

The Piercing Gaze of God

Hebrews 4:11-13

October 18, 2026

Hebrews 4:11 to 13, and this comes after that section on entering into his rest. And then he says this, "Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall into the same example of disobedience. 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 uncovered and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we have an account to give."

It's interesting the way a believer and an unbeliever will take the same passage. For a believer, for those who are wanting this exposure to God in his word, this is a comfort. In fact, believers often quote Hebrews 4:12 and 13 as a source of great comfort that God knows us. His word opens us up, reveals

everything, and we're so happy about that. But those who have something to hide, they don't like this at all.

I had a friend, but I'm teaching him about the omniscience of God and how God knows every thought, every motive, every imagination, everything that he's thinking. He told me he's like, yeah, I don't like that. I don't like that about God at all. He proved to not be a believer, but at the time he was a professing believer, and he did not like this doctrine of God's omniscience, that God can see all things, knows all things. He knows your thoughts before you think them. He didn't like that at all. It made him uncomfortable.

I think there's a dividing line, and that's really what this sword does, is it draws a line in the sand. Let's go through this passage then, because this is how the pastor's using this whole picture about the piercing gaze of God. Because of the excellence of this rest, we have to be especially careful and mindful and watchful not only about our own lives, but for one another as well. We need to have a loving concern for each other, and we need to be careful, mindful, and watchful. So careful to respect God's rest, mindful to revere his word, watchful to regard his gaze, his penetrating gaze.

Those are three outline points that I'll go through them again, but it's the pastor here trying to call his congregation, his church, to be mindful and careful and watchful. So, number one, be careful to respect God's rest. Be careful to respect God's rest. And that's verse 11. It says, "Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall into the same example of disobedience."

So, it's a restatement of what he wrote in verse 1. He's recapitulating what he said in verse 1. Therefore, let us fear, lest, we fall short of his rest. And then everything between verse 1 and verse 11 is all about this rest, that there is a present rest for the people of God. As long as it's called today, get in there, go after it. And so, he comes to the end of that argument and that explanation and he's saying enter it, be diligent to enter it, make haste to enter it in.

And in both verses, it's interesting that the pastor includes himself using the first-person plural. He includes himself in the warning. He's cautioning not just his church, but himself. He's calling himself to account as well, but also fellow Christians, also any who may be adrift, which is it's, it's those people that he's watching be disturbed and leave the

church and go back to the synagogue to avoid persecution or trouble.

It's those people that are kind of the occasion for what he's writing. But as he thinks about them, he thinks about himself, thinks about his own heart. He says, you know, what's in their hearts and what's filling their hearts with anxiety and the fear that they feel. He's like, man, I feel that too. I got to admit that what is in them and what's driving them, there are remnants of that in me too. And so, he includes himself.

He says, therefore let us be diligent, all of us, me too. So, he's concerned about himself, fellow Christians, but anybody who's maybe drifting, maybe they're drifting due to temporary disobedience. Maybe it's a deeper problem for them that they truly are in a state of unbelief, still. They have a heart of unbelief, a heart of apostasy that is falling away from the living God. So, the pastor encourages one and all to include himself, to be diligent.

The verb there is *spoudazō*, to make haste. It's a word that can mean hurry, make haste. But also, it can be used more figuratively to make a really strong effort to be eager, zealous, urgent, and make every possible effort. In his mind, as a pastor and familiar with the Scripture, the record of history

for him is exceedingly clear about what happens to those who follow that same pattern of disobedience.

The word pattern there can also be translated as example or model, but used here, used in this negative sense, it refers to something that has to be avoided. It's an example here of warning, which is to direct personal moral behavior, moral decision making, take moral responsibility and make a change. So be repentant, be thoughtful, be careful.

So as a loving pastor, as I said, his concern isn't just for himself. It's, it's for anyone under his influence. It's for anyone who would read this letter. And I'm so thankful it's included in Scripture because this reaches us too, calls us to account.

He wants all of them to hear him, to listen to him, to heed the warnings so that they all move together and enter into the promise of God's rest together. That's the heart of a true shepherd, really. He wants to keep the flock together. He wants to hold the whole group together and he says, so we're going to do this together.

You're only as fast as your slowest man. And so, we're going to make sure that if there's a wounded, we're going to put

them on a litter and put them on a stretcher and you guys carry them, and we're going to move forward together. But when he sees people peeling off and peeling off and peeling off, he's concerned, gravely concerned. And he's trying to convey the same sense of concern to his whole church.

And I hope you are getting that sense too. I hope the word of the living God is penetrating into your hearts so that you don't just think about me, myself and I. You don't think about just you and your best religious life now, but you think in terms of my brothers, my sister, the man, the woman to the right, to the left of me. We're doing this together and we're going to hold everybody together.

Since he knows people, how people think, informed as he is by all of Scripture, perhaps he knows from the Psalms where like it says Psalm 14, one the "fool says in his heart there is no God." He understands from the Psalms that there are those who disregard, even though they're religious on the outside, even though they're part of the community, but they say in the heart there's no God to give an account to.

Or Psalm 12, verse 4, "who is Lord over us?" Who's Lord over my lips, my tongue, the things I say? I'm the master of my fate, captain of my soul. He knows through the study of

humanity, by observation, but also through Scripture, that there are some who may be on the way out, and they may be tempted to believe that God can't see them in the hustle and bustle of the busy city of Rome.

Maybe that God does see things, but he kind of sees things their way. God's on their side, he understands the pressures that they face and he's sympathetic and he's not going to make them continue to meet with this Christian community. After all, it's hard. And God wants them to earn a good living and have a good family life and keep the family intact and all together.

So, God gets it. There's an ad campaign, right? He gets us. So, to that mindset, the pastor enters into verses 12 and 13 and he says, second, number two, be mindful to revere God's word. And you notice verse 12 begins with the word, for, and for means, he's giving a reason. He's explaining a reason for making haste, for being diligent to enter God's rest. Don't delay for or because. And then it goes into it. "The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as a division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

He continues in verse 13, which syntactically or grammatically these two verses are joined together. It's all of

a piece. "There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we have an account to give."

So, the reason to be diligent, the reason to be careful to respect God's rest, to repent of any disobedience in order to enter into that rest, what he's saying here, the reason I want you to be diligent, the reason I want you to be careful and mindful and diligent is because God is going to bring everything to account before the bar of his justice.

That's what these verses are saying. That's what this wonderful memory verse that we've all memorized from when we were young, Hebrews 4:12. That's what this memory verse is for, is to make us mindful and aware that God's word is going to be there at the bar of his justice.

In this verse, verse 12, the pastor is encouraging repentance among his people by focusing on the penetrating power of God's word. And in verse 13, then he goes on to focus on the piercing scrutiny of God's gaze. So first his word, what he speaks, and then his gaze, what he sees.

Two, you know, anthropomorphic views of how God is speaking, gazing, seeing. But it really refers to the power of

God's word and the omniscience of God's sight. The verses are connected. They make a single point, but we'll take them one at a time, starting with the penetrating power of God's word at verse 12, and we'll break that verse down into 5 sub-points. Letters A through E. You can see it in your Bibles. This just follows the adjectives that are there.

So, the word of God, letter A, is living. It's living. That is to say, it is no dead word. It is as alive as the God who speaks it. The word of God sees as he sees. It's like it's portrayed here as if it has its own will and life and mind thinking. It's acting on its own, but it really is him. That's why it's living. It sees as he sees. It hears as he hears. It knows as he knows it, as is the word of God. It is as alive as he is because it has life in itself.

In fact, this quality of livingness belongs to God and God alone. God has life in himself. It's an attribute of his being. It is his essence to exist and to live. And so, the attribute of God's word as a living word means, it is as God is always existent, immutable, unchanging, spiritual, eternal, infinite, all the rest. Okay, that's the idea here, that in living it is no dead word. It is as alive as God is.

Letter B, the word of God is bustling, bustling, which is to say it's active, it's effective, it's causative, Since it's living, the sign of its inherent life is that it moves, it acts, it produces. The sign of its life is that it doesn't sit still. It kind of reminds me of like in Genesis 1, verse 2, where the Spirit of God is hovering over the waters.

That picture of the Spirit of God hovering is like a mother that's bustling and hovering over her chicks and taking care of her brood. So that's the word that's used in that context as well. So, it's always attentive, it's always active, it's always effectual and causing. It's moving active, it's producing, it's fruitful. Okay, so that's the idea. The word of God is living and it's active.

Letter c, the word of God is cutting. And here the pastor employs a word picture that is very familiar with his folks. Obviously, they live in Rome. They're seeing Roman soldiers, Roman Legionnaires marching all through the city. So, he pictures the word of God as a blade. It's cutting. It is like the Roman short sword, but it is not a single sided short sword. It is a one with a double edge. So, it's a more expensive sword and it's perfect for combat. This Roman short sword was a close quarters weapon. The word here is *máchaira*.

There's another word for a sword in scripture in in the Greek New Testament called *rhomphaia*, A *rhomphaia*. It's a big heavy broadsword. And that sword, the *rhomphaia*, was used by the Roman cavalry to chop down infantry soldiers on the ground. So, they would ride through on their war horse and they would hack at infantry soldiers with this massive broadsword and just crush them. Even if it didn't hit him with the blade, if it hit with the broadside, it is still knocking people unconscious.

So that's the *rhomphaia*. That's not this word. In fact, the *rhomphaia*, that's the sword that comes out of Christ's mouth in Revelation 19:15 at the second coming in judgement. It is not a, a surgical weapon for close quarters of combat. It is a punishing, crushing instrument of judgement, so it's very appropriate that that's what's coming out of Christ's mouth as he comes in the second coming in Revelation 19 to judge his enemies.

This sword, the *máchaira*, is quick on the draw. It's shorter, about 18 inches, so it's something that can be drawn very quickly, very easily. It's up close and personal, a kind of an intimate killing weapon, swift, speedy, and it's double edged, so it cuts both ways. Yes, it does have an entry wound and often an exit wound because it goes right through, but it

does damage with every slice and with every stroke. That's how he's picturing the word of God. It is cutting. It is a two-edged sword.

Letter D, the word of God is then penetrating. Penetrating, and the word here can mean either penetrating or piercing. It's slicing with the skill of like a surgical scalpel or maybe men who like to fish like a filet knife, something that can slice right through and it can "pierce as far as the division of soul and of spirit, of both joints and marrow."

Now, at this point, just to clear up something, we're not to understand soul and spirit as two separate, distinct immaterial parts, nor are we to consider them just merely synonyms, that he's just talking about synonyms, soul, spirit, spirit, soul. What he's referring to here are two ways of referring to man's immaterial nature.

So, the spirit is the immaterial aspect of mankind. You could then contrast that with the material aspect, which is the body. It's a body and spirit. For us to have a spirit makes us soulish beings. It means we are *psuche* kind of being, soulish creatures.

The animal kingdom does not have a soul in that sense. Do animals have the breath of life? Yes, they do. But do they have a soul? That is, that they have an immaterial part that perceives the world around them and does its processing and thinking through a spirit, using the body to access the world around them? No, they do not.

Angels, on the other hand, purely spirit, wholly immaterial, invisible. They do not have a body through which they perceive the world. They perceive the world however; angels do that kind of thing. It's a bit of a mystery to us. We because our spirit inhabits a body, uses the body to access the world and makes us souls.

So, when we speak of the soul, sometimes it can be used as a synonym for spirit, just talking about the immaterial part of us. But often times it's just referring to what we are. We are unique of all God's creation, being at the pinnacle of God's created order as mankind being soulish beings, joining basically the material and the immaterial. Heaven to earth joined in mankind. We are created in his image, after all.

But the best way to understand this verse then is to take each one of these genitive expressions separately and each one governed by the same preposition. So, in the expression

piercing, and then it says as far as that's what it says in my Bible, "piercing as far as"; as far as, is the preposition *achri*. *Achri* is often translated, until, when it refers to time, so up to a certain specific time.

But when it's used figuratively, as here, it expresses extent. So as far as or to the point of piercing, to the point of piercing as far as. Piercing to the extent of is what this preposition says. So, piercing as far as and then there are four terms. They're paired in twos. Piercing as far as the division of soul, as far as the division of spirit, as far as the division of joints, and as far as the division of marrow.

You see what he's saying? This doesn't suggest the double-edged sword pierces to divide soul from spirit, because that's an ontological impossibility. The sword does not divide joints and marrow. That's kind of biologically ridiculous since the two are never joined anyway. God's word is like a double-edged sword that penetrates into impenetrable things like soul, like spirit. It penetrates into hidden things, things like joints and things like the marrow within the bone.

In fact, that second pair of terms there, joints and marrow. It provides an illustration for the readers from ordinary life like meal preparation, preparing your chicken and

putting it on the table and you use a sharp knife to go in and start to separate the joints, so that you can cut different pieces and put that onto the plate and serve it to your family.

Also, illustration either from ordinary domestic life, meal preparation or ceremonial life like in sacrifice. Whoever has carved an animal knows that joints and marrow are already separate and distinct from each other, so they don't need to be separated by a sharp knife. They're already separate; they're not even joined. But a sharp knife can pierce beneath flesh to reach those hidden structures and separate hidden joints, and then pierce into a hard bone to penetrate and expose that hidden Marrow. Many people make soup of that hidden marrow or use it for bone broth.

So, we understand his meaning here. In the same way that we ourselves can get to the joints in the marrow with a sharp knife. God's word is like that. It can penetrate and expose and divide what is hidden in the say, the metaphysical realities of the human being.

So, whether metaphysical realities beyond human reach like soul, spirit, to get to divide the thoughts of a spirit, thoughts of a man, or whether he's talking about physical realities hidden beneath the surface, things like the joints

within us that are hidden from sight or inside the bones, the marrow to expose it.

God's word has power to get to either, to get to both. Nothing is hidden from his penetrating gaze. His word sees into and even cuts into hidden, inaccessible spiritual realms. It can chop us up into bits, limb by limb, and separate us into little bits and pieces at each and every joint. It can cut into hard bone and nothing is so hard that his word is not able to penetrate it and pierce it and reveal it. That's what's going on here.

So don't get caught up in dichotomy and trichotomy views of man and all that kind of, that's not what's going on here. It's not trying to say that there's, you know, body, soul and spirit. Somebody's saying, just saying, that the word of God, it can cut into and discern and penetrate into all the matters of spirit, all the matters of soul, the psychosomatic connection of body and spirit together, the soulful aspects of what we are as human beings that are hard to perceive to us. It can also get into hidden things like joints and cut open into bones and even break open hard things, get into the marrow itself. The meat of it, the word of God, is penetrating.

Finally, letter E, the word of God is discriminating, discriminating. It's able to judge what it finds. It doesn't just expose it and then lay it out. And somebody else has to assess, take it to the lab, put it under a microscope, see what's going on. Now the word of God can not only cut into and expose and reveal, we're going to make judgements about it too. Judge the thoughts and the intentions of the heart.

Thoughts is also can be translated deliberations or reflections of the heart. Then the intentions can be expanded into the thinking or the reasoning or the processing of the heart. Again, these are things that God and God alone can see and know. David said in Psalm 139 verse 4, "Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O Yahweh, You know it all."

The word judge in verse 12, *kritikos*. We get the word critical from that, but it refers to somebody not, not somebody just hard to be around, critical cantankerous spirit. But it refers to someone who's able to discern, someone who's skilled in evaluating and competent to render judgement. And the word of God is certainly that, has that competency and that skill. And

the pastor in this verse has really just stacked these several descriptions, one on top of the other, to illustrate the

power of God's word. It is living, bustling, it's cutting, penetrating, discriminating.

And as I asked you at the beginning, what is his point? His point is to put anyone who is tempted to disobey and think that they can hide their motives from God, to put them on notice, to warn anyone who seems willing to depart from the fellowship and unbelief and fall into the same pattern that the Jews of the past historically have fallen into.

I've got to think that this pastor, just before writing this letter or maybe even just writing this section, I got to think that he was kind of mindful or maybe even meditating on Psalm 139 because they're so strikingly similar. Psalm 139, starting in verse 1, "Yahweh, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you understand my thought from afar."

So, there it is. He's able to penetrate into the matters of a spirit, to discern his thoughts, his intentions, his ponderings, his ruminating, his reflection, his reasoning, all that God perceives no matter the distance. "You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, You are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there's a word on my tongue.

"Behold, O Yahweh, You know it all. You've enclosed me behind and before, And You put Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It's too high, I cannot attain to it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You're there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.

"If I lift up the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest parts of the sea, Even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will bruise me,' " Other translations say hide me, "'And the light around me will be night.'" Well, "Even the darkness is not too dark for You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You."

Same concepts, same thinking we find in Hebrews 4:12, and the same view of God in his penetrating word. David's point of meditating on those truths, comfort, assurance, sets of safety, a sense of protection, a sense of security. How is the pastor then turning the same concepts to provide a warning? He's saying, look, reflect on Psalm 139. Don't think you can get away in the streets of Rome. Don't think you can tuck yourself away and hide in a synagogue and keep your bad motives hidden from the living word of God.

The warning continues then in verse 13, continuing in verse 13. This is all again, as I said, verses 12 and 13 are both connected, but the third point is to be watchful to regard God's gaze. As I said, be careful to respect God's rest, point number one; be mindful to revere God's word, point number two; and then be watchful to regard God's gaze after he speaks of special revelation as living and active.

In verse 12, the pastor continues with his warning, saying there is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of him to whom we have an account to give the word of God, living, bustling, cutting, penetrating, discriminating. His gaze is scrutinizing as he really prepares for the final judgement of each and every soul.

Philip Edgecombe Hughes wrote this. He said, "there is not and cannot be any part of reality which is unknown or incomprehensible to him, who is the source of all being and the fount of all knowledge. Every creaturely covering and pretext is stripped away. There is no recess, no dark depth that is not wide open before him.

"his profound and solemn truth is one that man in his fondness does not like to face. It's damaging to his self-esteem, it destroys his proud pretensions to wisdom and

competence, and it discloses the feudal superficiality of all the elaborate defenses which he seeks to erect against God.

"But God sees all things as men never can, in the ultimate light of their undisguised reality. His gaze penetrates beneath the surface and beyond every spacious facade to the radical heart of our being. The gaze of God is universal. He's able to watch all persons at all times and all places."

Most interestingly, the pastor moves from verse 12 to 13. And he moves seamlessly from the word of God, which is a spoken thing, to the sight of God, which is a visual thing, what he sees through his omniscient eyes. And so, he's using both these pictures to tell us, don't think you can trifle with God.

Again Philip Hughes, "Indeed, a man's knowledge, even to his own self as faulty and inadequate, and wisdom begins in his recognition of this fact, and in the prayer that God therefore will search him and know him, and reveal to him the true depths of his depravity, and also the wonders of divine grace.

"The man who acknowledges he is now and will be hereafter naked and exposed to the eyes of the one with whom we have to reckon, that the discernment of God is always without error and his judgement righteous and equitable. That is a man standing on



the threshold of divine grace. For it is against a background of human guilt and powerlessness that the grace of God, which in Christ brings forgiveness and victory, is most particularly displayed."

That's what he wants for his people, that's what we want for each other as well. As we want to see no one leave God, the source of all blessing, God the one who provides forgiveness, God who gives his grace and victory in Christ, God who is our salvation. Thinking about these thoughts of God's view, his penetrating word, his omniscient gaze, we the believing, take a lot of comfort in that. In fact, we want more of it, don't we? So, we pray along with David and with this pastor. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way."

Let's pray. Our Father, we do pray that prayer. That is our prayer. And I know that there is a chorus of believers here who would echo it, who pray it often, and who find, even in Hebrews 4:12 and 13, a passage that is written in its context to be a warning to those who are straying, those who are departing, those who, who may indeed even be unbelievers.

Not just succumbing to a temptation, though believers, but even some of them unbelievers, and demonstrating that by departing and departing for good. And so, while this passage and the way the, the pastor uses it, way he uses these, this theology, these concepts, he does provide a warning for his church. And yet the believing see the same warning. And man, we draw near.

We draw near to you, Father, because we want your searching gaze. Psalm 139 is precious to us. Hebrews 4:12 and 13 are precious to us. We do know that there are as you look at our lives and as you know us thoroughly, as nothing is hidden from your sight, we do realize that there are things in our lives that are not pleasing to you, and we want those things rectified as well.

And so, as the pastor moves into the next section about the high priestly ministry of Christ, we once again take great comfort in the fact that what you see and what you expose, you so mercifully intend to deal with.

Our Lord Jesus Christ sees our sin as a malady that he seeks to get rid of, a cancer to cut out and, and destroy. He does not have an anger toward us. Your anger toward our sin has



already been dealt with on the cross because of Jesus Christ and there is no wrath remaining for us.

But there are sins that we want to repent of, turn away from. We want you to purge us and turn the fires up as hot as you need to, to cause the dross to rise to the surface. You may scrape it away, as painful as that may be. Father, we do pray that you would search us and know us and try us and see if there had to be any harmful, hurtful way to us. Get rid of that and lead us into the everlasting way. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.