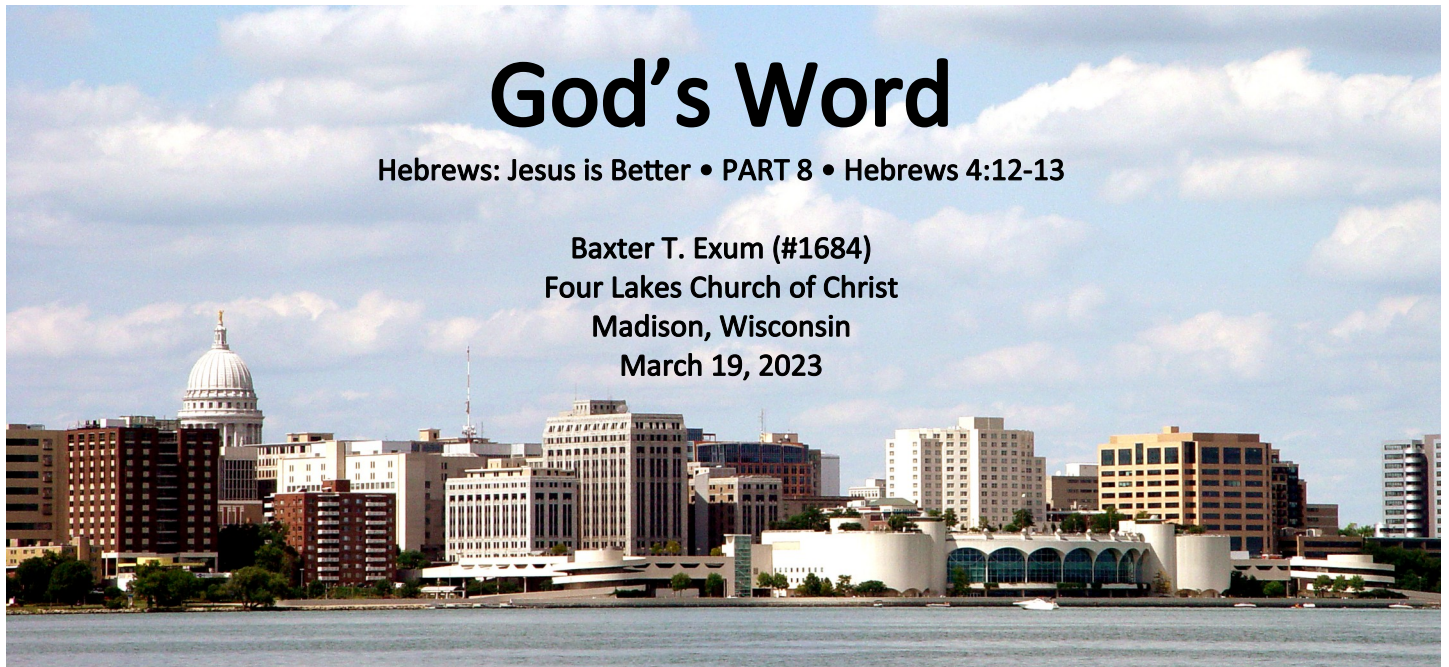


# God's Word

Hebrews: Jesus is Better • PART 8 • Hebrews 4:12-13

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Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
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It is so good to be together this morning! If you are visiting with us today (either here in person or online), we are glad to have you with us, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the front of the bulletin or by going to our website at [fourlakeschurch.org/visitor](http://fourlakeschurch.org/visitor).

Before we get to our study of God's word this morning, we'd like to take just a moment to introduce John and Yonnie Palmer as new members of the congregation. John and Yonnie have worshiped here several times through the years, visiting their daughter in the area, but they finally moved up here last summer. They come to us from the Griffin Road congregation in the Fort Lauderdale area, where John served as a gospel preacher for 24 years and where he also served as an elder for some of that time. We had the opportunity to meet with John and Yonnie after worship two weeks and took a few moments to get to know each other. They are eager to get involved, and we would encourage all of you to get to know these two as well. In keeping with the ancient tradition, we got in touch with Dan Deckard from the Griffin Road congregation, asking for their help in introducing these two to the church here, and Dan says he and his wife have "shared in Christian friendship, and worked along side the Palmers for many years here at the Griffin Road Church of Christ," and he says that "they will be a great asset to [us here] at Four Lakes." So, we've added a cubbyhole, and we are working to get their information added to the church directory, which is available in the member section on the church website. We've asked John Long (one of our shepherds) to make a point of thanking God for sending John and Yonnie our way (at the end of our service today). We are very glad you are here, and we hope we can encourage each other in the years to come.

We are here this morning to worship God and to preach the good news that Jesus gave his life for us on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We obey that good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and by obeying his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. And we do have several examples this morning, starting with an update from the Lord's church in Georgetown, South Carolina, right on the Atlantic Ocean. They say, "Welcome to the family, Alexis!" And then they quote Acts 8:35-39, ***"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?' And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing"*** (Acts 8:35-39).

We also have an update from Daniel , who preaches for the Main Street congregation in Hurricane, West Virginia. Daniel Curry says, "Tonight my father, Daniel Curry, Sr., was added to the church. He was baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Rejoice with us!" So good to see this!

There were a number of others this week, but I thought we should close with an interesting case from the Seven Oaks congregation down in Mayfield, Kentucky. They say,

Today, we rejoice with John Powell, as he was baptized into Christ. John has a trache [a breathing tube inserted directly into the trachea through an incision in his neck]. Because of this, we had to be very careful about immersing him in water, but he was determined and excited to obey Jesus and give his life to Him. John is a great inspiration for all. His example teaches us to obey the Lord, regardless of what our circumstances might be. We thank the YMCA for letting us use their pool.

What an encouragement! We share this to help illustrate what it means to obey the gospel. And if you have not yet obeyed the gospel yourself, or if you aren't sure whether you've obeyed the gospel, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship today or reach out using the contact information on the website or on the bulletin, and we would love to study together.

This morning, we return to our series of lessons on Hebrews, and this morning we come to a passage IN the word of God ABOUT the word of God. It's a passage that's familiar to most of us, and yet as I did the research for today's lesson, I was rather surprised to discover that I have never preached on this passage before. I've referred to it here and there, but in more than 30 years of preaching, I have never preached specifically on these two verses. We get to fix that today! If you are not there already, I would encourage you to turn with me to Hebrews 4:12-13 (in our pew Bibles, the passage is found on page 1873) - Hebrews 4:12-13.

To put this in context, let's remember that the book of Hebrews was first written most likely in the mid-60's AD to a group of Christians who were starting to have a hard time listening to Jesus. They had heard the gospel from others, they had obeyed it, but times were getting tough, and these people were tempted to turn back. And so the author of this book emphasizes over and over again, all throughout the book, that Jesus is Better. Jesus is worth following, so don't turn back!

Over the past two weeks, of course, we've been looking at God's rest and the fact that we can miss it (just like the Israelites did) if we harden our hearts, if we refuse to believe. But then on the positive side, we need to make sure we make it to God's rest by listening to God's voice right now (today) and by encouraging one another day after day as long as it is still called "**today**." And his whole argument goes back to that extended quote from Psalm 95. Well, today's passage continues this thought by referring to "**the word of God**." In other words, you know that message from God you're all in danger of ignoring? Let me tell you about it. He's saying, "Let me give you some reasons why you really don't want to be ignoring the word of God."

This brings us to Hebrews 4:12-13, where the author continues this thought and says, "**For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.**" So again, as we think about how important it is that we pay attention to the word of God, that we don't ignore it, let's think about why this is so important by noting some characteristics of God's word. What do we need to know about this book that God has given to us?

## I. And we start with the reminder that the word of God is LIVING.

Of course, we look at the book itself, and it does not appear to be alive, does it? In fact, it appears to be rather boring. We might even say that it looks dead. It doesn't move on its own. It doesn't make any noise. It doesn't grow, as most living creatures might grow. And most of our Bibles are even covered with the skin of a dead animal. That's a bit weird, isn't it? And we look at the format of a book like this, and it's almost as if somebody has gone out of their way to make this book boring. It's covered in plain black cover, the print inside this book is incredibly small, almost on the verge of not even being readable. And not only that, but pretty much every sentence in this book has been numbered! Have we thought about that? Most of you know that my dad taught high school speech and English for about ten years. One of his master's degrees is in English, and one of his favorite novels is *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. He loves this book. He and mom went to Key West to visit Hemingway's home several years ago. They've been to Hemingway's house up in Idaho. Even just a year or so ago, I mentioned this book to my dad when I told him that we got to visit Hemingway's home in Key West, and dad quoted the first paragraph of this book from memory! But I want us to try to imagine what would happen if we bound this book in a plain black cover, reduced the size of the print to the point of barely being readable, and then imagine interrupting the flow of the text by numbering every sentence. And then imagine filling up the text with footnotes and cross references! I think we might come close to pretty much killing a book like this! And yet, isn't that what we've done with the Bible? We look at the format of most of our Bibles, and we've made it functional, but sometimes very difficult (even unpleasant) to read. The format has taken some of the joy out of reading it. And yet, we still refer to the word of God as being a *"living"* document. Why is that? In what sense is this book *"alive"* (despite our best efforts to kill it)?

Well, the word of God is *"living"* because it creates spiritual life. It's like a seed, in that when it is implanted in an honest heart, it sprouts and grows and ultimately bears fruit. Peter describes it like this in 1 Peter 1:23-25, *"...for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER.' And this is the word which was preached to you."* This is why we teach and preach the word of God here at this congregation. This is why we emphasize the word. This is why we are looking at an actual paragraph from God's word this morning; because we recognize the power of it. The power is not in some cleverly crafted speech, the power is not in some kind of entertainment; but the power is in the word itself. So, if we are tempted to give up on listening to Jesus, let's remember that his word is like a seed. It's *"living,"* and it will grow in our hearts if we only give it a chance.

## II. As we go back to the text, let's also notice that the word of God is ACTIVE.

I read this, and I wonder: Why describe it as *"active"* if it's already been described as *"living"*? Isn't this redundant? Not necessarily. Some living things are dormant; they're alive, but they don't really do anything. The word of God, though, is not just *"living,"* but it is also *"active."* And the word we have translated here as *"active"* goes back to a word we might even recognize in the English word "energetic." In other words, the word of God isn't just *"living,"* but it actually accomplishes something; it's powerful. And this is why Silas read from Isaiah 55 this morning,

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
And do not return there without watering the earth  
And making it bear and sprout,  
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;*

*So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;  
It will not return to Me empty,  
Without accomplishing what I desire,  
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.*

Again, like a seed, God's word is not only *"living,"* but it is also *"active."* It does something. The word of God is more than just a history lesson; it is *"active,"* it has the power to change us. We think of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica where he said (in 1 Thessalonians 2:13), *"For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe."* God's word has a way of changing us. It guides us as we make decisions. It motivates us to love and to sacrifice. It sprouts and grows and changes our hearts. It is *"living and active."*

III. **As we continue in this passage, we notice that God's word is described as being SHARPER THAN ANY TWO-EDGED SWORD, AND PIERCING AS FAR AS THE DIVISION OF SOUL AND SPIRIT, OF BOTH JOINTS AND MARROW.**

The word of God is *"sharp"* and it is *"piercing," "sharper than any two-edged sword."* This is almost certainly a reference to the Roman gladius, the primary weapon of any Roman soldier. Everybody who heard this for the first time would have recognized the reference immediately. Several years ago, I found a training gladius online. This one is NOT sharp, but this is the size and shape of the sword referenced in this passage. Rome conquered the world with this. Everybody would have been familiar with this. This is the Glock of the ancient world (in that everybody had one). And for the purpose of today's study, let's just note that this particular sword has two edges, doesn't it. Some swords are obviously designed to cut in one direction, but this one is designed to cut both ways. It is a two-edged sword. As I understand it, some of the larger swords in the ancient world were designed to break bones – large and heavy, almost like a blunt instrument, but one that could be swung – the gladius, though, was designed to slice; the gladius was designed to cut and to stab, to thrust, to pierce. And that's the reference here. Only here, the word of God is described as being *"sharper than any two-edged sword."* So, he's making a comparison, but also a contrast. It's like a sword, but sharper.

A year or so ago, I remember telling you guys about the incident in Mr. Vitek's 6<sup>th</sup> grade class at Coventry Elementary School down in Crystal Lake, Illinois. It was time to carve some pumpkins, but Mr. Vitek said we could only carve with a butter knife, so you had to bring a pumpkin and a butter knife from home. Well, everybody knows that a dull knife is a dangerous knife, so I went to a garage sale and got a butter knife of my own. My grandfather was a machinist, and he taught me how to sharpen stuff. And I found the knife this week – buried in my toolbox! I took that knife to a hand-cranked grindstone to get a point on it, and then I took it to the whetstone. And after several hours I had a razor-sharp butter knife! I was the envy of the entire 6<sup>th</sup> grade class – piercing and slicing, safely, with virtually no effort whatsoever! The word of God, though, is even sharper than this butter knife. In fact, this sword, the sword of God's word, has the ability to pierce *"as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow."*

I've looked into this before, and I should probably confess that I do not really understand the difference between soul and spirit. I understand the difference between joints and marrow (the joint is where two bones come together, while the marrow is found inside the bone), but the difference between soul and spirit? Not so much. Some have suggested that the soul is a reference to who we are, sometimes used interchangeably with a reference to our lives. Others have suggested that *"spirit"* can be defined as our "breath," but that also is a reference to life. But then we have passages where spirit and soul seem to be used interchangeably

themselves. In Matthew 26:38, Jesus said that his *“soul”* was very sorrowful (in the Garden of Gethsemane), but in a parallel passage over in John 13:21, John tells us that Jesus was *“troubled in his spirit.”* Which is it? I don’t know. And maybe that’s the point! We’re not getting an anatomy lesson here, but the author is telling us that God’s word has the ability to pierce and to cut us to the core of who we are. We think of Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 and the fact that those who heard Peter’s words were *“pierced to the heart.”* They heard the word of God, and they reacted by calling out, *“Brethren, what shall we do?”* They heard the word of God, and they knew they had to “do” something. Have you been there? I very clearly remember the first time I was *“pierced to the heart.”* I was 9 years old, my dad preached on Ananias and Sapphira lying to the Holy Spirit (in Acts 5), and I knew without a doubt that I had done what they had done. But it got me thinking: I need to do something about this. I had more to learn, but it ultimately led to my obedience to the gospel some time later (39 years ago yesterday, by the way). But in this sense, the word of God is like a scalpel – it cuts and it pierces, not to kill, but ultimately to heal – like a surgeon skillfully removing a cancerous tumor, the word of God touches us in a way that motivates us to make changes in the way we live.

Even the seemingly boring passages can have an impact. I was reading this week about a man who came to that genealogy in Genesis 5: Adam lived so many years and he died, Seth lived so many years and he died, and so on. And this man was overwhelmed by the certainty of death in that chapter. Even that list of names pierced him in the heart, and it led to his obedience to the gospel. But that’s the way the word of God is. It is *“living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.”* It may cause pain, but it’s a good kind of pain. Yesterday, I laughed out loud at a Babylon Bee article. The headline said, “Man Who Feels Terrible Begins Exercising So He Can Feel a Different Kind of Terrible.” In the same way, the word of God may cause us some pain, but there is a purpose to it. His word is sharper than any two-edged sword.

#### IV. As we continue in our text, we also find that the word of God is ABLE TO JUDGE THE THOUGHTS AND INTENTIONS OF THE HEART.

The word *“judge”* goes back to a word that we might recognize in our English word “criticize,” and it’s the idea of judging or deciding. God, through his word, has a way of judging our intentions. Sometimes we have some trouble judging people’s intentions, don’t we? Sometimes we get it wrong. God, though, looks at the heart, and his word cuts straight through the outer shell, the outward appearance, and his word judges *“the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* He knows what motivates us. We think of those opening words of Psalm 139 where King David says,

*O LORD, You have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
You understand my thought from afar.  
You scrutinize my path and my lying down,  
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before there is a word on my tongue,  
Behold, O LORD, You know it all.*

He does know it all! His word assesses, and analyzes, and weighs, and evaluates, and decides. You know, last week we had that passage referring to the *“deceitfulness of sin.”* Sin is deceitful. It can be so appealing that we get confused and lose our way. God’s word is able to cut through our excuses. We may rationalize, but his word reaches deep inside us and *“judges the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.”* Today, people say, “follow your heart.” God’s word, though, says (in Jeremiah 17:9), *“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?”* The prophet then continues and says, *“I, the LORD, search the*

*heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds."* Our hearts are deceitful, but God's word cuts through it.

V. And this leads us to the rest of this passage, as we find that God's word REVEALS.

The author says, *"And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."* The word *"open"* refers to being *"naked"* and goes back to a word that is the basis of our English word *"gymnasium"* indicating that people used to exercise naked (also tied to the word *"gymnastics,"* for the same reason). Before God, we are completely naked with no way to hide. We certainly think of Adam and Eve back in the Garden of Eden. We remember, when they sinned, they realized they were naked, and they tried to hide, didn't they? They covered up with some fig leaves, but that didn't do it, did it? God clothed them with the skin of an animal, the first reference to animal sacrifice in the Bible. But the point is: It is truly impossible to hide from God.

The other part of this is that not only are we *"open"* or *"naked"* in God's sight, but *"all things are...laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do."* *"Laid bare"* goes back to a word that we've already used this morning. Remember how I referred to the guy being baptized having a *"tracheotomy"*? *"Trach"* is a part of this word translated here as *"laid bare."* It's the idea of a neck being twisted or exposed. We might think of slitting the throat of an animal, or maybe an executioner pulling back the head to expose the neck of a condemned prisoner. That is our position before God: We are completely exposed and vulnerable. We may hide ourselves from our neighbors, we might even be able to hide ourselves from our family, maybe from a spouse, but God sees everything. We think of Moses looking both ways before killing the Egyptian. He forgot to look up, didn't he? Or we think of Jonah trying to run from God. It doesn't work. God sees everything. He sees even more than WikiLeaks. He sees more than all the cameras out there. I'm thinking about the Myers family visiting the capitol building here in Madison several years ago. They were in town for a wedding and posed for a family photo. Somebody stole one of their bags, but when they looked at the pics they took that day, they realized they had a picture of the guy stealing their bag. They showed police, the guy is a regular downtown, and they recovered everything. God also sees everything.

I think of an interesting letter I got from the city a while back. Some of you know that we volunteered for the very first organics collection program a number of years ago, where the city would pick up basically anything that would rot, in a separate black trash can, and they would take it to a commercial digester, to try to cut down on stuff making its way to our landfill. We were all in! But after a while, all 400 of us in the program got a letter from the Streets Division, along with several full color photos of our trash! Have you ever had somebody take pictures of your trash? In the lower left-hand corner, somebody forgot to remove the non-biodegradable sticker off of their avocado. Others had contaminated the stream with various plastic bags. Somebody put the branch of a Christmas tree in there. A small toy shovel nearly derailed the entire program. But I was impressed! The trash cam sees everything!

Well, God sees everything as well. Ultimately, it's for our good, but we need to realize this. We think of how we might be a bit scared before going to the doctor. We have some test, some blood-work, maybe an x-ray or an MRI, and we may be scared to know the results. Ultimately, though, knowing is for our own good. The same is true spiritually. We think of what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:10 when he said, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."* Or, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:5, *"Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him*



*from God.*” God sees everything. The good news is that God’s word exposes our behavior not to cause shame or embarrassment, but to heal and forgive. Knowing this, is there anything we need to confess to God? Are there any changes we need to make? The good news is: God sees everything, but he forgives when we repent and obey.

### Conclusion:

This morning, we’ve looked at the word of God, and the encouragement this morning is that we pay attention to it, that we respect it for what it really is. I hope we realize that as powerful as God’s word is, Satan will probably take some extreme measures to try to keep us from reading it. So I would ask: How has Satan kept you away from God’s word this week? And then, how do we fix this? How do we make sure we spend more time in the word this week than we did last week? You know how I said earlier that the format and the font of our Bibles might be barrier? I’ve brought three of the more interesting Bibles from our house this morning.

- The one on the left is just the four gospel accounts all in one book, in the English Standard Version. I have brought this before, but they have removed all chapter and verse divisions, they’ve removed all footnotes, and they’ve focused on making this a pleasure to read. They haven’t changed the text itself, but they’ve made some huge improvements with the format. And they have more volumes available. If you’d like to know more, go online and look for the ESV’s “Reader’s Edition.” No distractions in these.
- The one in the middle is Da Jesus Book, a translation from Greek to Hawaii Pidgin. This is a legitimate translation by Wycliffe Bible Translators. Some of you know that I married into a Hawaiian family, so this is culturally relevant for us. But it’s interesting.
- And the one on the right is a waterproof edition of the ESV! The print in this one is practically microscopic. But, if you are looking for a Bible to read in the pool, or the boat, or the tub, this might be the one! I’m just saying that not all Bibles need to be bound in black leather and interrupted with footnotes.

And if I can help you find some kind of reading plan that works for you, please let me know. We have many, many options. The point of our study today is that we need to treasure God’s word for what it really is. We need to study it, memorize it, and meditate on it. It has to move from the page into our hearts.

Josh has chosen a song to prepare our hearts and minds for the Lord’s Supper, but before we sing, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for giving us your living and active word. We pray for humble and honest hearts that are willing to read and to learn. Protect us from the evil one.

We come to you through Jesus, our Savior and King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)