

Hebrews 4:12-13
“Preparing for Judgment”

Introduction:

These two verses bring to a conclusion a portion of this letter that began at 3:7 and centered in the example of the failure of the wilderness generation of Israel. In these verses the author provides an explanation regarding how the readers of this epistle could avoid Israel’s failure and instead diligently pursue entrance into God’s rest (vs.11).

I. His Word:

The key resource that can enable a believer to succeed in the pursuit of God’s rest (i.e. entrance into heaven and God’s presence after death) is the Word of God. Here the author talks about how the Scriptures can aid the believer to prepare for that time when believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (II Cor.5:10). In developing this theme, the author made four observations about the nature of God’s Word, and then he identified the sphere of its work within us.

First, the author wrote that “*the word of God is living*” (vs.12a). The Word of God is living in the same sense that God Himself is a living God (3:12). God is living in the sense that He genuinely exists in reality. He is not the figment of human imagination like the false gods. The fact that God genuinely exists means that He is relevant to our lives, and we must accommodate our thinking to include Him. The Word of God then is alive in the sense that it is not simply a collection of religious sayings that we can observe or ignore without consequence. It is the real voice of God speaking to us in every generation, expressing things we must believe and obey if we are to enter into God’s rest.

Second, the author wrote that the Word of God is “*powerful*” (vs.12b). The word describes something that is effective at accomplishing its purpose. The Word of God therefore is capable of fulfilling whatever purposes God has for it. This same idea is found in a very familiar OT verse:

*“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not
return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please,
and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”*

Isaiah 55:11

The Word of God is capable of enabling us to be anything and everything that God wants us to be and do (as it is employed by the Spirit of God). Scripture then is the critical resource we need if we are to succeed to enter God’s eternal rest and to prosper in that rest.

Third, the author wrote that the Word of God is “*sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow*” (vs.12c). One of the sharpest instruments in the ancient world was a sword. Soldiers who employed them sharpened them to a razor’s edge so that even a glancing blow would cut open an enemy’s flesh. A sword that was sharpened on

both sides was even deadlier because it would enable the sword to cut in either direction. This metaphor is employed to convey the idea that the Word of God can penetrate deep into who a person is, and whatever the surface veneer we may project, the Word will cut through it to expose who we really are. The author says that the Word divides or separates soul and spirit, joints and marrow. The author was not saying that the Word separates a soul from a spirit, or a joint from marrow (which in the latter case would be literally impossible since they are not attached), he means that the Word cuts into the soul, spirit, joints, and marrow and divides that which is within them. It is not meant in a literal sense, but figuratively, to convey that it penetrates into every part of us; both our material and non-material selves to reveal what is within us. This is important because even the deepest parts of us will be examined at the judgment seat of Christ. Therefore, we must be prepared by having the truth of who we really are deep inside revealed to us. For it is only when we know the truth about ourselves that we can submit these things to the effectual Word of God that can transform even these deep internal parts of us so that they reflect God's sanctifying touch.

Fourth, the author wrote that the Word of God is "*a discerner*" (vs.12d). The Greek word refers to making judgments or discrimination between things. The Word of God unveils the truth about what is really within us so that there are no secret sins that we are unaware of. The idea here is that there are things a person does not even know about themselves, but the Word of God enables us to learn the truth about ourselves; again, with the purpose of seeking life change.

Finally, the author noted that the sphere in which the Word of God does its work is "*the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (vs.12e). The Greek word translated as "*thoughts*" actually refers primarily to one's feelings and affections, while the Greek word translated as "*intents*" primarily relates to one's reason or rationality. However, there is also a significant overlap in the meaning of these words. Therefore, it is most likely that together the words refer to everything that goes on in our minds. In this statement, the author refers specifically to the heart as the sphere of our thoughts and intentions. That is because in that culture, the heart was not just the seat of one's emotions, it was instead the core of a person; their true inner self that was the root of all that they were. Therefore, the idea here is that the Word of God does not change us in superficial ways. Rather it has the power to transform our core identity. This relates to the basic reason why the Israelites failed at Kadesh Barnea; they had evil hearts of unbelief (3:12). So, God's Word is the cure to the sin that can and will cause us to fail if it is not dealt with. The Word can transform our hearts so that they are filled with faith and oriented around obedience to God.

II. Our Response:

The author then turned to address why the Word of God is so invaluable to us. The author wrote that "*and there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account*". First, we are reminded that our accountability lies in the fact that everyone must

eventually answer to our maker for who we are and what we have done. And we must do this before the One who understands everything about us. The author then elaborated on just how much God knows about us and did this with both a negative and a positive observation. Negatively, there is nothing hidden from His gaze. This reminds us that in our accountability to God we have no secrets, nothing is covered up so deeply that He cannot see it. Positively, the author wrote that all things are naked and open before Him. The idea of nakedness is similar to the idea that there is nothing hidden. However, it calls to mind the state of Adam and Eve after their Fall; they were naked and they were ashamed (Gen.3:7-10). God sees us exactly as we are, and since the Fall, He sees our sin and thus our shame is exposed. So, the solution lies in returning to the state where we can be naked and unashamed before God (Gen.2:25). The word translated as “*open*” seems to refer to being vulnerable or helpless before someone else. The idea is not that God is out to harm us; instead the emphasis is on how we are incapable of hiding anything from God that we do not want Him to see. The point then seems to be to encourage us to give up the futile attempt of trying to hide from God.

The author’s last phrase in this passage is difficult to translate, because literally it reads “*toward whom in us the word*” (pros hon hemin ho logos). Though rendering this phrase into English is difficult, the basic idea of the author is clear. The author was employing a play on words in this phrase. Verse thirteen ends with the same term which is found at the beginning of verse 12. The common term is “*word*”, and the wordplay conveys that as God gives His Word to us, so we must give a word back to Him in the form of an answer or response of accountability. Therefore, though not true to the literal wording, the smoother translation (in the NKJV and in other versions) captures the essential meaning of the phrase, that we will have to give an account to God regarding why we lived our lives as we did. Our accountability to God then at the judgment will essentially be an explanation of how we responded to what God has said to us in Scripture. Thus, it will be either an account of how we obeyed or disobeyed His Word.

Conclusion:

The overall passage from chapter three verse seven to chapter four verse thirteen demonstrates that the proper answer to God at the time of judgment is that we believed what He said and we were obedient to what He told us to be and do. The wilderness generation of the Israelites served as a negative example of unbelief and disobedience, which were the reasons for their failure to enter God’s rest. And it forms the substance of the author’s warning, that we not to follow their example but instead we are to choose to believe in God and submit to His Word so that we can enter His eternal rest.