

# God's lethal weapon (Hebrews 4: 11-13)

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Most of you are aware or will become increasingly aware of the problems that come to theological students because of their close contact with the Bible. It's not simply that such contact means you begin to take the Bible for granted, but that the nature of your close contact makes it a positive hazard. So much of the time you are using the Bible for a variety of purposes. You have to deal with it in terms of solving exegetical problems or discovering historical settings, or you employ it as a quarry for theological formulations, or you use it in counselling or in ministering in your field education assignments. You are all the time trying to master the Bible for particular purposes, and it's not long before you discover that if that is all that is happening in your contact with the Word, the experience turns sour on you. You meet other Christians who know you're at seminary or studying theology and they say, 'Hey, how fantastic, what a privilege to study God's Word all the time like that!' But when you have a Greek or Hebrew examination the next day, and you're struggling with the exegesis of a verse that has at least six possible interpretations, and your church history course has just made you depressed about the mess some sections of the church made in interpreting Scripture and applying it to a particular issue, and you're having all sorts of problems about the relativity of the interpretation of the Bible in general, then you find it rather difficult to respond enthusiastically to such people with a 'Praise the Lord, isn't it wonderful?' And if, as may well be the case, you're going through one of those periods when because of such problems the Bible has even become a closed book devotionally to you, you not only find it difficult to rejoice at your privilege, but you feel downright guilty—'Here am I with all this contact with the Word but I'm not receiving anything spiritually beneficial from it.' You begin also

to envy those whom you may be tempted to think of as more naïve brothers and sisters who have not been exposed to all the questions that you have and for whom the Bible can remain living and fresh. At times then it becomes a real question whether study of the Bible is a privilege or a hazard.

The writer to the Hebrews saw that contact with the Word could be both a privilege and a hazard. To this writer his Bible, the Old Testament, was a living Word. Hebrews 4: 12—'For the word of God is living and active.' In the context that clearly refers to the written Word, to Psalm 95, which has been under discussion and which the writer introduced in 3: 7 with the words, 'Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says. . . .' To this writer Psalm 95 was God the Holy Spirit speaking and it was a living Word as he read it in the light of its fulfilment, in the light of God's final Word, of what had happened in Christ's death and exaltation. He read it in that light but nevertheless it was the written Word, his Bible, that he describes as living and active.

Because it is living for him, he can use it to speak to his readers and can apply it to their situation. He wants them to see the seriousness of contact with this Word. He exhorts them in 4: 11—'Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one *fall* by the same sort of disobedience.' He wants them to avoid what had happened to Israel when through unbelief the bodies of those who sinned *fell* in the wilderness (3: 17). 'For the word of God is living and active.' Words can do things. On a good day just two words from me can turn the chaos of our children's playroom into order. But not only can words command, they can excite, make a person cry or laugh, pronounce two people to be man and wife or even start a war. Words can accomplish a tremendous amount. How much more God's Word! It's something that will not remain neutral in your contact with it. It will act, it will accomplish what God wants and will have an effect whether you like it or not. It will result either in blessing or judgment for you. But either way it has an effect. The writer has just shown that God's word of oath, 'As I *swore* in my wrath, they shall never enter my rest', had a definite effect and was fulfilled. The generation to whom it had originally been addressed

fell in the wilderness. In fact, says the writer in 4: 2, that Word had first come as promise, as good news, but it did not result in blessing. Why not? Because it did not meet with faith in the hearers. Israel did not respond in the right way. They were not free to pick and choose from God's Word whatever struck their fancy nor simply to treasure it as the divine oracles. Rather it came to them as God's authoritative Word for their lives. They were to hear, believe and obey, and any other response invited God's Word to become his sword of judgment. This is what the writer fears may happen in the case of *his* readers. 'For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' But why a two-edged sword? The allusion is again to the wilderness generation and to Numbers 14: 43 where as a result of God's oath the wilderness generation fell by the *sword*. But these readers who have heard God's Word as it is fulfilled in his Son are confronted by that which is far more fearful, they face a far more lethal weapon. God's Word is sharper than any two-edged sword, sharp enough to carve apart soul and spirit, joints and marrow. To have such close contact with the Bible may be even more of a hazard than you imagined. You are in contact with what can become a lethal weapon and like all such weapons it needs to be handled with immense care and utmost awareness of what you are doing. It involves the deadly word of judgment of the One with whom we have to do (4: 13), to whom we have to give account. In his sight no creature is hidden. All are open and laid bare. The two words involved are translated literally as 'naked' and 'pinned by the throat'. The latter term is connected either with bending back the sacrificial victim's neck ready for the fatal stroke of the knife or with the grip of the victorious wrestler as he pins his opponent by the throat signalling his defeat. In either case we see man's plight when face to face with his Creator. All cover-ups will be stripped away and his pretensions will avail him nothing as he is pinned by the throat in a state of utter powerlessness.

The writer's point, however, is that before events ever reach such a stage, you must allow the Word to do its work now, its work of 'discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (4: 12). The emphasis is on the heart because this is where the wilderness generation had begun to go wrong—'Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion' (3: 8); 'They always go astray in their hearts' (3: 10)—and the Jewish Christian readers must be on

the alert lest apostasy begin in their hearts. 'Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God' (3: 12). Let God's Word sift out the first traces of any such unbelief and hardening and deal with them before it is too late.

A seminary or college community is big enough to make it fairly easy to remain somewhat anonymous if you so wish. You can wear various theological and spiritual masks, and others don't really know your heart. You can be a student in the seminary, sitting in exegesis and theology classes, training for ministry, with unbelief creeping into your heart and the deceitfulness of sin making inroads into your life. Allow the Bible to begin to do its work in your life, ripping away that image you have built up for yourself, that mask you wear before other people, and let it begin to pin you naked and squirming because some of the sickening evil of sin and unbelief in your life is being exposed. Come to the Bible not only to be moulded by its propositions but to be shaken by its questions. Do you ever allow it to call you into question in a disruptive and disturbing way? 'Yes, but how can I?' says someone, 'I feel I need to exegete all the Greek or the Hebrew and read at least three commentaries before I can hear what a passage is saying.' Resist that feeling with all that you have. It's the temptation of wanting to be able to pin it all down thoroughly and rationally and to master it. But God's Word is bigger than that. The temptation can also come not just in terms of the intellect but in terms of devotional use when we are expecting passages to trigger off certain spiritual experiences. Don't attempt to box the Word in like that; it's too big for you to cut it down to your size. Instead, just keep reading, even when you don't understand all the nuances. Keep reading regularly, even when there are no particular spiritual responses. You will be stocking up your memory with Scripture, and gradually, and now and again, you will find the Spirit taking some of those passages, passages that have not already been forced into service for your exegesis, theology or ministry and also some that have, and using them to surprise you, to call some of your own categories into question. In this way you will get the sort of exposure to the Bible that enables you to come not to master it but to be mastered by it, not to judge and criticize it but to let it judge and criticize you. By itself the privilege of close contact with God's Word is no guarantee of blessing; what is needed is a continuous exposure of the heart to it and a continuous response of faith.

There's also a communal aspect to this matter. As we have seen, when the Old Testament text came

alive in a new situation for the writer to the Hebrews, he exhorted his community. As the Word lives for you, don't hoard it up, don't save it for field education assignments, for preaching clinic or ministry on Sundays. Because of the tendency of our hearts to unbelief, the writer to the Hebrews saw the need for the community to '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). Because sin is so deceitful we all, faculty and students, need exhortation; no-one can sit back securely. The Lord may want you to speak the Word to someone in your community that will help them to avoid eventually having to face God's Word in its lethal capacity as the sword of judgment. Don't say, 'It's none of my business,' when you see someone beginning to slide, when you see unbelief or disobedience—it *is* your business because it can affect the whole community. It is Hebrews that talks about that root of bitterness in the heart springing up and by it many becoming defiled (12: 15). Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life together* says what needs to be said, 'Where defection from God's Word in doctrine or life

imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation, the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured. Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin. It is a ministry of mercy . . . when we allow nothing but God's Word to stand between us, judging and succouring.'

In a sinful world God's Word, in whatever way it comes to you, whether you interact with it by yourself or whether it is brought to you by another, can be painful. The Bible can be a painful book. Yet the sword of God's Word uncovers your sin in order to point you to the One who bore God's sword of judgment against sin, to the One whose sprinkled blood *speaks* more graciously than the blood of Abel and who has been exalted to heaven as your merciful high priest. To experience the Bible working in your life in this way is to become someone who knows genuinely and from the heart what the writer to the Hebrews is talking about when in 6: 5 he speaks of tasting the *goodness* of the Word of God.

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