

The Christian Life (30): Sanctification (Part 15)

Having considered the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes of peace, shield of faith, and helmet of salvation, we come this morning to the final piece of Christian armor, "the sword of the Spirit." "And take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph.6:17). "Most nations have some particular weapons or arms proper to themselves; but few or none come into the field without a sword. A pilot without his chart, a scholar without his book, and a soldier without his sword, are alike ridiculous. But, above all these, is it absurd to think of being a Christian, without knowledge of the word of God and some skill to use this weapon" (Gurnall).¹ "This differs from the others in that this is also an offensive weapon. The sword serves a dual purpose, defensive and offensive. It is something whereby we can not only repel the enemy but also attack him" (MLJ).²

The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God is a unique piece of armor in fighting Satan, for it attacks the enemy as well as repels him. (1) It is a defense against Satan. Jesus sets the example here. He responded each time to Satan's temptations in the desert with 'It is written' (Matt.4:1-11). His words from Scripture plunged like steel into the heart of Satan. That is how we too need to respond to Satan. Hand-to-hand combat with Satan and with temptation seldom works. We need the sword of the Spirit in our hand. (2) It is an offensive weapon against Satan. We fight Satan by finding shelter in Christ. We fight him with an unyielding defense. But we also fight Satan by taking the offence against him. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, gives us clear directions, powerful motives, rich encouragements, and instructive examples that equip us well for confronting Satan.³

I. The Armor of God: The Sword of the Spirit

1. *How is the word of God a sword?* "The sword was an essential part of the armor of an ancient soldier. His other weapons were the bow, the spear, or the battle-axe. But, without a sword, no soldier would have regarded himself as well armed. The ancient sword was short, and usually two-edged, and resembled very much a dagger" (Barnes).⁴ "The Greek word used for 'Sword' refers to the short-handled sword, which was an important offensive weapon in close combat" (O'Brien).⁵ It was primarily intended for hand-to-hand combat and was used as a defensive and offensive weapon. "There was no element of the offensive in any of the other five parts of the whole armor of God, but here there is. The sword serves a dual purpose, defensive and offensive. It is something whereby we can not only repel the enemy but also attack him" (MLJ).⁶

A sword, whereunto the Word is compared, has a double use. One is to defend a man from the assaults of his enemies, the other is to annoy, drive back, and destroy a man's enemy. Thus the Word of God is of great use both to defend us from all the assaults of our spiritual enemies and also to drive away, confound, and destroy them. It is profitable for doctrine and reproof, for instruction and correction (2Tim.3:16). By the Word also may all carnal and fleshly lusts be cut down and subdued, as flesh may be cut in pieces by a

¹ Willaim Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:194

² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:324-325

³ Joel Beeke, *Striving Against Satan*, 54-55

⁴ Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes: Ephesians to Philemon*, 132

⁵ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 481

⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:324-325

sword. Wherefore as gentlemen, soldiers, and travelers always have their swords by their sides, or in their hands ready to defend themselves and to spoil their enemies, so ought we always to have this sword in readiness. Let us show ourselves as being wise and careful for the safety of our souls as natural men are for their bodies.⁷

(1) It wounds. As a sharp sword it cuts the conscience and pricks the heart. "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do'" (Acts 2:37). While this wounding work of the word is necessary to become Christian, it's also necessary as Christian. "Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects; therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty. For He bruises, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole" (Job 5:17-18). "What better weapon can we have to fight with against corruption, than 'the sword of the Spirit: which is the word of God,' and is called a 'two-edged sword;' the law is one edge, and the gospel another; and both these are powerful, sharp, and piercing, to the suppression and mortification of corruption, going to the very inwards and heart thereof" (Hopkins).⁸

(2) It exposes. The word exposes our thoughts and intentions. "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb.4:12-13). It's a mirror which reveals our hearts and enables us to deal with sin and temptation at its root. "He who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does" (Jas.1:25). Scripture shines light upon the battle.

(3) It protects. (a) It protects from temptation. Thus our Savior used this sword against the temptations of the devil (Matt.4:1-11): "Away with you, Satan! For it is written" (v4, v7, v10). "Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world" (1Pet.5:9). "I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the world of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one" (1Jn.2:14). "The mouth of the righteous speaks wisdom, and his tongue talks of justice. The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide" (Ps.37:30-31). "When the heart is well stocked and furnished with this word of God, you have something to oppose still to darken the splendor of the world, to check the desires of the flesh, and thus to carry on a continual warfare and watchfulness" (Manton).⁹ (b) It protects from false teaching. "For a bishop must be blameless... holding fast (forth) the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Tit.1:8-9).

2. *How is the word of God the Spirit's sword?* Paul says the sword, which is the word of God, is the sword of the Spirit. Thus, the phrases "the sword of the Spirit" and "the word of God" are synonymous. It's the word (or sword) that is "of" or "from" the Spirit. It's uniquely the Spirit's word. "What the Apostle is saying is this: 'Take up the sword which the Spirit Himself provides for you, that is to say, the Word of God; in other words the Scriptures, the Bible'" (MLJ).¹⁰ "It is the Holy Spirit alone that enables us to use this Word properly. It is one thing to know the contents of this Book; it is a very different thing to

⁷ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 280-281

⁸ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 3:150

⁹ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 17:132

¹⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:325

know how to use it aright. The Holy Spirit alone can enable us to do so" (MLJ).¹¹ Thus, while Scripture has been written, it remains a spiritual sword. "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit (spiritual), and they are life" (Jn.6:63). "This sword is spiritual and so opposed to a material sword made of metal. 'The weapons of our warfare are not carnal' (2Cor.10:4), *not carnal* means it is spiritual. Were it not spiritual it could not possibly pierce so deep; it could not discern the thoughts of the heart (Heb.4:12). Neither could it anyway annoy the Devil, who is not flesh and blood but a spirit" (Gouge).¹² The Spirit inspired, explains, and applies the word.

Behold God's goodness and wisdom in furnishing us with such a weapon as our greatest enemies, even they who are not flesh and blood, so dread. And that not without cause, because it has the power to confound them. So if we are wise, skillful, and careful in using it we need not fear their fear nor be troubled. But we shall rather strike dread and terror into them.¹³

(1) He inspired it. "This is a weapon which His hand alone formed and fashioned; it came not out of any creature's forge" (Gurnall).¹⁴ "Scripture comes altogether from Him. It is the Spirit who inspired the men who wrote it; so it is 'the sword of the Spirit' in that sense" (MLJ).¹⁵ "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2Pet.1:20-21). Scripture did not originate with man but with God. "He produced it. He gave chosen men the revelation; He guided them in the recording of the revelation. So the Bible is not a mere human document, a human word. It is indeed God's own out-breathed Word. It was breathed into these men and they wrote it" (MLJ).¹⁶

God's Word was brought into being preeminently by the special ministry of God's Spirit. God's Word is the word of man in the sense that it did not come through mindless robots. Scripture bears the unmistakable and undeniable imprint of man. Each book of the Bible betrays the stylistic and even grammatical peculiarities of its author. But God's Word did not originate with man: 'Prophecy never came by the will of man.' God's Word originated in God: 'But holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit' (2Pet.1:21). Foundationally and fundamentally, the Holy Spirit is the primary author of Holy Scripture.¹⁷

(2) He explains it. "The Spirit is the only true interpreter of the word. The Scriptures must be read, and can be understood, by that Spirit alone by whom they were made. He that made the lock can alone help us to a key that will fit its wards and open its fence" (Gurnall).¹⁸ "We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1Cor.2:12). "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1Cor.2:14). "It is the Spirit alone who enables us to understand and to receive this Word. Everything connected with this Word is always the result of an operation of the Spirit from beginning to end. Truth is 'spiritually dis-

¹¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:328

¹² William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 281

¹³ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 281

¹⁴ Willaim Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:219

¹⁵ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:326

¹⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:326-327

¹⁷ Ian Hamilton, *Ephesians*, 282

¹⁸ Willaim Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:219

cerned.' It must be interpreted in a spiritual manner. And nothing and no one can enable us to do that apart from the Spirit of God Himself" (MLJ).¹⁹

(3) He applies it. "It is only the Spirit of God can give the word its efficacy and power in the soul. It is His office to seal the soul with the impress of things believed. Except He lays His weight on the truths we read and hear, to apply them close, and as it were cut the very image in our minds and hearts, they leave no more impression than a seal set upon a stone or rock would do" (Gurnall).²⁰ "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much conviction" (1Thess.1:5).

The written word, or if you will, the Scripture, is the sword by which the Spirit of God enables His saints to overcome all their enemies. The Spirit will do nothing for them without the word, and they can do nothing to purpose without Him. The word is the sword, and the Spirit of Christ the arm which wields it in for the saints. All the great conquests which Christ and His saints achieve in the world are got with this sword. When Christ comes forth against His enemies, this sword is girded on His thigh, 'Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty' (Ps.45:3). His victory over them too is ascribed to it, verse 4, 'And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth'—that is, the word of truth. We find in, Rev. 1:6, Christ holding 'seven stars in His right hand,' intimating the choice care He hath over His people, particularly the ministers, who are more shot at than any other. And how doth He protect them, but by this 'sharp two-edged sword coming out of His mouth?' This is the great privilege which the poorest believer in the church hath by the covenant of grace.²¹

The relationship between the Spirit and the Word is an all-important one. Failure to realize this has accounted for many troubles in the long history of the Christian Church. People always tend to put the emphasis exclusively on one side or the other. The moment you separate the Spirit and the Word you are in trouble. There are some who say that having the illumination of the Spirit you do not need the Word at all. But then there is the other tendency, at the other extreme, to discount the Spirit, and to say that as long as we have the open Bible and the Word before us, and as long as we know it in some mechanical sense, we need nothing further. So the Spirit is forgotten, and you may have a dead orthodoxy, or a mere intellectual academic knowledge of the Scriptures, which really does not enable one to fight the battle against the devil and the principalities and the powers. The Spirit and the Word must be kept together always. The Spirit has provided for us the instruction found in the Word, but we cannot use it without Him.²²

3. *How is the sword of the Spirit taken up and used?* As with the other pieces of armor, the sword of the Spirit must be taken up and used. "The benefit of using this sword well is admirable. For there is no error in judgment but may be refuted, no corruption in life but may be redressed hereby. Neither is there any true sound doctrine but may be proved and maintained against all gainsayers, or any virtue and duty but may be warranted by it, and we thereby directed also in the performance thereof" (Gouge).²³

¹⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:327-328

²⁰ Willaim Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:220

²¹ Willaim Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:220

²² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:328-329

²³ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 284

God's Word is to the blind a light, to those who wander a guide, to those who are in distress a comfort, to those who doubt a counselor, and to the unlearned a teacher. And what is it not? It is all things to all men. O excellent instrument! How greatly are we bound to God for it? What account are we to make of it? How expert ought we to be in it? Whoever carelessly neglect it or lightly esteems it is most ungrateful to God, who in wisdom and goodness has provided it for him, and most injurious to himself in losing the use and benefit of such a weapon.²⁴

(1) Knowledge. An expanding heart knowledge of Scripture is essential to taking up and using the sword of the Spirit. "In all things that we do we must by the Word understand and know what God says, what is His good will, what is pleasing and acceptable to Him. For by the holy Scriptures only and alone we may attain to the knowledge of the whole will of God. Without the knowledge of God's truth we shall be always wavering and never be established in any truth, whether it concerns doctrine or practice; nor yet with courage will we resist any contrary corruption" (Gouge).²⁵ "The sword is provided for us; we have an open Bible. But we must know it. We must know the whole of it. It is not sufficient merely to learn certain proof texts; you must know your whole Scripture. We must be soaked in Scripture, we must have it at our finger-tips as it were, so that when we are tempted, the appropriate Word comes to us" (MLJ).²⁶

William Gouge in his book *The Whole Armor of God*, suggested three ways "to attain knowledge by the Word." (a) "Read the Word diligently and frequently. Give attendance thereunto, and that not only with others but also alone with yourself that you may better observe it. Have set times for this end and be constant in observing them" (Gouge).²⁷ "Our Savior bids us 'search the Scriptures' (Jn.5:39). We must not read these holy lines carelessly as if they did not concern us, or run over them hastily, as Israel ate the Passover in haste, but peruse them with reverence and seriousness. The noble Bereans did search the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11)" (Watson).²⁸ (b) "Mediate on what you have read. Meditation is a special means to help both understanding and memory. A thing at first reading is not so well conceived as when it is seriously pondered. This serious pondering makes a deep impression of it in our memories" (Gouge).²⁹ "Meditation may be described as a holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves" (Watson).³⁰ Thomas Watson then said "in mediation there are two things: first, meditation necessitates a Christian's retiring of himself, a locking himself up from the world. Meditation is a work which cannot be done in a crowd. Secondly, it is a serious thinking upon God. It is not a few transient thoughts that are quickly gone, but a fixing and staying of the mind upon heavenly objects" (Watson).³¹ (c) "Attend on the preaching of God's Word and bring thereunto a mind willing to learn. This is God's ordinance in the use thereof we may well wait and depend upon God for His blessing and that to enlighten our understanding, to work upon our affections, and to teach us how to apply it" (Gouge).³²

²⁴ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 285-286

²⁵ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 281-282

²⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:335

²⁷ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 282

²⁸ Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 12

²⁹ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 282

³⁰ Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 23

³¹ Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 23

³² William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 282

How is the Word made effectual to salvation? A. The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.³³

(2) Wisdom. By "wisdom" is meant the ability to rightly use and apply Scripture. A wise soldier is a skillful swordman. "Wisdom teaches us rightly to apply the Word, and that both in the true sense and meaning of that particular place we allege and also according to the present matter for which it is alleged" (Gouge).³⁴ "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2Tim.2:15). "Ask for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to wield the sword of Scripture against Satan. The Spirit is the ultimate author and interpreter of God's word, so seek His wisdom. The Spirit delights to open our minds to His word. He will teach us how to use it as a sword against Satan" (Beeke).³⁵

If we miss the meaning of the place, it is not the Word of God but a conceit of our own brain. We pervert the Scripture to our own destruction. A potion mistakenly applied often kills the patient. Even so, if the terrors of the law are urged to a wounded conscience, they may drive a man to utter despair. Or if the sweet promises of the gospel are applied to profane libertines they may make them highly and intolerably presume. Nothing can be more pernicious than the Word wrongly applied. It is like Saul's sword that never returned empty from the blood of the slain. When it was held out against the enemies it destroyed them; when Saul himself fell upon it, it ran into his own bowels and killed him. So the Word well used against our spiritual enemies destroys them. If we fall on it ourselves it may be the death of our souls; for it is either the savor of death or the savor of life. It is needful then that unto knowledge wisdom is added that we may rightly apply it.

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(3) Faith. Faith could be likened to the hands that wield the sword. Without it the word will never be effective. "*For the gospel is the power of God to everyone who believes* (Rom.1:16). All knowledge and wisdom without it is in vain. The Word the Jews heard did not profit them because it was not mixed with faith in those who hear it. Eve understood God's Word well enough and she had wisdom enough well to apply it; but because she did not steadfastly believe it, but was brought to doubt, she lost the use of this sword and her enemy came in upon her and killed her" (Gouge).³⁷

³³ Larger Catechism, Q.155

³⁴ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 282

³⁵ Joel Beeke, *Striving Against Satan*, 55

³⁶ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 282-283

³⁷ William Gouge, *The Whole Armor of God*, 283