

The Power of the Word

2 Corinthians 3:18, Hebrews 4:12-13, Isaiah 55:10-11, Psalms 119:9-11, Psalms 1:1-3

Slide 1

This morning we're looking at the power of the Word in our lives... the power of this book and everything that's contained between its covers.

So, let's just pause for a moment to consider what a treasure trove we have in these pages. First, we have narratives, or stories. Not fanciful, imaginary stories, but history.

The story of how the world and the entire universe came into existence by the Word of God. Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit and being cast out of Eden.

Noah and the ark being saved from a global flood. The Tower of Babel.

We have the story of how God miraculously delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, through the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea.

We see God giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. David the Shepherd boy using a slingshot and five stones to kill the giant, Goliath. Samson destroying the Philistine temple with his bare hands.

Joshua bringing down the city walls of Jericho with only the sound of a trumpet blast. In the New Testament, we have the narratives of Jesus' virgin birth with angels, shepherds and wise men.

We have Jesus' miracles... turning water into wine, walking on water, giving sight to the blind, feeding five thousand people with only a few loaves and fishes. His tragic crucifixion and glorious resurrection.

All these stories have shaped our culture and our civilization, stories which have fired the imaginations of artists, poets, playwrights, composers and authors for over two thousand years. All of that is in here.

But not only stories, there's poetry and songs in the Psalms. Wisdom in Proverbs. Prophecy. Letters from the Apostles to the early church telling us how to live our lives as Jesus' disciples.

Finally, the book of Revelation which uses vivid, allegorical imagery to give us a picture of what's to come in the future.

I'm reminding you of all this because sometimes we take what incredible riches we have in this book for granted.

This book is a treasure which most people throughout human history haven't been able to possess and which many don't have even today.

It wasn't until Gutenberg's printing press in the fifteenth century that a printed Bible was available. Until then, all Bibles were hand copied by highly trained scribes or monks and these Bibles were very expensive.

It could take these scribes or monks two or three years to produce a single copy of the Bible, and only the very wealthy or royalty could afford one.

Even though the Gutenberg printing press was available, when the Bible was printed it was only in Latin, not English.

This was because translating the Bible into the language of the common people, rather than the Latin of the educated priesthood, was punishable by death.

William Tyndale was strangled and his body burned at the stake for the crime of translating the Bible into English.

Church authorities didn't want ordinary people reading the Bible for themselves; they wanted them dependent on the experts to tell them what it said and what it meant.

It took centuries for the Bible to be translated into many of the world's languages.

Even today, the Wycliffe Bible Translators organization tells us there are over three thousand languages in the world which have no Scriptures at all.

Yet, we can walk into any Barnes & Noble or go to Amazon.com and for a few dollars; for less than the price of a Venti, white chocolate mocha at Starbucks, we can purchase a Bible.

So the question begs... Why did people spend their lives laboriously, hand-copying the words in this book, letter by letter, day after day for centuries?

Why did they risk imprisonment and death to translate it into a language that ordinary people could read?

Why, today, do people leave their homes and families and travel to remote parts of the world, spending years learning the languages of villagers in Africa, or tribes in Papua New Guinea, so that they can translate the Bible into their native tongues?

Why do people risk everything to bring the Bible into countries like Saudi Arabia or Iran where it's forbidden? Why? Because of its power.

2 Corinthians 10:4-5, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

This book has the power to demolish strongholds. It has the power to overcome everything which is contrary to the knowledge of God.

This includes religions which worship false deities, political philosophies built on lies and tyranny and social movements which deny the reality of human nature and contradict God's creation.

The Bible has the power to overcome every kind of falsehood or error.

Slide 2

The Bible tells us that it's God's intention to reshape us spiritually into the image of Christ.

2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

Think about that. We're all being transformed into the image of Christ. Every one of us here this morning who's a follower of Christ is in the process of being remade, spiritually, into Christ's image.

God's making us like Him—in our character, in our thinking, in our desires, in our thoughts, and in our conduct and one of the most important ways that God is doing that is through His Word.

Hebrews 4:12-13, "For the word of God is alive 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."

"The word of God is alive and active." This is what makes the Bible different from every other book. But what does it mean to say that the Bible is "alive?"

It means that it isn't lifeless or an inanimate object. It isn't just words lying there on the page. God's Word has life and energy, and this energy is innate; in other words, it has power within itself.

It doesn't receive its power from you or me, from any group of people or from any source other than God. Its power comes from within itself.

Therefore, God's Word acts. It acts upon us. It acts upon people and situations. It does things on its own, independently of us. We don't control what it'll do or what it'll accomplish.

It isn't guided or directed by us; it's guided and directed by the Holy Spirit, and it'll accomplish God's purposes, not ours.

Isaiah 55:10-11, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

In this passage we see at two things. First, God's Word will always accomplish His purposes. Once it goes out; once it's proclaimed, taught, printed, and preached it never fails.

It has a power that can't be resisted and which will not be denied. It will accomplish God's purposes. That's a promise.

Second, God's Word is carrying out His purposes, not ours. It does what God wants, not what we want.

On Sunday mornings, I stand up here and preach the Word. I do my best to explain what it means, and to explore how we should bring our lives into agreement with its teachings.

But I don't determine the effect that the Word has on you and on your life. That's not under my control; it's under the control of the Holy Spirit.

So, from my perspective, the effect of these sermons is unpredictable because the Holy Spirit will do what He will with His Word. That's amazing, encouraging, and exciting, but also a bit unsettling.

By the same token, every time you open the Scriptures, every time you read a chapter, a paragraph or a single verse, you're submitting yourself to the changes that the Holy Spirit wants to make in your life.

The Word is "*living and active.*" It has an inherent power, an innate energy. From our perspective, it's more like a wild animal than a household pet.

As soon as we invite the Word into our hearts and minds, it begins to act powerfully upon us. It begins to change us, mold us and shape us. That's risky because we can't predict what those changes will be.

All we know is that God intends to make us more and more like Jesus. So, when we engage with the Word, when we read it, when we think about it, when we study it, we must be willing to allow God to do what He desires in us.

The question then becomes: Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to allow God's Word to make the changes in you that He deems good and necessary?

As we go through life, we experience many different things: Highs, lows, victories, defeats, joys and sorrows.

But it's not just what we go through that shapes us. It's how we think about our experiences; the stories we tell ourselves, the internal narratives we write about our lives.

That's why we need the Bible, so we can understand and interpret our experiences from God's perspective. Otherwise, we'll interpret our life experiences according to the world's perspective.

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As I read earlier, Hebrews 4:12 tells us, *“For the word of God is alive 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.”*

Did you hear that, the Word of God *“penetrates.”* Like the sharpest sword ever forged, it penetrates deep into the hidden places of our mind and the concealed recesses of our heart.

Those places that only we know about, places that perhaps we're not aware of ourselves. Nothing is hidden before God and before his Word. God's Word exposes us. It slices right through our defenses.

All our protective armor, all the ways in which we harden ourselves, all the walls we put up, the false fronts, the masks—they don't work against God or against His Word. It passes right through them.

But here's what we need to understand. When God's Word is at work on us, it isn't the sword of an enemy. It's a scalpel in the hands of a loving, skillful surgeon cutting out the dead and diseased tissue.

It isn't harming us; on the contrary, it's cutting out what's corrupted, sick or sinful. That which needs to be removed.

It's cutting out fear. It's cutting out pride. It's cutting out malice. It's cutting out regret and bitterness.

It's cutting out worldly values. It's cutting out envy. In other words, it's cutting away and removing everything in us that's unlike Christ.

It's a lifelong process. But even though we know that it's our loving Father who's performing the surgery, it's still uncomfortable and sometimes painful.

Even though we know that God will cut away only what's necessary. Even though we know that the result will be health, strength, and freedom from the disease of sin, our tendency is still to resist it.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, writes about the resistance which we sometimes have when God begins to change us:

“Did you ever think, when you were a child, what fun it would be if your toys could come to life? Well suppose you could really have brought them to life. Imagine turning a tin soldier into a real little man. It would involve turning the tin into flesh. And suppose the tin soldier did not like it. He is not interested in flesh; all he sees is that the tin is being spoiled. He thinks you are killing him. He will do everything he can to prevent you. He will not be made into a man if he can help it.”

Just as a toy soldier would resist being turned into a flesh-and-blood human being, fighting to keep itself made of tin, so our own sinful flesh resists the change that God's making in us; transforming us into fully-formed sons and daughters of God.

But that spiritual surgery is necessary, and it's being carried out by means of the powerful Word of God.

No matter how deeply embedded sin may be in our hearts, the Word of God will find it and cut it out, so that it can no longer make us spiritually weak or sick.

Psalm 119:9-11, *“How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”*

The Psalmist states that he seeks God with all his heart. He desires to live a holy life, walking in purity and obedience to God. I pray that's your desire as well.

So, how can we live in obedience to God and avoid sinning against him? By exerting our willpower? By making resolutions? By punishing and shaming ourselves whenever we fail? No!

In order to live a holy life, we need to make sure that God's Word is in our minds, and in our hearts.

If there are areas of our lives where sin is dominating us; where sin is controlling our thoughts, our words and our actions, then we need more of God's Word in our minds and hearts. We need more of its power to fight sin.

John Bunyan, the author of the classic Christian book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote in the cover of his Bible, "*Either this book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.*"

That's true. Having the Scriptures in our heart, reading them and thinking about them will help to protect us against temptation.

It'll warn us when we're about to step off the path. It'll convict us of sin and prompt us to repent and turn away from it.

The Word of God is powerful, living and active. It can protect us from the temptations that Satan puts in our path.

But on the other hand, if someone knows that what they are doing is not pleasing to God, they'll avoid reading the Bible. They'll avoid hearing the Bible preached.

They know that the Word of God will challenge them to forsake their sin, and they don't want to do that.

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But not only does the Word of God protect us from temptation by purifying our hearts, it nourishes and strengthens us.

Psalm 1:1-3, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.”

The person who delights in the Scriptures, who meditates on them, who considers the meaning of what they read in the Bible and how they should respond to it, that person will be refreshed, fruitful.

If you’re feeling spiritually dry, weak or unfruitful, open your Bible. Read it. Think about it. Think about what it means and how you can put it into practice.

A person who fills their mind and heart with the Scriptures on a regular basis will enjoy spiritual health and fruitfulness, like a tree planted on the banks of a stream.

As the Psalmist writes in Psalm 119:28, *“My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.”*

When we’re tired and weary, both emotionally and spiritually, when we need to be refreshed and encouraged, when we feel that we’re close to the breaking point and need more of God’s strength, we can look to God’s Word to provide what we need.

Finally, there’s one more power the Word has that I’d like to mention, and that’s the power to convert. The power to open someone’s eyes to the truth of the Gospel. The power to draw them to Christ.

Jesus tells us in John 6:65, that no one can come to Him unless they are drawn to Him by the Father. No one can come to Christ unless the Father has enabled them to do so.

No one has the power to convert themselves. No one has the power to give themselves sight, or to bring themselves from death to life. They need the power of God to make that happen, and that power is contained in His Word.

Romans 10:14-15, 17, *“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”*

How this happens, we don't know. How the Word of God, being read or heard by an unconverted person, causes them to embrace the truth that in times past they had rejected—it's all a mystery.

It's a supernatural process, something which the Holy Spirit accomplishes. But what we do know is that it requires the power of God's Word. If we're going to see our friends and family members converted, we need to share God's Word with them.

We need to share with them the good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal life through faith in Christ, as revealed in His Word.

Slide 5

Conclusion

I'd like to close by giving you something practical; a way to get these powerful Scriptures into your life.

Now, there are many ways to do this. You can memorize verses that are meaningful to you. You can read through the Bible in a year. You can come to church and hear the Word being taught.

You can listen to preachers on the radio or on podcasts, or you can attend a Bible study group.

But if you need a place to start; or if it's been a while since you've been consistent in reading the Bible, I have a foolproof Bible reading plan.

Here it is. "Read the Bible today." That's it. That's the plan. Step one: Ask yourself, "Is it today?" If so, then step two: Read the Bible.

Now, you may ask, "How much should I read?" Read as much as you have time for.

If you have time to read a chapter, do that. If you only have time to read a paragraph, do that. If you can only read a single verse, read one verse. Just read the Bible. Today.

You may ask: What part of the Bible should I read? Any part you like. Many people find it helpful to read sequentially through a book, like the Psalms, or the Gospel of John, but you don't have to do that. Just open the Bible and read. Today.

Maybe you ask: "What if I didn't read the Bible yesterday?" That's the beauty of this plan. It doesn't matter. The plan is to read the Bible, today, not yesterday or tomorrow. Read the Bible today.

This is a plan that anyone can follow. Read the Bible, today and every day. Why? Because the Bible, God's Word, has the power to change us, to keep us from sin, to refresh our spirits, and to build us up and strengthen us in faith.