

- d. In verse 11 the writer issued a summary charge to his readers. It reflected his concern and purpose in his previous instruction, and also served to bring together the warnings in verses 3:12 and 4:1. *Falling away from the living God through unbelief – even when it seems slight and doesn't involve an overt forsaking of the faith – may find the wayward one ultimately coming short of God's rest.*

That exhortation, then, is followed by a two-part declaration concerning God and His word (4:12-13). Because this passage initially appears to change the subject, it's often used in isolation to substantiate claims regarding the Bible's divine nature and people's accountability to it. But this is to miss the writer's point, for he penned these two statements as elaborating on his exhortation: "**For**, *the word of God is living and active...*" But these statements equally lead into his assertions concerning Jesus' enthronement and priestly ministration – i.e., His entrance into God's rest as regal Image-Son (4:14-15), and the implications for His saints' faith and endurance (4:16). Two observations follow from this:

- 1) The first is that verses 12-13 must be interpreted in terms of the surrounding context and the flow of the writer's argument. Whatever his point regarding God's word and its insight into men, that point sits within and contributes to his larger argument regarding God's rest and the human obligation to enter it.
- 2) Secondly, verses 12-13 must be interpreted in terms of Jesus' relationship to God's rest (i.e., His status as enthroned and priestly Image-Son), and men's share in that rest in Him, rather than as an isolated proof-text dealing with the Christian doctrine of the Scriptures ("bibliology").

With these things in mind, it ought to be evident that the writer's statements can function positively or negatively. Commentators and Christian readers naturally incline toward the latter, especially because of the warning that immediately precedes them. From this perspective, the writer was saying to his readers something like this: *Be diligent to enter God's rest, which means applying all care and constant, intentional devotion in your faith and faithfulness. Complacency and waywardness may escape your notice, but they won't escape God's. His word – His **truth** – stands firm and isn't subject to human speculation and rationalization, and nothing is hidden from His gaze and understanding. Therefore, your future entrance into God's rest depends on the actual reality of your faith and participation in Christ, and not your notions and expectations.*

But the statements can also be viewed *positively*, with the writer seeking to encourage his readers regarding the diligence and perseverance he was requiring of them: *They could (and should) have all confidence in their striving to enter God's rest, for He knows their struggles, weakness, insecurities, fears, and failures. Everything pertaining to them is "open and laid bare" before Him, and they could derive strong hope from the penetrating insight of His word – the word that proclaims Jesus' triumph, informs their faith and promises their rest in Him.*

Again, a negative interpretation seems most natural when the statements in 4:12-13 are viewed from the vantage point of verse 11. On the other hand, verses 14-16 strongly suggest a positive interpretation. In the end, the meaning the writer actually intended implicates *both* vantage points, since his statements build on the exhortation in verse 11, while also having in view and building toward his two summary exhortations in verses 14-16.

Before sorting out how both negative and positive interpretations might apply, it's appropriate to consider some of the features of the statements themselves.

- The thing that immediately jumps out is that both statements highlight the same basic idea, namely God's penetrating insight and its implication for human beings and their relationship with Him. But verse 12 assigns this insight to God's *word*, whereas verse 13 attributes it to God *Himself*. (The verse doesn't mention God, but the pronouns *him* and *his* seem to refer back to God, who's mentioned in verse 12. Also, the writer identified this individual as the one "with whom we have to do.")
- At the same time, the writer closely associates God and His word by means of the descriptors, *living* and *active*. He previously spoke of *God* this way (3:12, ref. also 9:14, 10:31, 12:22), and will later do the same with *Jesus* (7:25). But here he identified God's *word* as alive and actively effectual, which raises certain questions. Obviously these traits describe God's *spoken* word in the sense that His communication is *speech-act*: that is, His words speak the *truth* of His intent and will, which truth is then manifested in reality. So it was that God "spoke" the created order and its fullness into being (Genesis 1). But how is that true of the *inscripturated* word? The Scripture doesn't, in itself, bring to pass what it speaks of. It does so only indirectly, in that the God behind the word accomplishes that which He's disclosed in the Scriptures. It's only in that sense that one can say of the inscripturated word that it is living and effectual.
- The writer closely associated God with His word, but specifically in terms of the divine qualities of absolute insight, perfect discernment, and authority to judge. But this treatment is importantly set within a distinct *inclusio*. (*Inclusio* is a literary device that uses certain words, themes, ideas, etc. to "bookend" a passage. This technique acts to partition a context and provide a general interpretive framework for interacting with it.) This *inclusio* focuses on Jesus and His high-priesthood as the substance of the Christian's confession (cf. 3:1, 4:14-16).
- Situated within the *inclusio*, then, is the writer's discussion of hearing and faith – i.e., the right response to God's *word* – as granting entrance into God's rest. In Israel's case, that word was the word of covenant oath and promise, which now has been fulfilled and actualized in Jesus (1:1-2). Hearing, faith and rest focus on Him (cf. again 3:12-14, 4:1-3, 11).

These observations, set within the larger context and concern of the epistle, indicate that verses 12-13 must be understood in terms of Jesus the Messiah. More precisely, *He is the incarnate Word who fully embodies God's all-penetrating, all-knowing word.* Or put differently, the truth of the writer's description of the word of God has been fully realized in Jesus, the incarnate Word, and this is the word ("good news") now preached to men (4:2). This fact, then, points to another profoundly important truth. The writer here insists that God's word possesses full insight into the human creature because it penetrates to the very marrow of human existence. This is obviously true in the sense that it is the word of the God who created man and knows him inside and out. But the surrounding context and the direction of the writer's argument suggests that he meant more than this:

*The penetrating insight of the word of the Creator God has reached its zenith in Jesus, the incarnate Word, for His insight penetrates to the very marrow of human existence because He fully participates in that existence (cf. 2:17-3:1 with 4:14-16). **The incarnate Word has exhaustive and perfect insight into man because He is man in truth – a son of Adam who exists as true Image-Son.***

This is not to suggest that the phrase *word of God* should be crossed out in the text and replaced with *Jesus* (i.e., "Jesus is living and active..."), but that God's word finds its ultimate life and effectuality – its "God-breathed" living power and actualized truth – in the "word made flesh." What the writer conveyed in verse 12 was true prior to the incarnation, but in an anticipatory and promissory way. By eternal design, the commanding and compelling insight of the divine "word" was to attain its full expression in Jesus the Messiah; now, in the fullness of the times, *that* is the word preached – the word that penetrates to the very core of man's being to discover and fully uncover him, not by detached divine insight, but by incarnation. *God's word **knows** man because the Word **became** and **is** man.*

These considerations, then, show how the statements in verses 12-13 are both negative and positive:

- On the one hand, God's word, which has attained its destiny in the "word become flesh," strips man of every hiding place and refuge available to him, whether his outward credentials and accomplishments, or the cave of his own heart and mind. If God's word that preceded the Messiah exposed human beings and called them to account, the incarnate Word does so fully and perfectly; *nothing reveals the sons of Adam like the Last Adam.*

Until Jesus came into the world, the full nature and extent of the human plight could not possibly be known. How can a person know the truth of himself when he only has others like him to compare himself with? In that circumstance, there are a myriad of places where one can hide from the truth. But in the light of Jesus, the true Image-Son, people can no longer define themselves by themselves or other people. In Him, the light now shines in the darkness, so that darkness no longer provides a refuge.

- The incarnate and glorified Word searches out and fully exposes man by embodying in Himself true humanness. But this very insight and exposure is the ground of man's sure hope and confidence. *For this Word embodies man in truth in order that human beings should become truly and fully human in Him.* The goal of the "word made flesh" wasn't the exposure and condemnation of man for the sake of his destruction, but his renewal (John 3:17). Jesus' life as true Image-Son condemned the human race as false, but He bore that condemnation in Himself, putting pseudo-man to death in His death, so as to initiate a true human race in His resurrection.
- e. Hence the entirely positive exhortations that form the climax of this context (vv. 14-16): God's word of truth that exposes and condemns man now sounds forth the good news of the living Word and the truth of human (and creational) renewal in Him, which renewal is the entrance into God's rest for which man was created. This renewal and rest are in the true Image-Son, the enthroned King-Priest, and thus *He* is the confession – i.e., the truth which is heard, believed and owned – of every one of God's image-children (v. 14).

And Jesus is the confession of the image-children, not as an abstract body of doctrine to be accepted and upheld, but as the personal, living truth of their own existence and human destiny. By confessing *Him* as the resurrected and glorified Image-Son, they make the same confession regarding *themselves* (cf. Romans 8:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 3:1-4; Revelation 5:9-10). For Jesus became all that they are in order that they should become all that He is (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). This truth ought to provide strong consolation and hope to His followers, not only because Jesus' glorification as True Man is their own personal destiny, but because of His present ministration on their behalf. Jesus' brethren can claim His destiny because they share in Him, but they share in Him because He first shared in *them*: He was born a son of Adam just as they were (Luke 3:23-38), and so fully shared in their human existence and experience. And Jesus didn't shed His humanity when He ascended to the Father's throne; He exercises His sovereign mediation, not as a detached King-Priest, but as a sympathetic mediator and intercessor who knows from His own human experience the weakness, temptation and struggles of His brethren (4:15).

These Hebrew Christians were facing immense challenges, to the point that some were beginning to waver. But the answer to their struggle of weakness, doubt and fear wasn't renewed resolve or reinvigorated courage; *it was to remember whom they confessed.* They had entrusted themselves to the One whom all of Israel's history and longings anticipated; the One who'd fulfilled the divine word by embodying and accomplishing all of what Israel's God had said and done. He was the object of their hearing and faith, and He was the substance of the rest set before them and promised to them. All that they were and hoped for was "yes and amen" in Him, but because He was one with them. How, then, could they not endure in faith – and indeed, with *all confidence* of mercy and gracious provision from the Priest-King whose regal glory looked to and served their own (4:16)?