

## The Power of the Word

For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 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. (Heb. 4:12-13)

Just four years ago, a French family living in Toulouse were in their attic trying to fix a leaky roof. Stuffed in the rafters of the roof was an old painting. It was a good thing they had the painting checked out, because it turned out to be a lost painting of Caravaggio painted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Experts are still divided, but it appears to be genuine, and will probably fetch about \$137 million. It's safe to say that this family, struggling with a leaky roof, didn't know what they had been sleeping under for many years.

We could multiply stories like that. People who didn't realise they had a rare coin, or a rare stamp, or a first edition rare book, or that their house was on an oil field. And when they realise what they've always had, they treat that object with new reverence.

I wonder how many of us know what we have when we have a Bible. There was a time when the cost of papyrus or vellum was so high, and the cost of hiring a scribe so high, that the idea of having your own personal scroll of one book of the Bible was a dream of only the super-rich. Even after the advent of printing, it was some time before Bibles became mass-produced enough to be affordable by the poor. But today, not only is there an endless supply of Bibles, study-Bibles, different versions of the Bible, but the Internet has meant that the entire Bible can be downloaded in a few seconds. What our ancestors would have, and did give their lives and dearest possessions for, is now free and instantly available.

When that is the case, we may tend to forget the value and the power of the Word. We are sitting with multiple copies and ever-present digital copies of a book unlike any other book, with properties unlike any other book, producing effects on people unlike any other book. Here is a short and powerful reminder of exactly what it is we now have in our pockets, and sits on our shelf.

This is one of those passages which could stand alone. You could put it in nearly any book of the Bible at some point, and its message would remain the same: the power and potential of God's Word. In our context, it comes as the capstone to a section on Jesus the Supreme Prophet. Jesus is a greater king than angels. Jesus is a greater prophet than Moses. And if the people under Moses doubted God's Word, and turned back, what will become of us, if we doubt God's Word under Jesus, the Final Prophet.

So as a conclusion to his section on Jesus the greatest Prophet, the writer gives us some of the most thrilling words about God's Word in all of Scripture. Here we have a description of the Bible within the Bible, a self-portrait of God's Word. Here is the Bible's inspired autobiography, telling us what it is, and what it does.

Now some have debated over whether the Word here refers to the living Word, Jesus Christ, or to the written Word. But it seems to me that the writer expects us to understand that the written Word which we now hold in our hands is the written form of Christ. He is describing what God's Final Word, in His Son, now given to us in the form of 66 books, is like when given out.

So how should we take these verses? We should read them as you read the leaflet that comes with your medicine. It tells you what the medicine will do, what its effects will be, what the side effects will be. Whether you are taking it for yourself, or whether you are giving it to another, you know

exactly what the medicine is meant to do, is capable of doing, and is likely to do.

In these two short verses, there are three pairs of words which go together: living and powerful, sharper and piercing, discerner and revealer.

## **I. The Word is Alive and Life-Giving**

12 For the word of God *is* living and powerful

Here we read what we who are saved already know: the Word of God is living and powerful. Living refers to its nature, powerful refers to what a living thing does. When something is alive, it has energy, it affects things around it, it moves and moves things.

Dead things can be put in museums because they will remain in place unless someone moves them. Security guards walk around museums not because the exhibits may do something to the living visitors, but because the living visitors may do something to the exhibits. Inanimate objects like books, chairs, curtains, may experience age or decay, but they don't affect anything around them.

But here we read that Scripture is living and powerful. I don't mean the physical pages of a printed Bible or the pixels on a screen are powerful. We mean the words spoken by the living God, now inspired and transmitted have life and life-giving power.

They are not the dead words of now long-extinct languages studied by historians. They are not the curious but lifeless words of false religion, the interesting but ultimately powerless words of man's wisdom. When God spoke, things sprang into existence, molecules coalesced. When God spoke, nothing became something, chaos became order, lifelessness became life. The ultimate explanation for what we see around us is words. The spoken Word of the living God.

When the Son of God, the Word Himself spoke to storms, or to bread, or to demons, or to disease, or to death itself, the answer was living and powerful.

The Word of God, inspired and inscripturated has this power. No, it is not like the black magic of witchcraft that uses words as charms and spells. It is the friendly and reasonable message of God to man, that like the wind, blows where the Spirit wills, and quickens as he wills. Sometimes it may be preached, sometimes it may be heard, sometimes it may simply be read. But as and when God intends it, it is powerful.

Once Charles Spurgeon was invited to preach at Crystal Palace which could seat over 20 000 people. He went ahead of time, to test the acoustics and the range of his voice. There, in what seemed to be an empty building, Spurgeon spoke John 1:29 out: "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." Spurgeon writes: "In one of the galleries, a workman, who knew nothing of what was being done, heard the words, and they came like a message from heaven to his soul. He was smitten with conviction on account of sin, put down his tools, went home, and there, after a season of spiritual struggling, found peace and life by beholding the Lamb of God."

Another lady once received a parcel from a friend in Australia, and the wrapping paper for the parcel happened to be a newspaper, and on one of the pages, a Spurgeon sermon was printed. She read parts of it casually, became more interested, was deeply convicted, and finally came to Christ.

Once a man named Thorpe went to hear George Whitefield, and then went back to his friends intending to do a mocking imitation of Whitefield's sermon. But he did such a good job, that as he mockingly re-preached Whitefield's sermon, he was smitten with conviction, paused, sat-down. He was converted.

Closer to home, we have heard from the Gideons, who place Bibles in hotels and schools and prisons. We recall the story told of the man in prison here in South Africa who gladly accepted a pocket New Testament, because the pages were just perfectly sized to be rolled up into a joint to be

smoked. So the man was pleased to have this little book that would provide him with hundreds of joints. He smoked all through Matthew. He smoked all of Mark. He smoked everything in Luke. But one day, while smoking through John, he noticed the words, and began reading them. His heart was quickened and smitten, and he believed on Jesus Christ as His Saviour.

The word of God does not become alive when you explain it well, or defend it perfectly, or dress it up. It is already living and powerful.

Do you expect that when you hear it? Do you expect it when you give it out? I fear we do not. We forget the life-giving power of the Word. We say, "Ah, but the unbelievers I know do not believe it is God's Word. I cannot just give it to them." Yes, but if you'll recall, you had that problem too, once. You were an unbeliever. Had someone withheld God's Word from you on the basis of the fact that you didn't believe it was God's Word, what would have happened to you? That would have been a doctor withholding medicine because you are sick. It is precisely the life-giving power of the Word that turns unbelief into belief, and scepticism into acceptance.

What would we have said to the man who might have kept interrupting Jesus and saying, "No, you can't tell this lame man to rise up and walk. He's lame. You cannot speak to a deaf man's ears and say "be opened", because he's deaf. And most of all, you cannot say to a dead man, like Lazarus, come forth, because he's dead." We would say, your logic has failed you. God's Word supplies the thing it demands. Stop doubting the life-giving and powerful effect of the Word. Give it out. Give out a tract or a booklet, or a Bible. Email a sermon or a Scripture. Speak the truth to your neighbour, and don't hesitate to actually quote God's Word. Unleash the Word, and let it do its work. Release the lion from its cage. Sow the seed and wait to see what grows. Try the key in every lock you find, it is sure to turn in one or more. It is living and powerful.

## **II. The Word is Accurate and Precise**

and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow

The writer moves from images of life and energy to images of incisions and cuts. Once again, here is the Bible's nature and its resulting action. In nature it is sharp. Sharper than a two-edged sword. This word referred to a dagger. Another meaning of the term, and very likely considering the context, is that the word means scalpel, a very sharp blade, used for surgery, and used by the Jewish priests when cutting up the sacrifices. Considering that the audience likely included priests who used these scalpels, and considering that a certain doctor may have written the book of Hebrews, we think it likely that that is the instrument being thought of.

What can the Word do with this sharpness? It can pierce through with an incisive kind of accuracy, and find the dividing points between soul and spirit and joints and marrow. A surgeon could use many sharp objects for surgery, all of which would cut. He could use a butter knife. He could use a hacksaw. He could use a fountain pen. He could use an axe. He could use some paper scissors. But why would those be less than helpful? They lack the precise sharpness of a scalpel. They will rip and tear, and fail to cut, and cut in the wrong places, and the result will not be healing, but more harm. The ability to make sharp, swift, clean and direct cuts, separating what needs to be separated is what makes a scalpel so valuable.

We are told the Bible is so sharp and accurate, it has the ability to find distinctions between what is hard to distinguish. In the Bible, man is said to have soul and spirit. Sometimes, the Bible uses the words to refer to identical things, so that they appear to be synonyms, different words for the same

thing. In a few places, they seem to be slightly different, as if soul refers more to the animal life of man, and spirit refers to what communes with God. And the distinction is so fine that a whole debate exists in Christianity between dichotomists, who say soul and spirit are the same thing, and man is made of only two parts, body and his immaterial soul-spirit, and trichotomists, who say man is three: body, soul, and spirit. Now we're not here concerned to solve that debate, and frankly some people in the biblical counselling movement place way more emphasis on it than it deserves. The point is, wherever that incredibly fine distinction is, Scripture is the scalpel fine enough and sharp enough to make the cut in precisely the right place. Likewise with joints and marrow. It could refer to the distinction between soul and spirit and body, but more likely it refers to the surgeon's difficulty of separating the marrow from the bone, and the bones from the joint, which once again, the Word has that kind of separating power.

The Word of God has a kind of accuracy that hits the bullseye of truth every time. When it explains what man's real problem is, is not vague or unclear. When explaining why marriages fail, and how they succeed, its diagnosis is perfect. When detailing the causes of depression, or anger, or fear, or restlessness, the Bible never misses.

Think of the Lord Jesus with the Samaritan woman, with Nicodemus, with Simon the Pharisee, with Zaccheus, with the rich young ruler. With each one, He knew exactly what was needed. As He did with you.

You perhaps remember the moment or moments when the Bible seemed to be summing you up in a few words, getting to the heart of your problem in a few simple sentences. As the Bible addressed you as a sinner, as a rebel, as being living and yet dead, it was like that moment when your ears have been blocked and suddenly you swallow or yawn and everything is louder and clearer. This was your Creator summarising your whole existence with total accuracy.

If you are used to the vague nonsense of astrology, or the tired cliches of motivational speakers, life coaches or prosperity preachers, or even the clever-sounding emptiness given by modern psychologists, the Bible will either feel like fresh air after the smoke clears, or a cold water on your cosy body.

You see, depending on the heart, the Bible's accuracy is either loved or hated. If you want to go on in sin and live for self, then your heart wants chewing gum and marshmallows. The Word's accuracy feels invasive, and your reaction will usually be defensive, and angry. But if you are weary of yourself, and tired of the emptiness, then the Bible's accuracy will seem like clear sight after blurriness and darkness, like well-played music after hours of noise and discord.

It is not that the Bible misses. It is that you dodge. The Bible will not fail to hit exactly the spot needing work, precisely the area needing repentance. But often, we see the arrow coming and make sure it does not pierce. If you want change, if you want growth, if you want God's solutions on God's terms, the Bible will be to you a clearer mirror than you ever looked in, a more powerful spotlight than you ever saw, and sharper eyes than you have ever used.

And so for the people you love. They do not need inspirational memes. They don't need some psychological feel-good cliches. They don't need broad, vaguely religious and only possibly Christian videos and links. They need God's Word to do its accurate, piercing work. Unleash the lion.

### **III. The Word is All-Seeing and Revealing**

and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 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.

The Word is living and gives life, is sharp and accurate, but it also does a work of revealing. What does it reveal? Here we are told it is a discerner, which is the word *kritikos* (from where the English word *critic* comes from). That means it is able to judge, able to evaluate thoughts and motives. The Word sits as a judge, bringing out our inner life and passing sentence on it.

It doesn't only accurately tell you what's wrong with you. It also reveals you to you. It switches on the light in the dark room of your hidden motives and thoughts.

We have thoughts and motives, but they seem perfectly normal to us. We have this whole inner life, but it is rather a stacked deck, where we agree with ourselves and justify ourselves, and everything makes perfect sense to us. But then the Word comes, and it sifts through our thoughts, and exposes them. Suddenly it is as if there has been a silent observer in our brain, eavesdropping on our every thought, and now making it public. And of course, there has been, because the author of the Word is described in verse 13

13 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.

No one's inner life is hidden from Him. It is as if your thoughts were being broadcast to a big screen to God. So when His Word comes, it sifts these thoughts, and brings them up, and shows them for what they are. The Word makes you think about your thinking, the Word shows you your chronic selfishness, and exposes your motives as not at all noble and generous.

And it can sort out your thoughts for you. Sometimes we can no longer understand ourselves, we don't properly understand our own motives. But the Word is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. It exposes and explains.

I remember the testimony of our brother Reinier. He started coming to our church as an unbeliever, but as a self-righteous, religious one. And he told me years later that each week he would come and he would get angrier and angrier. The reason for his anger was that he knew someone was feeding me information about him, and I was using it in my sermon. He wanted to know who the gossip was that was passing on the secrets of his heart for me to use as sermon material. Of course, now that he is in Christ, we laugh and rejoice in that, because there we see the Word mastering us, working through me who knew nothing about him, working in him, discerning and judging his own thoughts.

The Word will do that. It will do that with discomfiting accuracy, feeling almost invasive.

Now let me say something personal here. Such is the nature of the Word, that you may sometimes feel I have crafted an application specifically for you. Now I obviously try to think of the real needs of the congregation before I preach. But I deeply dislike the practice of some preachers of dealing with individual and unique problems through the pulpit. If there is a need in your life that I become aware of, and I know no one else in the congregation has that need or a very similar one, I will either approach you to speak about it, or rather commit it to God in prayer when I pray for you. I will not deal with one person's problem in a not-so-disguised general fashion from the pulpit. That's just cowardly. The pulpit is to feed the sheep, biblical counselling is for one-on-one applications. And not only is it cowardly, it would take away from my joy of seeing the Word work. I love to hear stories of how the Word worked powerfully, and someone felt it was just for them, when I had

no idea of that situation or that person. I love unleashing the Word and seeing it have this discerning, revealing effect. If I try to engineer that by tailor-making individual zingers, I destroy it, and turn the whole thing into a work of the flesh. In fact, for many of my applications, I don't have to reach very far at all, I need look only at my own soul, and my own Christian experience. So if the Word comes and it seems almost too close to home, you should assume two things, one, perhaps you are not alone in your experience, others share it too, and two, the Word is doing its discerning work.

Perhaps many an opportunity with a soul has been lost because we tried to be cleverer than God's Word. We wished to appear wise and mysteriously penetrating, so we guessed at a person's problem, and shrouded our guess in the best of human wisdom, half convincing ourselves, and half convincing the other person, but totally convincing no one. If we had unleashed the Word, led people to the Scriptures, let them look in the mirror, let the Word be the discerner of thoughts and intents of the heart, we would not missed the mark, and worse, missed the mark in the name of God. Recall that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, and the wisdom of God might appear foolishness to men, but set aside your fear of man and unleash the lion.