

## WEAPON OF CHOICE

Hebrews 4:12-13

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One of my favorite trilogies is *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R. Tolkien. And I was also captivated by the screen rendition written by Peter Jackson. For those of you who've seen the movies, especially the third one *The Return of the King*, you will recall the many battle scenes. Aragorn, the character destined to be king, was particularly skillful with wielding his broadsword. A broadsword is a straight, doubled-edged bladed weapon designed for both slashing and thrusting. Double-edged means exactly what it implies: it was sharp on both sides of the blade. A weapon of choice when you went to war.

Now, I don't know if anyone in this room has ever wielded a sword? Anyone? But I suggest this topic to you this morning because in Hebrews 4:12-13 we are given a fascinating image concerning Scripture, the Word of God. Please turn in your Bibles and read with me:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (New International Version)*

The Message version, a more contemporary translation of the Bible, says it this way:

*God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it—no matter what.*

Have you ever thought of your Bible as a weapon? A double-edged sword? In Ephesians 6:10-18 we read a passage about putting on the full armor of God. Verse 17 reads: *Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.*

The Sword of the Spirit. Again, the Bible is referred to as a weapon. In fact, in the whole description of the Armor of God, this is the only offensive weapon the Christian is given. Everything else is strapped on for protection and defense.

Did you realize that your Bible is your offensive weapon against the principalities and powers of darkness that roam the earth seeking to destroy you? Did you realize that one of the reasons Scripture is given to you is to defeat Satan?

You might recall what happened to Jesus after he was baptized by John the Baptist. He was sent into the desert for 40 days and nights, and once there, he had a confrontation with Satan. Satan tempted him three times, and each time Jesus defeated him by quoting Scripture. (Matthew 4 & Luke 4) *It is written: Man does not live on bread alone. It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. It is written: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.* And Satan left him until an opportune time.

We've been mentioning that the National Baptist Convention of Mexico has set aside August as the month to celebrate the Bible. We've been encouraging you to read it more frequently, to study passages, to dig deep.

Why? Because the Bible is also your teacher. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we learn this about the Word of God:

*Every part of Scripture is God-breathed, and useful one way or another—showing us the truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.* (The Message Version)

So let's take a closer look at this passage in Hebrews to understand more fully God's Word and what kind of weapon we have at our disposal.

To begin, it's helpful to know a bit about whom this book was written to in order to grasp its message. Hebrews was written for struggling, professing believers. It was written to give them words of hope in the face of threats, persecution, and even lingering doubts. The author of Hebrews was pointing these believers back to the word of God as something solid to hold on to when the world around them was presenting a different truth. In essence, he was saying, "Not sure what's real? Not sure what to believe? Not sure if this Jesus stuff is truth? Then test it against Scripture. God's Word will reveal it to you."

### **First, he tells them that the Word of God is living and active.**

The Jews had a very special idea about words. Once a word was spoken, it had an independent existence. It was a power that went forth and did things. To say that the Word of God is living is to say that the words are not outdated or uninformed on the perils these Hebrew Christians were facing, or on the perils you and I face today. As a living word, it continues through every age with complete relevance.

We get our words "energy" and "energetic" from the Greek word "active" (energeo). As soon as God's word is spoken, it goes to work.

A Christian university student shared a room with a Muslim. As they became friends, their conversation turned to their beliefs. The believer asked the Muslim if he'd ever read the Bible. He answered no, but then asked if the Christian had ever read the Koran.

The believer responded, "No, I haven't, but I'm sure it would be interesting. Why don't we read both together, once a week, alternating books?" The young Muslim accepted the challenge, their friendship deepened, and during the second term he became a believer in Jesus.

One evening, late in the semester, he burst into the room and shouted at his new Christian friend, "You deceived me!"

"What are you talking about?" the believer asked.

The new believer opened his Bible and said, "I've been reading it through, like you told me, and just read in Hebrews that the Word is living and active!" He grinned. "You knew all along that the Bible contained God's power and that the Koran is a book like any other. I never had a chance!"

"And now you'll hate me for life?" queried the believer.

"No," he answered, "but it was an unfair contest." (Floyd Schneider, *Evangelism for the Fainthearted* (Kregel, 2000); quoted in *Men of Integrity*, March/April 2001)

Martin Luther once said of the Bible: The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.

The Word of God, living and active.

**Second, the author of Hebrews tells his listeners that the Word of God is sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.**

By comparing Scripture to a two-edged sword, the author helps us to see that no instrument in the hands of men or devised by human ingenuity can penetrate the heart more keenly than the Word of God.

The machaira, or short straight sword of the Roman soldier, was known to be an efficient weapon. Its two edges meant that it never failed to cut; it was never blunt. It plunged in quick, efficiently, and to the bone.

So too the Word of God. To the depth of your being—soul, spirit, joints, marrow—the word of God goes with all its cutting, living, energizing power. We are skilled at pretending to be what we are not. And sometimes we even pretend at being Christians. We go through the motions of coming to church, praying, doing good deeds. But this verse reminds us that God's word penetrates through pretensions, through the motives, through all the reasoning to expose hearts that have been hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and minds ruled by unbelief.

For those of us watching The Truth Project on Wednesday evenings, we sometimes see clips of an interview with author and theologian R. C. Sproul. I recently ran across his conversion story which illustrates how the Word of God can stab and penetrate when you least expect it. Sproul shares:

I had actually gone to a church-related college, but I went on a football scholarship, not because of any interest in the church. At the end of my first week, which was spent in freshman orientation, my roommate and I decided to hit some of the bars across the border. We get to the parking lot, and I realized that I was out of cigarettes.

So I went back in the dorm and went to the cigarette machine. I got my Luckys and turned around and saw the captain of the football team sitting at a table. He spoke to me and my

roommate and invited us to come over and chat, and we did. This was the first person I ever met in my life that talked about Christ as a reality.

I'd never heard anything like it. I was just absorbed, sat there for two or three hours. He didn't give a traditional evangelism talk to me; he just kept talking to me about the wisdom of the word of God.

He quoted Ecclesiastes 11:3: "Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie."

I just feel certain I'm the only person in church history that was converted by that verse. God just took that verse and struck my soul with it. I saw myself as a log that was rotting in the woods. And I was going nowhere.

When I left that guy's table, I went up to my room. And in my room by myself, in the dark, I got on my knees and cried out to God to forgive me. (Author and theologian R. C. Sproul, ChristianityToday.com, 12-30-02)

Sproul was invited into a conversation with the captain of his football team. A young man not afraid to be caught reading his Bible, not afraid to invite one of his teammates to have a discussion about what he was reading. And through what we might think was a very obscure verse, God's word penetrated Sproul's hardened heart and brought him to repentance.

What's even more amazing about this penetrating nature of the Word of God, is that it works regardless of our cooperation. In the story above, R. C. Sproul opened his heart to listen to God's Word. But what about someone who has closed off his or her heart to God? What happens then? This next story reveals how God's Word can penetrate every barrier we might seek to put in its way.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Bristol, England, a certain Mr. Thorpe was part of a band of men known as the Hell-Fire Club. Their reason for existence was to mock and deride the work of the famed evangelist George Whitefield. They would attend his evangelistic rallies with the sole purpose of causing disruption. They would gather at public places and tear his character and the words of his sermons to shreds.

On one such occasion the Hell-Fire club had gathered at a local pub for such mockery. Mr. Thorpe was known for his brilliant parodies of Whitefield's preaching. He and his friends would call Whitefield *Dr. Squintum* because of Whitefield's near-sightedness. Mr. Thorpe would garner an audience, squint his eyes, and begin to deliver a Whitefield sermon—imitating every gesture & expression he'd seen the preacher make, quoting Scripture and exposition that he'd heard.

But on this particular evening, in the middle of rousing laughter to his antics, he suddenly found that he had to sit down. Pale and shaking, Thorpe was pierced through with conviction and converted on the spot by the very sermon he was seeking to ridicule. That night he gave his life to Christ and became an exemplary Christian leader in his community.

What about you? Has this living, energetic Word pierced through to the inner sanctum of your soul, bringing conviction and conversion?

The Word of God is Living and Active.

The Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword, penetrating soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

**And Third, the Word of God judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.**

The Jewish people believed that the heart was the central seat of human personality, the deep fount of a person's life in all its aspects: spiritual, intellectual, moral and emotional. This is where the Word of God dives in and goes after every aspect of who you are. God is not satisfied with just one corner or one room of your life being transformed; he desires all of you, the entire house, to be impacted by his word. When you read a scripture passage, or perhaps just one verse, those words can permeate and influence not only your spiritual journey with God, but also shape your thoughts, guide your moral choices, frame your emotional responses.

While on one hand that might terrify you to death, on the other hand, it should bring you comfort. Because it means you don't have to be an intellectual, a Rhodes Scholar, or a seminary theologian to understand the Word of God and then know how to apply it to your life. The words of the Bible will expose your heart, and teach you, no matter what your socio-economic, educational background. God's Word is waiting to mold itself to every aspect of your entire life.

In his book *More Jesus, Less Religion*, Steve Arterburn writes: Some time ago, I read about the work of a Wycliffe Bible translator in a remote village in Papua New Guinea. When the opening chapters of Genesis were first translated into the native language, the attitude toward women in the tribe changed overnight. They had not realized or understood that the woman had been specially formed out of the side of the man. Without even hearing this concept developed, these people immediately grasped the ideas of equality between the sexes and began adjusting their behavior. The people heard. They believed. They obeyed. They changed. Just like that.

That change doesn't mean everyone in the tribe immediately came to faith in Christ, however. While they immediately recognized the respect God has for both men and women, the members of this tribe had their own hard-to-abandon gods and superstitions. One of their practices was to spit on the wounds of the sick. Their medicine men were known as the spitters, and they did not want someone like Jesus to take away their status in the village.

However, the attitude changed as more of the Bible was translated into the tribe's dialect. When translators read the passage where Jesus cured a blind man in a most unusual way, the medicine men pricked up their ears. The Master spit on the ground, made a paste of mud, put it on the man's eyelids, told him to wash it off—and the man was healed. When these tribesmen heard this story in their own language, they saw that Jesus was not against them, but for them. They found one of their own, a Savior who was also a spitter! And they came to the Lord because of this connection. (Steve Arterburn and Jack Felton, *More Jesus, Less Religion*, Sisters, Oregon: Waterbrook Press, 2000, p.116)

Whether you're a member of a remote tribe in Papua New Guinea, or a member of the New York Stock Exchange in the United States of America, or an ex-patriot living your dream in La Paz, Mexico . . . God's Word will speak to the thoughts and attitudes of your heart . . . and change you, from the inside out.

Hebrews 4:12 is an uncomfortable verse. *The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

It makes us realize that the Bible is not an ordinary book. It is more than just a great literary masterpiece. It is more than just a poetic commentary on the history of the Jewish people. It is more than the accumulated sayings of a renowned teacher. Even today, the Scriptures must still be smuggled into some countries and shared copies passed around at the peril of being beaten, jailed, or even killed. Why? Because even people who don't believe in its message, recognize that there is something dangerous about this book. About a book that claims to be God's word.

And if verse 12 isn't provocative enough, the author declares even more with verse 13:

*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*

Long before Jonah, people have tried to run away from God. Even Adam and Eve in the Garden attempted to hide themselves from God after the Fall. It is the natural tendency of our humanity to hide one's self from God. But there is no escaping his piercing gaze.

"Nothing hidden from God's sight" translates "before the face of." It pictures God's ever-present face upon all of our open and secret acts, upon all of our thoughts. The omniscience of God: the ability of God to see and know everything. An attribute of God that we like when it comes to our hurts and trials. We want God to see and know about our pain. But when it comes to our sin and unbelief, we would just as soon have God look the other way. But that is impossible with God. God loves us unconditionally, but he also judges us with a piercing gaze.

Revelation 3:19-20 says:

*Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

The author of Hebrews is saying to his audience, "You can't escape from God. Everything about you is uncovered and laid bare. You're thinking about abandoning your faith, God sees that. You're intimidated by your Jewish neighbors and are thinking about returning to Judaism. God sees that. You're afraid of persecution and thinking about running away from Christianity, God sees that. You feel weak, doubtful, and need help . . . God sees that too!"

The word "uncovered" is literally "naked" in the Greek. In the presence of God, all your disguises are stripped away. The word for "laid bare" (tetrachelismenos) is even more

intriguing. It has several meanings in Greek. One comes from the world of wrestling. It was used for seizing an opponent by the throat in such a way that he could not move.

Have you ever been caught in the grip of God? One can evade God for a long time, but sooner or later he will seize you, pin you motionless, in a face to face encounter.

The other meaning was when a criminal was being led to judgment or to execution. And a dagger, with its point upwards, was so fixed below his chin that he could not bow his head in concealment but had to keep it up so that all could see his face and know his dishonor.

Again, an image of being compelled to look God in the face.

Kermit Eby writes in *The God in You*: At some time or other, a man must stop running from himself and his God—possibly because there is just no other place to run to.

Mary Poplin had been running from Jesus and the Christian faith for quite some time. A professor of education and Dean of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University, she attended a Methodist church as a child but began searching other spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, even telepathic attempts to bend spoons. This is her story of how she was uncovered and laid bare before God's eyes . . .

I knew a graduate student who . . . lived his life differently. First of all, he prayed for me for eight years. And he would say irritating things like, "If you ever want to do anything with your spiritual life, I'd like to help you." That was irritating because I thought I was doing plenty with my spiritual life. You know, I was bending spoons. And the other, more distressing thing is, he would ask me questions like, "Do you believe in evil?" And I would realize that I couldn't answer the question consistently. But despite being annoyed by him, I also became friends with him.

He eventually became a professor and worked at our university for a year. When he left I had a dream. I still felt empty and confused, and in the dream I was in a long line of people suspended in the air. The line seemed eternal on both ends. Jesus was standing greeting us in line.

When I looked at Jesus, I knew immediately what I was seeing. I couldn't even look at him but for a second. I fell down to his feet and started weeping, and the only way I can describe the feeling I had in the dream is that I could sense every cell in my body, and I felt total shame in every cell. Then Jesus grabbed my shoulders, and I felt total peace, like I had never felt in my life. I woke up, and I was crying.

So I went to the phone, and I called this friend. He had never told me he was a Christian. But I called him and said, "I think I need to talk to you about my spiritual life." And he said, "Let's meet for dinner." At dinner, he said to me, "Why do you think you have to do something with your spiritual life now?"

And out of my mouth came something I'd never thought about. I said to him, "I have some black thing in my chest. And I don't know what it is." He just nodded, and I told him the dream. I said, "What do I do?"

And he said, "Do you have a Bible?" He made sure I had one before we split up that night. He said to me, "You could read five Psalms a day and one book of Proverbs." And I thought, *Well, okay, I'm going to do it. I mean, I'm really going to do it this time.* And then he said, "Since Jesus was the one in your dream, you might even read the New Testament." And that's how casual he was about that.

I began to read them, and we began to meet in a town between our cities about once a week. That was November to January. In January my mother wanted to go to North Carolina to where she had grown up. We went to this little Methodist church, not because she was religious; she just wanted to see her friends.

When we got there, I was really moved to just go up to the altar and give my life to the Lord. It wasn't even an altar call. It was a communion call. The minister said you don't have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus Christ lived, that he died for your sins, and you have to want him in your life. And when he said that, I was so powerfully moved that I actually thought, even if a tornado rips through this building, I'm going to get that communion.

I took the communion, and I didn't even listen to the minister. I knelt down and said, "Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me." And when I took the communion and I said that, I felt free. I felt like tons of things had been lifted off of me. And I began to have an insatiable desire to read the Bible.

Romans 1 says that God is obvious to everyone, and the minds of people who deny him become darkened. Though they think themselves wise, they're actually foolish. That was me. But the Scriptures began to heal my mind so I could actually think again. (The Dick Staub Interview: Mary Poplin Calls Claremont Her 'Calcutta,' [ChristianityToday.com](http://ChristianityToday.com))

Does God have you pinned in a hold you can't escape from?  
Does Jesus haunt your dreams?  
Do you open the Bible and wonder if it *really* can have an impact on your life?

Then these two verses, tucked away in Chapter 4 of Hebrews, are for you today.

God's Word is living and active.

God's Word is sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing your soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

God's Word judges the thoughts and attitudes of your heart.

Nothing is hidden from God's sight. Everything about you is uncovered and laid bare before His eyes.

In Isaiah 55:11, God says this about his Word: *"It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*

As God's word soaks into your life this morning, into the soil of your soul, be assured that it will not return empty. It will accomplish exactly what God desires in your life, and the purpose for which He sent it.

Amen.

**Other Sources:**

*The Letter to the Hebrews* by William Barclay. Westminster Press. Pages 38-41.

Excerpts from *"The Sharp, Two-Edged Sword"*, a sermon by Dr. Phil Newton preached on January 28, 2001.

Illustrations found at [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com) to which I have a membership.