

The Sword of the Spirit

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| <i>Text</i> | Ephesians 6:17 |
| <i>Readings</i> | John 16:5-15; 1 Peter 1:22-2:2 |
| <i>Theme</i> | We must be armed with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. |
| <i>Purpose</i> | To urge you to know the Bible well so you can use it in this spiritual battle. |

Some of the most dramatic scenes in movies are sword fights. Some of you may have seen the Lord of the Rings movies with their large scale battles and many soldiers fighting hand to hand with their swords. In that series Aragorn had a very famous sword reforged; it was renamed Anduril; when he was fighting with it no one could stand against him.

In the Star Wars movies Yoda taught young Luke Skywalker to fight using his light sabre as a sword and there are spectacular conflicts as he fought against the dark powers of evil.

A Roman soldier at the time Paul was writing was also armed with a sword. It was not the large Thracian broadsword that you see in the movies but a short sword, more like a large dagger and used for close combat.

Earlier (in verse 14) Paul had written about the belt of truth. That described the truth of God in a general sense – all the truth he has made known to us – but “the sword of the spirit” is a picture of “the Word of God”, the Bible, the truth God has made known to us in this book.

The sword of the Spirit means that the Spirit inspired the Word of God, the Bible.

That is, the Holy Spirit guided the minds and pens of the biblical writers so they wrote down exactly what he wanted them to write.

The Spirit did not do this in a mechanical way as though he was using a typewriter, nor was the biblical writer taking down dictation like a secretary.

Rather each writer used his own gifts and wrote in his own style but in such a way that what was written was the word of God. So Paul could write; “All Scripture is God-breathed...” (2 Timothy 3:16)

When we read the Word of God today we can only understand it by the Spirit.

Some of you need glasses to read. Reading the Bible without the help of the Spirit is like trying to read without your glasses – it is very difficult to make out the words and make sense of the page!

Or it is like trying to read in very low light – again you can’t see clearly.

If we are to understand the Bible the Holy Spirit must put his light on the words he has written, he must illumine what he has inspired.

When we read the Word of God like this the Spirit then applies the word of God to us and to others.

The prophet Nathan did this to David after the king's sin with Bathsheba. He told him a parable and then applied it by saying; "You are the man!" There was no escaping that application.

You have probably had this experience too. You are reading the Bible, or hearing it read, and something strikes you. It may be that you are convicted of some sin in your life, or you hear words that are of great comfort to you, or you read a passage that gives you great hope. The Holy Spirit has applied his word to your heart and life.

The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God.

The Greek word for "word" is rhema, which can also mean speech or sound or voice. This is where Radio Rhema derived its name, which is very appropriate for a Christian Radio station proclaiming the Word of God.

By "the Word of God" Paul meant the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

By the first century the 39 books of the law and the prophets and writings were accepted as the Old Testament Scriptures, by Jews and Christians.

But the New Testament was still being written. Paul wrote this letter in AD 60 and there were other NT books written later still. Paul regarded his writings as also forming part of the Scriptures and Peter agreed with that (2 Peter 3:16-17)

Over a period of 200 years the church recognised that the 27 books of the NT were written by an apostle or someone closely connected with an apostle, were widely accepted as part of the Bible by the Christian Church, and were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Today we call this collection of 66 books the canon of the Scriptures or the Bible.

We believe that the Bible as inspired by the Holy Spirit is true, trustworthy and reliable; and it is inerrant, that is, without error; and it is infallible, that is without any mistakes.

We need to emphasise this today because not everyone who claims to be a Christian believes this. This was denied by the old liberalism of the 19th and 20th centuries and it is being denied today by the new liberalism in what is called the Emergent church. Emergent church leaders speak about the Bible enthusiastically but vaguely. They will describe the Bible as an amazing collection of writings and a beautiful story. They will tell you that have a deep love for the Bible and that they respect it. They will say it is "an ancient book of incredible spiritual value"; but they hesitate to say that the Bible is the Word of God and they will not say that it is inerrant and infallible.

In this post-modern situation where people are so sceptical of finding the Truth we need to hold fast to the position that the Bible is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is the Word of God from cover to cover.

If you believe the Bible truly is the Word of God and the sword of the Spirit then you will be able to use it with confidence in this spiritual battle.

You can use it as a defensive weapon.

The Word of God can protect you from the attack of Satan.

Jesus used it like this when he was tempted in the desert by the Devil. Three times he faced a temptation from the Devil, and three times he answered those temptations by quoting the Word of God, each time quoting a passage from the book of Deuteronomy (Luke 4:1-13; Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:13,16)

We can use the Word of God in the same way. Passages of the Bible can keep us from doubt, anger, pride, envy, grumbling, discouragement, gossip and many other sins.

Psalm 119:9 asks; "How can a young man keep his way pure?" The answer; "By living according to your word."

This is the value of memorising verses from the Bible. Psalm 119:11 says; "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." We need to do the same.

The Word of God is also a powerful offensive weapon against our enemies.

Reflecting back over the 16th century Reformation Martin Luther wrote; "I simply taught, preached and wrote God's Word. Otherwise I did nothing. While I slept, or drank beer with my friends, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The Word of God did it all."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Reformed Baptist preacher, said about the Bible; "There is no need for you to defend a lion when he is being attacked. All you need to do is open the gate and let him out." In the same way all we need to do is use the Word of God.

Paul wrote of its power in Romans 1:16; "For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."

And the writer of Hebrews wrote (4:12); "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."

John Stott described how the Holy Spirit uses this sword of the Word "to cut through people's defences, to prick their consciences and to stab them spiritually awake." (Stott, God's New Society, p. 282) It is a weapon to be used in our offensive against the enemy.

To be an effective weapon the Bible must be used wisely and well. It is not to be shouted from street corners at people who are passing by. We are not to fire verses at people like pellets from a shotgun just to prove a point. The Bible is not a magical book. Rather it is must be used with wisdom and skill.

Let's consider a few implications of this.

To use this sword effectively you need to know it well, you need to be familiar with it, knowing its doctrines, being able to locate key verses, being able to find your way through the books of the Bible.

Children, if you are to know the Bible and be familiar with it you need to listen to it as your father reads it at home in family devotions and as it is read in worship. Listen carefully and absorb it and let it sink in.

Each of us also needs to read it for ourselves. The people of Israel could not do that because there were very few copies of the Scriptures available. Every book had to be copied by hand costing much time and expense. But we are in quite a different situation; all of us own at least one copy of the Bible, many of us have multiple copies. But it is no good to you unless you read it. Just as a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush, so "a Bible in the hand is better than a dozen on the shelf." (Thomas Williams)

Are you reading your Bible? Do you aim to read it each day? Do you read it systematically, book by book?

To use the Bible well you not only need to know it well but you also need to practice using it.

Imagine a Roman soldier going into battle without being used to his sword and without any practice. His movements will be clumsy, his defence will be weak, and he will tire very quickly and get weary.

So too for a Christian soldier; if we are going to do battle as great swordsmen we need to practise with the sword of the Spirit.

To do this it is helpful to discuss it with others.

Do that over coffee after worship. All too easily we talk about the cricket (in summer) or about the rugby (in winter) or to what is going on in our families or our workplace. There is nothing wrong with discussing these matters, but let's also talk about the Word of God. Strengthen your sword arm. Practice your defensive and offensive moves.

This is one of the great benefits of the group Bible studies. Listening to sermons is a valuable means of learning about the Bible but it is mainly one way – the preacher is speaking and the congregation is listening. There is not much opportunity for interaction about the sermon. The Bible studies, however, give opportunity for discussion, questions and explanation. All that is good practice for you when you are called on to defend your faith.

Not only do you need to know it and practise it but you also need to interpret it correctly.

The Bible is a large book written over a period of 1600 years and in a variety of styles or genres. There is history, law, poetry, proverbs, gospels and letters. Each must be interpreted carefully and accurately.

A good study Bible can be helpful, or a reliable commentary, or a book about Bible interpretation.

Sermons can also help you understand the Bible and preaching ought to be an example of how to read and interpret the Scriptures.

Before we read or hear God's word we need to pray the prayer of Psalm 119:18; "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."

To use the Bible properly you need to know it well, practice it diligently, interpret it correctly, and apply it carefully.

The Word of God will do you no good at all if you "hear" it and then go away and forget it, or if you read it but don't do what it says. We need to be hearers and doers of the Word. (James 1:22-25)

Knowing the Bible is not an end in itself. We don't learn about the Bible just to win arguments with others, or do well in Bible quizzes, or come first in Sunday School, or not make a fool of ourself in catechism class!

No, we read and know and study the Bible so that we might have life! That life is to be found in the Lord Jesus. The written word of God points us to the living word of God – the Son of God.

John began his gospel; "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... In him was life and that life was the light of men...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1,4,14)

It may be entertaining to watch sword fights on the movies. But your ability to use the sword of the Spirit is a matter of life and death.

The Bible is the sword of the Spirit. It has been given to us by our Commander, the Lord Jesus.

Read it carefully and use it well so you can defend yourself from spiritual attack and defeat the powers of darkness.

Amen.