



The Living and Active Word of God

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 4:1-13 (3b-13)

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

Review and Response Just this week, as I have been studying and thinking about this message, I have been amazed at the gracious way in which the writer of Hebrews frames this important warning in Hebrews 4. He is masterful, clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit. He begins, back in chapter 3, by dealing with the danger of a hardened heart and the need for a soft and responsive heart toward the Word of God, for sensitive and receptive heart. He want to prepare his hearers because he understands that the warning that he is going to give to the Hebrew Christians and to us is both strong and searching, but also spiritually enriching – but it will only be enriching to those whose hearts are soft and pliable toward God, willing and ready to hear and receive it. How we receive this text speaks volumes about the condition of our hearts and it is vital consequence.

He knows that someone with a hardened heart hears this searching and examining word and responds in a way that further hardens his/her heart. He/she thinks such things as: “He’s preaching against ‘once saved, always saved.’ He can’t tell me I’m not saved. He doesn’t know me, I have a legitimate reason for...” He/she responds with self-justification, with human wisdom and with excuse-making to the clear and unambiguous warnings of God. The hardened heart responds with offense at the Word of God, with a refusal to even consider the weight of God’s Word that only leads, apart from the miraculous intervention of God, to greater and greater hardness and eventual apostasy. That is the danger of the hardened, unbelieving heart, right?

But the one with a soft heart, a heart that is sensitive to God and to His Word, responds to such warnings with humility. He/she hears these warnings, takes them to heart, understands the love and the grace expressed by them, and examines him/herself. He/she is honest and open to the searching of the Word of God, doesn’t make excuses but deals with reality. He/she deals with sin, deals with areas in his/her life that aren’t in line with true and

striving faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, and repents, availing him/herself of forgiveness in Christ and of the grace to pursue a more faithful life – and in that way gives proof that their faith in Christ is real faith that leads to eternal rest in God. He/she receives God’s word not with offense but with gratefulness, seeing these warnings as the way by which God preserves saving faith in His children. Such a one doesn’t presume without examination but examines him/herself in the light of God’s Word and responds well. This is what he is trusting will be the character of the heart of the Hebrew Christians to whom He is writing. One of the most deadly enemies of true, saving faith is presumption. The writer of Hebrews wants us to see that.

You see, as we consider the call to faith, the call to hear God’s voice and respond, the call to enduring belief and trust, here’s what becomes crystal clear in light of the author’s message – there are no exceptions to the Word of God. There are no small or inconsequential sins or patterns of sin. There is no such thing as small or inconsequential disobedience. There is no such thing as acceptable, understandable, or excusable rebellion. There is no such thing as an acceptable season of cooling affection, devotion, or obedience to Christ. There is no such thing as justifiable unbelief or doubt. There is no such thing as convenient Christianity. All of these things, left unchecked, all those things minus sincere repentance, lead to apostasy and spiritual death.

Last week, as we looked at these words that were addressed to these struggling believers in Rome, these Hebrew Christians who were suffering distress, pressure, testing and temptation to fall away from Jesus and to trade faithfulness for compromise, to trade the gospel for another, more socially acceptable substitute, primarily a return to their old life under Judaism, we learned some important foundational truths that must motivate us in our own days of opposition and temptation to find our life, our identity, our worth and our rest in earthbound things—in approval and affirmation by the world, to play loose with the gospel of grace, to be distracted and to regress, to embrace other passions, and turn in our hearts from the worth of Jesus Christ. What is at stake is the rest of God.

What is at stake is the full experience and enjoyment of the salvation, the presence, the blessing, the grace, the life and the love of God, in this life and throughout the life to come in eternity, that is the gift of God through persevering, growing and enduring faith in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. What is at stake is eternal life. We must endure until the end. And so he called us to a proper fear like we saw in verse 1, a proper fear of unbelief so

that when your devotion to Christ begins to slip, when persecution causes you to think about falling away, when hardship begins to cause you to doubt God's faithfulness, when your passion for Christ is replaced by inordinate passion for other things, when you begin to stray and become careless, when your heart begins to harden – this proper fear that your faith in God may be slipping away would drive you back to Jesus Christ, in humility and repentance.

Likewise, he showed us that if we fall away from faithfulness to Christ, like the Exodus generation, we have no excuse, for we have heard the good news just as they did. Their hardened unbelief led to the loss of the rest of the Promised Land. It is by hearing and receiving the Word of God, acting on it and believing in Jesus Christ personally that you receive the promise of the rest with God, the eternal life that starts now. And true faith is proven by a life of faithfulness – not perfection – but real, persevering faithfulness, faithfulness that is evident in the way that you live your life.

Drawing upon this illustration of the Exodus generation, the writer of Hebrews makes this point – they left Egypt but they never made it to the Promised Land because their “faith” wasn't real, it gave out. But that cannot be us. We, too, have yet to arrive at our “Promised Land,” So we must press on. We must keep believing. We must pay closer attention to the gospel that we have heard; We must not neglect this great salvation; We must consider Jesus; We must not harden our hearts; We must take care that we guard our hearts from evil unbelief; and we must exhort one another every day against the deceitfulness of sin. In other words, we must strive to enter the rest of God. The goal is the rest that God has always offered to His people and offers to the Hebrew Christians and to us, even now. As we continue in this text today, we're going to look first at:

God's Rest – The Great Offer of History (3-11) The first thing he is going to show us is that the rest that God offers is greater than anything else. Pick the text up with me at the beginning of verse 3: ***“For we who have believed enter 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 this 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, again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, 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.” (Hebrews 4:3–10, ESV) Now, admittedly, the train of thought in these verses is a little difficult and kind of complicated, but the main point is that there is a rest, a life with God, a life of blessing and joy, spiritual life, real life that God has offered all throughout creation history. This rest is the greatest offer in human history and he wants us to see that.

First, the writer of Hebrews goes all the way back to creation, to the seventh day, to the Sabbath of God. He says, **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.”** Now, when he says that God has **somewhere spoken** of the seventh day, don’t get the wrong idea. He is not like the person who says, “Doesn’t it say somewhere in the Bible that God helps those that helps themselves. I’m pretty sure I read that somewhere.” The answer to that is, “No, you didn’t because it doesn’t say that anywhere.” What he is using here is a Hebraism, or a figure of speech, to say that what he is going to quote is an eternal truth, ok? It doesn’t just apply to the creation story; it applies forever.

And his point is this. God created everything in six days and then on the seventh day, He rested from His works. Now, why did God rest? Was it because He was tired, because it took a lot out of Him to create the entire universe? The obvious answer to that is, “No.” God rested because He was finished with His task. His rest was the rest of accomplishment. God made and ordered the creation according to His Sovereign power and plan. He rests, not in the sense that He is now “hands off,” but in the sense that His control is absolute. He exercises providential care; His saving will proceeds, but His sovereignty is unchallenged. His reign is one of rest.

And God invited Adam and Eve into that rest, into the enjoyment of His Kingdom, His blessing, His rule and His reign, into His Sabbath rest – to rest with Him in His perfect finished work, to rest with Him and to enjoy His kingdom forever. Notice something with me, every other day of creation was bounded by the words, “There was evening and there was morning, the (blank) day.” But on the seventh day, there is no mention of evening or morning. That seventh day lasts forever. Adam and Eve were offered this everlasting rest and they lost it. They lost it through unbelief when they believed and acted on the lies of the devil. But that doesn’t mean that the promise of rest was lost forever. Immediately, in the

Garden of Eden, God promised a Savior, One who could lead mankind back into the rest that Adam and Eve had forfeited in the Garden of Eden by their sin of disobedience, whose heel would be bruised but who would crush the serpent's head. That promise set in motion the redemptive plan of God, through the nation of Israel, culminating in the birth, life, sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to pay the penalty of our sins, to redeem us from unbelief, to destroy the works of the devil, and to give to us eternal life through living faith in Christ.

God, as we have seen, offered that rest to the Exodus generation, spiritual rest in and with Him, a rest pictured by the Promised Land, **who**, though they, **formerly received the news failed to enter because of disobedience**. The vast majority refused to believe God. But God was not defeated. His plan was not undone. Still, He continued offering this spiritual rest to anyone who would receive it through faith and trust in Him. The offer of eternal rest in God, the Sabbath rest of God, remained for those who would take it by faith. Specifically, the writer of Hebrews talks about the days of David. It makes sense since in this passage he is quoting from one of David's psalms, Psalm 95. Even when the nation was in the Promised Land, by this time a mighty kingdom under David's rule, David says that God is still holding out a promise, an offer of eternal rest that goes far beyond the physical rest of the Promised Land – salvation rest through faith in Him. The writer says, **again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."** The offer continued in the days of David to those who would believe.

He furthers his point that God is offering something far greater than a land when he says: **For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.** It's a play on words that you cannot see in the English translation. The name, Joshua, and the name of Jesus are the same in the Greek language. His point is that the original Joshua, who led the children of the Exodus generation into the Promised Land, was really only a picture of the rest of God's salvation that Jesus Christ, alone, provides.

Then the writer of Hebrews sums up creation history saying, **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.** God's promise applies to the Hebrew Christians and to us even today. True Sabbath rest, true and lasting salvation, can only be found in Jesus Christ. It is what Jesus promised when He said: **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,**

and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30, ESV) It is the rest of knowing that your sins are forgiven, your eternal guilt removed, and your standing with God has been changed from enemy to child. It is the rest of knowing that you belong to Jesus Christ, that by the Holy Spirit He lives in you, that, in Christ, all the promises of God are “Yes and Amen,” and that this life is not the end, that where Christ is you shall be also. Jesus Christ has done all that is necessary to give to us this eternal rest and all that remains for us is to believe and to keep on believing, to trust and to keep on trusting, to strive in faith to enter that rest like we saw last week. ***“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”*** (Hebrews 4:11, ESV) This is a rest that we want.

But the great question then is this: How do you know if you have entered God’s rest through faith? How do I test my heart and see if it is genuine toward God? I don’t want to miss that rest, so how do I know? There is only one way to know, by the testing of the Word of God. That is why my heart must remain soft toward God’s Word. That is the reason for the continual admonition not to harden my heart to the voice of God, to pay close attention to the word that I have heard, to consider Jesus, the Apostle of my confession who speaks God’s Word, to hear and believe God’s Word and not to have an evil, unbelieving heart. We need to hear God’s Word because it is the only measure of our souls. This is why we all must hear and receive

God’s Living, Powerful and Discerning Word (12-13) The Word of God is the measure of reality, of truth regarding our hearts. The writer of Hebrews says, ***“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.”*** (Hebrews 4:12, ESV) The writer of Hebrews is making his point very clearly. The only reliable measure of our the condition of our hearts, the only reliable measure of the reality of faith, the only reliable measure of truth is the Word of God – not our feelings, not appearances, not our reasoning, not any of the outward human measure – the only reliable examiner of our hearts is the Word of God – what the Word of God teaches. It is the Word of God, what it says about the evidences of true saving faith – resting completely in the finished work of Jesus Christ for salvation, a lifestyle of obedience, an evident devotion to Jesus Christ, faithful and true-hearted worship, the presence of the fruit of the Spirit in a believer’s life, a life of selflessness and Spirit-driven service, a life of persevering trust – that is the measure of the condition of our hearts before God. The Word of God is the measure of the truth of

our faith. When we say we believe, the Word of God either approve or disproves that confession.

That the writer of Hebrews refers to the Word of God as a sword is not an accident. Not at all. He is thinking back to the story, again, of Israel's unbelief at Kadesh Barnea in Numbers 14, when they were poised on the edge of the Promised Land. In their unbelief, they refused to go in and take possession of the Land. They did not act in faith. After they rebelled and Moses, speaking for God, pronounced the judgment that they would die in the wilderness without ever reaching the Promised Land, Scripture says that they mourned greatly.

Numbers 14, starting in verse 40 records the scene: ***“And they rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, “Here we are. We will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned.” But Moses said, “Why now are you transgressing the command of the Lord, when that will not succeed? Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies. For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword. Because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you.” But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the Lord nor Moses departed out of the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them and pursued them, even to Hormah.”***

(Numbers 14:40–45, ESV) In their presumption, they decided to act even more faithlessly, in greater unbelief. First, they refused to believe God's promises. Then, they refused to believe God's words of judgment, and then went into Canaan and died by the sword. The reality of their unbelief, the reality of their hardness of heart, was exposed by the blades of Amalekites and the Canaanites.

Here's his point -- If the swords of the Amalekites and the Canaanites were powerful to expose the hearts of the Exodus generation, how much more powerful is the living and active Word of God to reveal the truth about our own hearts? The Word of God is far sharper than the swords of the Canaanites. It cuts through far more than bone and muscle; it cuts to soul, to the spirit, to the very thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Words have power, right? They can command, excite, encourage, start wars, and make people laugh or cry. They can pronounce a man and woman, husband and wife. Words can accomplish a great deal, but nothing comes close to the power of the Word of God. The Word of God pierces our souls to the real us. It exposes our motivations, desires, the hidden

thoughts, and the motivating passions of our souls. It cuts through our professions, pretensions, excuses, and motives, lays bare self-delusions, revealing the truth condition of our hearts. It judges our motives and will, confronts our unbelief, our spiritual immaturity, our disinterest in Christ, our disinterest in Scripture, where our hope and trust truly lie. It goes to the heart, to our life in all of its aspects – spiritual, intellectual, moral and emotional. The Word of God examines us on the most fundamental of levels – our hearts.

The Word of God does this in such a way that, **“No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:13, ESV)** Our hearts, all of us, are naked and exposed – literally in the Greek, naked and pinned by the throat. It was a word used of bending back the neck of a sacrificial animal to administer the fatal stroke or of a wrestler’s hold on the throat, rendering him helpless. Whatever the picture that the writer was desiring to convey, the meaning is clear: all of us are in the grip of God helpless and exposed to the One to whom we must give an account. There is a day of account coming. He knows our genuineness and he knows our pretense. He knows our faith and he knows our unbelief. He knows our struggles to live faithfully and he knows our excuses for obedience. He cannot be fooled. No excuse is acceptable before him who knows the reality of every detail of our thoughts and existence. It was true for the Hebrew Christians to whom he was writing and it is true for us. Now, that sounds terrifying, doesn’t it? But, listen beloved, that all depends on how you respond to the searching power of God’s word.

How We Respond Matters How we respond makes all the difference in the world. If you respond to the Word of God in such a way that you welcome it, in humility, freely confessing that you are a sinner in desperate need of salvation, freely confessing that you are in desperate need of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to be obedient, to become like Christ, to remain faithful to Him – this truth about God’s Word is a source of thankfulness. It shows you and me where we are trusting and growing in our faith and where we are still weak, where we are becoming whole and where we are still broken, where fruit has taken root and is growing and where sin still resides and wars against your soul. It drives us to repentance, to confession, to the grace and kindness and mercy of God in Christ. You welcome the searching, penetrating work of the Word of God because it drives you to cling more closely to Christ, to cling more close to the One who loves you and gave Himself for you, to believe and keep believing the gospel, to abide more closely in Jesus Christ, and find your life and your hope in Him. You welcome the Word of God because it preserves your soul. Like Phillip Hughes, a wise Christian of old, you pray: **“O thou elect blade and sharpest sword...who art**

able powerfully to penetrate the hard shell of the human heart, transfix my heart with the shaft of thy love.... Pierce, O Lord, pierce, I beseech thee, this most obdurate mind of mine with the holy and powerful rapier of thy grace.” That is the reason for the admonition over and over, **“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”**

But if your response to God’s Word is to turn a deaf ear, to bristle at its examination, to reject it, if you grow angry at the Word of God and its evaluation of the thoughts and intentions of your heart, if you find the Word of the Lord to be a burden, if the Word of God, rather than producing thankfulness instead spawns indifference or self-justification and excuses, or pointing to other measures of your spirituality rather than the ones described in Scripture as a means of defense – it should terrify you.

The Word of God tests us. It reveals the true condition of our hearts and of our souls before God and it can be painful. But this Word is such an incredible gift, such a marvelous gift, such a gracious and indispensable gift of God. And here is why. It’s true that whenever we honestly evaluate ourselves in the light of the Word of God, we come up short. I have never examined myself honestly from the Word of God and come away singing my praises. I always come up short. We all do and yet the Word of God uncovers our sin and our need in order to point us, to point you and to point me, to the One who bore God’s sword of judgment against sin, to the One whose blood speaks forgiveness, who has been exalted to heaven as our merciful high priest and gives to us the grace to endure with joy. The good work of the Word of God is to point us to Christ as our rest.

God has spoken through his Word. John Calvin says: **“If anyone thinks that the air is beaten by an empty sound when the Word of God is preached, he is greatly mistaken; for it is a living thing and full of hidden power, which leaves nothing in man untouched.”** Do you hear Him? Are you listening to His voice? That’s the question. How do you respond to the Word of God? The Hebrew Christians had to make a decision – either they would be faithful to Christ or they would fall away. Either they would believe and continue believing, obey and continue obeying, or they would fall away. Either they would refuse to hear the Word of God and grow harder in heart and eventually fall away, or they would respond to the word of warning by running to Christ. It is the same choice that is before us all.

Beloved, with our hearts naked and exposed before the searching Word of God and God Himself, let us run to the only place of refuge from the certainty of divine judgment: the crucified and risen Redeemer, Jesus Christ the Lord. For battling and determined believers, wrestling with sin and perseverance, longing to remain faithful, looking for grace to persevere, go to the Refuge, Jesus Christ. Hear His Word, listen to His voice. It will impart new life to you souls and cut through the fog of our age to speak to you divine truth.

For those whose hearts are being hardened, cooling in fervor for Christ, showing signs of neglect and apathy, I beg you, in the name of Jesus, hear God's Word before it is too late. When your conscience is pricked, respond in humility, while you still can.

For those who are Christians in name only, who are trying to play the game -- God's Word exposes you. Run to the Refuge, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, who humbled Himself and gave Himself to bear the weight of our sin, dying on the cross and rising triumphantly from the dead. Embrace him by faith. Believe the gospel. Jesus is offering you life, eternal life, eternal forgiveness, paradise regained and all you must do is come to Him in faith, to lay aside all your excuses and objections and take Him as your Savior and surrender to Him as Lord.

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

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