

You are to subscribe to Scripture anew this evening to ensure that you are galvanized by grace. Otherwise we are in danger of becoming rusty aren't we?

Peter says, 2 Peter 1, be all the more diligent to make your calling and your election sure. And then we might ask the question, how am I to be assured of my salvation?

Well, Peter says that we are to supplement our faith with, among other things, steadfastness and godliness. He says if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

Now all of this implies a code of practice which is the living and active word of God.

[31 : 17] We are to subscribe to it. So am I willing tonight to say I will examine myself and be willing to be examined by the word of God.

I will search the scriptures and be searched by the scriptures. This living and active word that I subscribe to it will prompt me to look again to the Lord Jesus and strive to walk after him.

this living and active word will probe me and pierce me at times. It will correct me. It will chastise me. It will redirect me. It will rebuke me and it will restore me.

Oh how I need my Bible how I need to renew my subscription to the scriptures tonight and discover something of the psalmist David's longing in Psalm 139 verses 23 to 24.

search me oh God and know my heart try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

[32 : 44] you submit your annual accounts to your auditor you think that you have covered it all no stone is left unturned but the auditor has an eagle eye and as he undertakes his forensic scrutiny and analysis of the past year he will apply his red pen here and there and as he does so he will see to it that what has been submitted to him is made good and put right but we have the ultimate auditor haven't we spoken of here and we are encouraged to look to him

I am accountable to the omnipotent all powerful omnipresent all everywhere present God the omniscient all knowing divine examiner who soar dissects and divides and redirects me to the path of righteousness and he urges me to subscribe in order to strive in order to thrive with the grace of perseverance notice you in verse 8 just as we close that Joshua is mentioned remember the words spoken to Joshua back in Joshua chapter 1 verse 9 be strong Joshua God says to Joshua and be courageous what does God command Joshua to do well read the passage again when you go home tonight and you will discover that God is effectively urging

Joshua to subscribe to his word do not turn from it testify to it meditate on it that you may have good success God promises success but success can be forfeited by disobedience as you read the book of Joshua you don't need to travel too far with Joshua and the Israelites until you come across Achan's sin and the humiliating defeat at Ai if we are to strive we must of necessity subscribe the psalmist and psalm 1 prospers when planted in the precepts of the

Lord so you see perseverance and obedience go hand in hand by grace alone yes but we are given every encouragement to subscribe to every means of grace at our disposal designated means through which we can strive with greater resolve with a spirit of perseverance that we will not find within but we will find from above may God grant each and every one of us this evening to strive but not without subscribing to faith in Jesus Christ alone amen we bow our heads in prayer