

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Unstoppable Gospel Power

Armor of God Series – Palmetto Baptist Church

Texts:

- **Ephesians 6:17** : *“and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,”*
- **Isaiah 11:4** : *“but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”*
- **Isaiah 49:2** *“He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away.”*
- **Isaiah 59:21** *““And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and forevermore.””*
- **Hebrews 4:12–13** *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*
- **James 1:21** *“Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”*

Introduction:

For some time now we have been considering the final paragraphs in Paul’s letter to the Ephesian Christians. These paragraphs are the climax to which Paul has been building in the letter (6:10-20).

You will remember that the theme of Paul’s letter has to do with a stunning peace God has restored through the ministry of His Messiah, Jesus Christ (1:2; 2:13-22; 4:1-3; 6:23).

As believers, not only have we been granted this peace personally; corporately, we are the cosmic display of what this peace will be like when Messiah restores shalom to all of creation (1:9-10; 3:10). Paul describes himself (and us) as Ambassadors of this peace sent by God to announce this “shalom” to those who are enslaved in the kingdom of darkness (6:20).

Paul makes clear that as Christ's ambassadors we are invading a hostile kingdom to rescue those enslaved by sin and darkness – and we will face relentless resistance and ruthless opposition from the spiritual forces that rule and empower this dark realm (6:10-13).

So, how are we to stand? How will we resist such a powerful wicked enemy who possess an armory of dark weapons that have been used successfully to destroy so many others? How will we find the strength and courage to stand firmly and advance boldly into the very heart of this dark realm to rescue people from the coming wrath of God, and the destruction Satan is presently bringing upon them?

Paul's answer is to point our eyes to two realities:

1. There is a majestic armor that God has provided every Christian by which we are guaranteed success in our mission to invade Satan's realm with the gospel of God's peace.
2. There is a marvelous Champion who wears this armor and we have been united to Him in an indissoluble union – so that whatever happens to Him, actually happens to us. His strength is our strength. His victory is our victory.

We have worked our way through the different pieces of armor listed in this paragraph – armor that Christ wore on our behalf in the OT!

- ***The belt of truth*** – the perfect obedience that Christ faithfully rendered to God on our behalf (His active obedience).
- ***The breastplate of righteousness*** – his perfect obedience fulfilled every demand and expectation of the Law and resulted in a complete and unimpeachable righteousness that has been imputed to us when he volunteered to take our place and suffer the condemnation that was rightly ours (sacrificial atonement by His death). This brought about a marvelous unbreakable peace between God and us.

- ***The shoes of eager readiness*** to announce this peace to those in bondage in the kingdom of darkness – to bring the great news that our God reigns and has come to rescue the captive and set the prisoner free!
- ***The shield of faith*** in God’s promise to be our defender against all the attacks and fearsome weapons our ancient enemy hurls against us.
- ***The helmet of salvation*** – our confident expectation that God will keep His promises and his covenants with us just as He kept his promises to Christ by raising Him from the dead!

So – at this point in the text, we stand clothed head to toe in this marvelous, majestic armor. But, as we move forward and advance into the kingdom of darkness to fulfill the mission Christ gave us to make disciples of the nations – we need a weapon to use offensively to cut our way through the darkness and offensively to defend ourselves from the ruthless attacks of the enemy designed to stop or even reverse our gospel advance.

God has given us such a weapon – a marvelous sword given to us by none other than the Holy Spirit. So, what is that sword and more importantly, how do we use it effectively?

Two Important Pieces of Contextual Background:

A. The Ephesian Context:

- Ephesians, like most other non-Christians of the day, believed in the spirit realm. They believed their gods controlled spiritual beings by which they rewarded or punished people. As a result, Ephesus was entirely given over to pagan idolatry and the practice of dark magic.
- Luke records the presence of a great deal of demonic activity going on at Ephesus in Acts 19:11-20.
- A powerful magical charm was a coveted protection against the evil spirits. These charms consisted of a secret “word of power” contained in an amulet that would protect the wearer from such evil. These magical amulets were highly prized and very expensive – they were known as “Ephesian letters/words”.

- When the gospel came to Ephesus, it freed people from this bondage and Christians confessed and abandoned their involvement in magical practices. They brought their amulets (“Ephesians letters/words”) and burned them in the sight of all. The value of what they burned came to 50,000 pieces of silver! (Acts 19:19).
- What would cause them to abandon “words” they had once considered so powerful and valuable? God had given them a Word that was far more powerful than any amulet they burned, *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* (Hebrews 4:12).
- Furthermore, the Word God had given them was far more precious than silver or gold – its worth far exceeded 50,000 pieces of silver. The Word that God had given them was *“More to be desired than gold, even much fine gold”* (Psalm 19:10).
- Paul describes this Word as a Sword the Spirit has given to them that was far more powerful and effective against the real spiritual forces of wickedness against whom we wrestle (6:12).

B. The OT Messianic context– four important texts associate this spiritual sword with Messiah’s ministry:

- **Isaiah 11:4** *“but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”*
- **Isaiah 49:2** *“He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away.”*

The first set of verses speak of the Spirit of God resting on Messiah who will bring judgement upon the enemies of God and His people through the Word of His mouth and the breath of His lips. This is confirmed in 2 Thess. 2:8 where Jesus will destroy the “The Lawless One – the Man of Sin” with the breath of his mouth as well as in Rev 19:19-21 and 20:1-7 when Jesus will cast the Beast, the False Prophet, and Satan into the Lake of Fire with a mere word from his mouth.

- **Isaiah 59:19** “So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives.”
- **Isaiah 59:21** ““And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and forevermore.””

The second set of verses speak of the “wind of God” (a reference to the Holy Spirit” putting words into Messiah’s mouth by which He will deliver His people from their sins and rescue them from the bondage of Satan’s kingdom. This is exactly what Jesus did when he defeated Satan by the Spirit’s power and the words of God from Deuteronomy 6-8 when he was personally tempted by the devil – only the second human to have had a direct personal encounter with Satan of this nature.

Additionally, Jesus sent His Spirit to put His Word in the mouths of His followers and when Paul spoke those Gospel words to the Thessalonians, they turned from idols to serve the living God and to wait for the coming of Jesus! (1 Thess 1:9-10).

And this Word from God that Jesus announced is presently at work in us– it is the word Peter said remains forever and is the good news that was preached to us! (1 Peter 1:25).

So, this sword is a powerful weapon by which we advance the Gospel in the realm of darkness and by which we defend ourselves from the attacks of Satan as well as the temptations that assail our flesh. ***We need to observe four important aspects of this weapon God has given us!***

I. The Nature of This Amazing Weapon

and take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,”

A. Its Description – sword (macaira) of the spirit

- Two kinds of swords in Paul’s day – the long Thracian sword that a soldier would wield with both hands and the short thrusting two-edged sword that a Roman soldier would use in hand-to-hand combat. This is the sword that Paul has in mind.
- This sword comes from the Holy Spirit – it is a weapon forged by God and delivered to us by His Spirit. His Spirit helps us understand and receive it and energizes it when we use it.

B. Its Definition – word (rhema) of God

- There are two important terms for the idea of “word” in the NT – *logos* and *rhema*. *Logos* has to do with idea of the entirety of a concept or message. Jesus is the *Logos* from God.
- The second term is more specific – it has to do with specific statements that make up a larger message. It is also the term that would most often be used for a spoken declaration.
- This is the term used here – the Spirit gave specific statements from God – specific declarations and those statements/declaration have unstoppable power to do things.
- By His statement we are redeemed and justified. By these words we are capable of resisting Satan.

C. Its Function – Offense and Defense

- ***Its offensive value: It liberates us from the slavery of sin.*** This “word” has the power to deliver us from darkness and set us free from the bondage of sin and death. It is the “word of truth – the gospel of our salvation” which saved us when we heard and believed (Ephesians 1:13).
- ***Its defensive value: It cleanses us from the pollution of sin.*** It is also the word which sanctifies us by the washing of the water of the word (Eph 5:26).

- ***Its defensive value:*** It strengthens us in our battle against sin and temptation (Psalm 119:11 – *I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you*).
- ***Its defensive value:*** It overcomes the spiritual attacks of Satan and the spiritual forces of evil (James 4:7 – *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*)

So the picture Paul paints is not of a Christian waving a bible in his hand – but rather of a Christian who is skilled in the Word and knows how to use the individual statements God has given effectively to resist Satan and to free those enslaved by him.

II. The Ability of this Amazing Weapon (It can do four amazing things)

A. As we proclaim this word – It will Rescue and Release Sinners from the Kingdom of Darkness

- **Acts 26:15–18** “And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’” (ESV)
- **Romans 10:17** “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ
- **Ephesians 1:13** “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,”

B. As we depend on this word – It will help us Defeat Satan and Overcome Temptation

- Listen to Piper’s observation: “*Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God. No one sins out of duty. We sin because it holds out some promise of happiness. That promise enslaves us until we believe that God is more to be desired than life itself (Ps 63:3). Which means that the power of sin’s promises are broken by the power of God’s promises.*”

- This is why David said, “*Your word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against you!*” (Ps 119:11)
- This is why James and Peter both exhort us to “*Submit to God first and then when we resist the devil, he will flee.*” (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9)
- There is no power in merely quoting the Scripture – the power is when we quote the Scripture and then submit to its demands!

C. As we receive and submit to this word – It will Renew our Minds, Strengthen our Hearts, and Deliver our Souls

- **James 1:21** “*Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*”

D. As we meditate on this word and savor its sweetness – It will make the thoughts of our heart and the words of our mind acceptable to God.

- **Psalm 19:14** “*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*”
- **Psalm 1:2-3:** “*but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.*”

III. The Availability of This Amazing Weapon.

A. It is accessible – it is near to us

Romans 10:8 “*But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);”*

B. It is inescapable – It penetrates to the inner recesses of our heart

Hebrews 4:12 “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*”

C. It is profitable – for life and godliness

2 Timothy 3:15–16 “*and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*”

D. It is unstoppable – it will not return empty

Isaiah 55:10–11 *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”*

God has given us an amazing multifaceted weapon by which we can advance the Gospel, stand our ground, and grow in grace.

IV. The Use of This Amazing Weapon (two biblical examples)

A. Used Offensively to deliver People from the Realm of Darkness

- Paul, the Thessalonians, and the Gospel (1 Thess 1:2-10)
- **1 Thessalonians 1:2–10** *“We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, **because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.** You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, **for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.** For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”*
- This is an amazing testimony of what happened when the gospel came to this pagan city – it worked quickly, powerfully, and effectively to produce a powerful transformation in people that was known well beyond their city.
- How did this “word” work so powerfully that an entire group of people would become so convinced of its message they would turn away from their life-long devotion to cherished idols to serve the God they have never known and to wait for His Son to return whom they had never met?

- The power behind this word that did this powerful work is the Holy Spirit. He took this sword and used it to pierce through the darkness to rescue people from bondage and blindness!

B. Used Defensively to Resist the Devil – Jesus and the Temptation (Matthew 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-14)

- The temptation of Jesus was actually a Divine assault on Satan's kingdom – Messiah had come to set the captive free and to break the power of sin. This would require that He defeat Satan and overcome him in a face-to-face encounter – a personal attack.
 - We see this in that all three accounts describe the temptation as initiated by the Holy Spirit – this was not Satan coming to tempt Jesus, this was Jesus by the power of the Spirit going to face and overcome His ancient enemy – Mark states that the Holy Spirit drove/impelled Jesus to the wilderness.
 - Matthew presents Jesus as the ***New Israel of God***. Whereas the Old Israel was tested in the desert and failed, Jesus as God's New Israel would face these same tests and succeed.
 - Dt 8:2-3 – the point of the test was to reveal what was in their heart – whether they would obey God's Word under pressure or would they resort to their own wisdom and power?.
 - Luke presents Jesus not as the New Israel but as the ***Second Adam***. Where the First Adam failed the temptation of the Serpent by refusing to submit to God's Word, the Second Adam would overcome the devil by submitting and obeying God fully.
1. ***Temptation 1 – to use his power to satisfy his own needs/desires.***
Would Jesus demonstrate that obedience to God was more important than staying alive by eating OR would he use his power to serve his own ends to get bread by his own word? When Israel was hungry in the desert they rebelled against God and Moses. Would Jesus also rebel against His Father, or would he submit to the Father's will and wait for God to give him daily bread?

Response: *“But he answered, “It is written, “ ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ””* (Matthew 4:4; Dt. 8:3)

2. ***Temptation 2 – to use his power to control and manipulate God.*** Would Jesus wait on God to deliver him and reveal his identity as the Son of Man, OR would he use his power to control God by jumping from the pinnacle of the temple and forcing God to keep the promise made in Ps 91:11-12? Would he quietly wait on God OR would he demand that God act on His behalf as Israel did at the place of bitter water in Ex 17?

Response: *“But he answered, “It is written, “ ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ””* (Matthew 4:4; Dt. 6:16)

3. ***Temptation 3 – to use his power to seize all earthly authority over the kingdoms of the world.*** Would he wait on God to give him these kingdoms after the cross OR would he seize them now and avoid the cross? Would Jesus put his kingdom first or would he seek first the kingdom of God? Would he worship God alone OR would he worship the fallen being who was behind the golden calf that Israel worshipped in the wilderness?

Response: *“Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’ ””* (Matthew 4:10, Dt 6:13)

Here is the point – not whether Jesus would use the sword of God’s Word but rather, how would he use it?

Would He **submit** to God’s Word and use that word to refuse whatever temptation Satan placed before him OR would he use that powerful sword/Word for His own ends to get what he wanted?

When God puts His sword in our hand how we use that sword makes all the difference. Will we use that sword to do our own will or will we do what Jesus did when he said, *“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me”* (John 6:38)?

Conclusion:

James made an important observation – it is the engrafted word that is able to save and deliver our souls from moral evil.

This means that it isn't enough to have a bible or even to read it daily. ***It must lodge in our hearts, and it must conquer our will so that we submit to its demands – then and then alone will it have the power to deliver us from temptation and liberate us from sin.***

So why is this so hard for so many of us? Listen to the conclusion of a sermon preached almost 100 years ago: *“There are in the Christian ranks some soldiers whose hands are too nerveless or too full of worldly trash to grasp the sword which they have received, much less strike home with it at any of the evils that are devastating their lives or darkening the world. The feebleness of the Christian conflict with evil, in all its forms, whether individual or social, whether intellectual or moral, whether heretical or grossly and frankly sensual, is mainly due to the feebleness with which the average professing Christians grasp the sword of the Spirit.”* (Alexander MacLaren)