

“God’s Word at Work”

Introduction: When we left the letter of Hebrews a couple of weeks ago, we left with an invitation to enter God’s rest. We said that God’s rest encompassed the gift of forgiveness, a peace that transcends current trials and tribulations, and the hope of new creation. We enter such rest, our author noted, by faith in Jesus, a faith that is not in something we do for God but in what God, in Christ, has done for us. At the same time, our author explains, it is not a faith that is just mental assent but one which is trustingly obedient, a faith that seeks to put what we hear into practice.

This was not the kind of faith that the ancient ancestors – the wilderness generation, as they became known – had practiced. They, our author reminds his readers, had the good news proclaimed to them but did not enjoy God’s rest – symbolized by the Promised Land – “because of their disobedience” (Heb. 4:6), because they failed to put what they heard into practice, they refused to trust the promises of God.

Our author wants to make sure that his readers don’t fall similarly short in their trust of God and so we’ll hear him exhort: “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (v. 11).

Somehow, it seems, we are to work at resting! What’s that about? I’d like to suggest that “making every effort” has to do with making space for God to work on us and in us through his living, active, and penetrating word, a word that is worthy of our trust. Let’s hear our texts and then consider how God’s word works. [READ]

I. Triggers that lead away from trust

A. One of the things we wondered about as we looked at this Hebrews text a few weeks ago is how this rescued people could so blatantly turn their backs on God. From the ten plagues, to the turning of the sea into dry land, to the provision of food and water, to his guiding and protecting presence, God had worked lovingly on behalf of this people. Yet, they would not trust his promises, would not trust him to lead them to where they needed to go.

B. Such lack of trust is, of course, not limited to that ancient people. Unbelief is a challenge in every human heart, in every generation, and the triggers that lead us away from trust are many. Perhaps our trigger is impatience, especially when God doesn’t seem to bring about his promises according to our timing. Maybe our trigger is the messages we hear from the world that encourage us to find satisfaction elsewhere. Perhaps our trigger is the experience of a trial which leads us to conclude that if God let this happen to us, who needs enemies?! Maybe our trigger is thinking that in our scientific, technologically savvy, post-modern age we don’t really need anyone other than ourselves to run the universe. Whatever the trigger, we all have a propensity in our disordered hearts to wander from or doubt God’s promises.

So, the author of Hebrews wants to reassure us that God’s word – comprised here of the OT scriptures and its promises, as well as the ways Jesus was fulfilling those promises and bringing God’s kingdom to birth (ways which were currently being assembled and recorded in what would become the NT) – is amazing and worthy of our trust.

II. The word that is worthy of our trust.

A. Our author lays out three attributes of God's word to help us consider its trustworthiness: "For the word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword" (v. 12). To put it another way, God's word is personal, powerful, and penetrating.

1. God's word is personal . . . "alive." Imagine that you wanted to learn more about John Wise, the first pastor of this church. One good way to do so would be to go to the library and check out a book or two that talked about his life and his ministry here in this place. Now, even if you were able to read each book about him from cover to cover, you would certainly learn a lot of facts about him, but you would never really ever meet him.

But in God's word, more than just facts are encountered, more than just helpful information about God is collected. In God's word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we encounter God himself. God, in and through his word, comes alive to us. As Jesus said in one place, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (Jn. 10:27). In God's word we don't just have facts about a dead man; we hear the voice of someone we know and can trust, someone who is alive!

2. God's word is powerful . . . "active." The word for "active" here is the word from which our English word "energy" derives. The word of God doesn't just say things, it does things, amazing things! In the beginning, God spoke the world into existence. When Jesus was encouraged by Satan in the wilderness to skip the cross, he used the energy and power of God's word to fend off that temptation. Many of Jesus' miracles involved him simply speaking divine decrees. To his dear friend in a tomb: "Lazarus, come out!" Or to the storm-tossed waves: "Be still!"

While Jesus is not with us physically, we do still have God's active word. As our reading from Isaiah pictures it, as rain and snow water the earth, making it bud and flourish, so does God's word accomplish the desires and fulfill the purposes for which he sent it, in particular, in this text, the granting of God's abundant mercy and freely given pardon (Isa. 55:6-11).

As one of the desert fathers or mothers put it long ago: "We think we are making spiritual progress when we realize how much we love God, but we are actually making spiritual progress when we realize how much God loves us." We are brought to that realization, we learn to live from, and not for, God's love through the work of his active word.

3. God's word is penetrating . . . "sharper than any double-edged sword." The sword used as his illustration here is not the long sword we might picture as used by a knight in shining armor, but the short, standard issue sword of the Roman legions, designed to cut through an enemy's armor in close combat. God's word, we might say, is made to penetrate the armor that is the human heart.

As Paul reminds a church leader named Timothy: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God want us to do" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NLT).

God's word, in other words, is like the scalpel of a surgeon which works on our heart. As we make space for it to penetrate our heart, it will reveal intentions, motives, and character, all of which probably need some work! It exposes who we really are and cuts out what is harmful, reshaping it

all for good. God's word is not just a way to get to know God; it is a way to get to know yourself and the healing that you need.

III. Making space for the word.

Let's bring all of this back around to our need for not losing but entering, enjoying, and remaining in, God's rest.

A. Think about your relationship with work. We live in an age when, through the marvel of technology, our work is more accessible to us than ever before, 24/7 actually. I don't want to acknowledge how much of a dinosaur I am but when Rama and I were working at the Bank of Boston 35 years ago, there weren't such things as cell phones or email. What it meant was that when you left the office at the end of the day no one could get ahold of you until you came back the next day. Can you imagine?! Further, we live in a culture where our primary identity is found not socially through our family but individually through our jobs. Our family name doesn't really mean very much nor does our standing in the community. Instead, we must earn whatever respect we have through our performance, and so we are constantly feeling that we need to prove ourselves.

B. And so, I think it's safe to say, we are a weary people. All the recess periods or vacations can't really provide us with the rest we need. Ruth Haley Barton calls this being "dangerously tired." It's not about being exhausted but about something far more sinister. Being dangerously tired, as she describes it, is when you can't stop. It's when you can no longer turn off the need to be doing. You can't stop checking your phone or whatever screen you are carrying with you. You have come to believe that life depends on your activity, your striving, your control, and you just can't rest. You may look important and powerful on the outside but on the inside, you are just flat out exhausted.

C. And then you drag this into your spiritual life, and you end up trying to live your life with God by somehow earning his love through your good works. So, what if we thought of the exhortation to "make every effort" to enter God's rest as simply the effort to make space for God in our life. It's all well and good to say that God's word is like snow and rain that nourishes the ground and makes it flourish, but for that to happen you need to be in a place where the word of God can "touch" you. We do so, I think, by making space, by taking time to read large chunks of God's word to get the big picture. We make space by studying God's word carefully together in a small group with others. We make space by reading God's word in small bites, meditating on a word or phrase that the Spirit seems to be using to touch you. We make space by memorizing parts of God's word that are meaningful to you so that you have it at hand, "hidden in your heart" (Ps. 119:11), when you need it.

In our adult SS class, *The NT You Never Knew*, we heard NT Wright describe the writings of the NT as "explosive" and "powerful." But as we discussed, to have such power unleashed in our lives we need to make space to read and study and reflect on what those documents contain.

We have, in God's word, an amazing resource. May we make space for it, so that it can work on us, so that we do not miss rest God desires for us to enjoy.