

The Sword of the Spirit

Ephesians 6:17b

17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...

The Apostle Paul has explained that in order to live the Christian life we must engage fierce warfare, not with human beings, but rather with the devil himself. He exclaims that we must take up every piece of armor that God provides, and in our text today, he commands that we take the sword of the Spirit. No soldier would be adequately equipped without a sword, and it provides for him not only a good defense but, uniquely, a good offense. We cannot make advances in the kingdom of God without our sword. We need to ask ourselves two questions: 1) What is this sword? 2) How do we wield this sword effectively?

I. What is the sword?

Paul says that the sword is the “word of God.” There are two words for “word” in Greek; one of them is the familiar “logos,” which speaks of the written word of God and the incarnate word of God (see for example John 1:1-18); and the word “rhema,” which typically connotes the spoken word. In this verse, Paul uses the word “rhema,” suggesting that we must take up the spoken word of God. Nonetheless, this spoken word is still the revealed truth of God, found infallibly in the Scriptures. This sword is also called the “sword of the Spirit,” which implies several important realities.

A. The Bible is inspired by the Spirit.

If we look at 2 Timothy 3:16, we read, “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” In 2 Peter 1:20-21, we read, “...no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In Proverbs 30:5, we read, “every word of God proves true.” We can see from these and other texts that the Bible is perfect, it is reliable, it is authoritative, it is infallible; it is truly the word of God.

B. The Bible is illuminated by the Spirit.

There are many disciplines and skills that need to be learned in order to interpret the Bible accurately, but above all, we need to have the gift of the Spirit. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Paul teaches that it is by the Spirit that even the youngest and least educated among us understands the word of God. The Spirit Who inspired the Scriptures also enables us to understand the Scriptures.

C. The Bible is empowered by the Spirit.

In Hebrews 4:12, we read that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...” The word of God is powerful. The classic example of its power is found in the temptations of Jesus Christ in Matthew 4. James also teaches us: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). It is the Spirit Who makes the word powerful in our lives and, through us, the lives of others.

II. How do we wield the sword effectively?

A. We must receive and cherish the sword we are given.

In Psalm 19, David gives us an idea of how precious the word must be to us when he

says, “the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...” More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.” In Psalm 119, the psalmist asks, “How can a young man keep his way pure?” His answer: “By guarding it according to your word...I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” The word of God will not be our sword unless we cherish it.

B. We must be trained in sword fighting.

A recent Indiana University study has shown that although 80% of American citizens believe the Bible is inspired in some way, less than 50% have actually read any portion of the Scriptures within the past year, and only 9% of Americans make it a daily habit to read the Bible. We are not going to be able to use our swords unless we study them. We must implement a discipline of reading the Bible seriously and understanding its historical and literary context in each of the books of the Bible.

C. We must use our swords.

We are to be aware of the devil’s power, but we are not to be intimidated. William Gurnall, in his classic exposition of this text, put it this way: “The word of God is a terror to Satan; he cannot overcome the dread of it. Let Christ simply say, ‘It is written,’ and the fiend runs with confusion and terror. And saints have found that the most successful instrument to defend themselves against Satan’s fiercest temptations is that phrase that came from Christ’s own blessed lips.”

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the sword of the Spirit.
2. Why do we have abiding confidence in this “sword?”
3. How can we better understand the Word of God?
4. What are the keys to successfully wielding this piece of our armor?

Going Deeper

1. How does your faith in the Word of God need to be strengthened?
2. What do you need to do to strengthen your use of the sword of the Spirit?