

The Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God

The sixth piece of armor Paul mentions in Ephesians 6 is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." How does a Roman soldier's sword help us understand how to use the Bible to win our spiritual battles?

The Bible, in Judges 7, records the story of Gideon and his 300 men:

Gideon and 32,000 Israelite troops gathered near the Midianite camp, but they were severely outnumbered by their 135,000 oppressors. Gideon was ready to do battle, but God had other plans. He was about to show His people just how powerful a God He was.

God told Gideon to let anyone who was afraid of the upcoming battle return home. Twenty-two thousand men took the opportunity to leave their ranks, leaving only 10,000 remaining. But God was looking for a smaller group still.

God then told Gideon to have the remainder drink from the spring, and all those who lapped the water like a dog would remain, while the rest were sent home. Finally, with only 300 men, Gideon and his little army surrounded the Midianites. On signal they blew trumpets, broke the pitchers covering their torches and shouted, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" (Judges 7:20).

Then the unthinkable happened. These 300 men—holding not swords, but torches and trumpets—routed the entire Midianite camp. Scripture records that God "set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp" (Judges 7:22). So before the Israelites even had a chance to reach for swords, God plunged the enemy camp into chaos and wild defeat. The Israelites were delivered from their foes by a miracle.

This famous story illustrates an invaluable lesson: It is God who gives the victory. His sword is what will deliver us.

Taking the Sword

Throughout the world, there are certain individuals—real and fictional—whose identity remains almost inseparable from their weapon of choice.

From England, there is King Arthur and his sword, Excalibur. From the Middle East, Ali and his scimitar, Zulfiqar. From Spain, El Cid and his long sword, Tizona. From Scotland, William Wallace and his unnamed claymore.

The sword is the only item listed by Paul that serves in an offensive capacity. Even if we have all the rest of the armor equipped perfectly, without our sword, we amount to little more than heavily armored moving targets.

Perhaps this is why we remember the name of King Arthur's sword and not, for example, his footwear. While the rest of the armor is undoubtedly vital, it is the sword and only the sword that allows us to attack—to directly do the work that needs to be done.

What purpose did the sword serve in the Roman army?

The Roman *gladius* has become known as "the sword that conquered the world." Adapted from a Spanish design, the prowess of the *gladius* in close range combat made it a fearsome tool in the hand of a skilled Roman warrior. When sharpened, its dual edges wreaked havoc on unarmored foes, while its tapered point could pierce through even heavy metal armor.

A Roman infantryman would go into battle armed with more than just his *gladius*. He would also have a dagger (*pugio*), several one-time use spears (*pila*) and lead-weighted darts (*plumbatae*), but the sword was his main means of attack. The sword is the only weapon Paul lists as part of the Christian arsenal.

What is the Word of God?

Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

God's Word—the Holy Bible—illuminates. It reveals to us the good and the bad, the wise and the unwise. It is the ultimate tool in learning how to live the best possible life, free from the restraints of stumbling in darkness.

John 17:17

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.

God's Word is truth, plain and simple. We can have perfect confidence in the fact that His words are accurate, true and unerring. When followed, they guide us without fail in the paths that we need to walk.

We can be destroyed by lack of the knowledge of God (Hosea 4:6), but we will be blessed if we hear and keep the Word of God (Luke 11:28). And the knowledge is not just for us. We are to be ready to answer others who ask us (1 Peter 3:15).

Why a sword?

Hebrews 4:12

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.

The all-powerful sword of the living God is able to cut through every defense our enemy can raise—down to the very division of bone and marrow. When wielded by a servant of God, nothing can withstand its ability to cut straight to the core of a matter and uncover the truth. As soldiers in God's army, it is our responsibility and duty to use His Word to discern the truth and then follow it. When God's Word shows us something wrong in ourselves, we can use this spiritual weapon to "surgically" remove the offending thoughts and actions (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Unlike all other pieces of the armor of God, which are solely defensive, the sword is uniquely suited for both defensive and offensive roles. A solid defense is invaluable, but the sword is the only way we can complete the work we have been given to do.

Notice that Jesus Christ used the Bible to counter Satan's attacks (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). We must also learn to live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Swords are used for close combat, not long-range warfare. Could this imply the nature of the battle a Christian fights?

Acts 14:22

...strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

James 1:2-4

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

The Romans relied in part on assailing their enemy from a distance with javelins and darts, but God does not give us that option as Christian soldiers. If we were able to fight our battles from a distance, we would never experience an actual trial.

At first glance, that might not seem like such a bad thing. But when we stop to consider that without trials, there is no growth, and without growth, we will not be able to enter God's Kingdom, we see that trials, however uncomfortable, are essential in our journeys as Christians. After all, the promises of Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26 and 3:5, 12 and 21 are given "to him who overcomes" and not "to him who remains as he is."

Paul only lists one weapon because we only need one weapon: There is no enemy the Word of God, coupled with His Spirit, cannot defeat. And so, armed only with our sword, we step out to fight our enemies head-on. The struggle is real. It is immediate, and it is in front of us. Our future in God's Kingdom is on the line, and we take up the battle so that we may hold fast to the future He has promised us.

What promises can we stand on?

Matthew 24:13

But he who endures to the end shall be saved.

Romans 8:31

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

We fight knowing the end of the story. Two of the many powerful and sure promises in God's Word tell us that if we remain dedicated to God and His Word, we *will* make it to the end, and we *will* be saved. There is no doubt in this statement. God's promises are as sure as the one He told Isaiah: "Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it" (Isaiah 46:11).

So take up your sword. The battle is ours.

THE EXAMPLES OF THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT: Matt 4: 1-11

There is no better example in Scripture of how to use the sword of the Spirit than Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness. Jesus turned back all three of Satan's temptations by using the Word of God.

It is important to notice what comes just before this incident. In Matthew 3 Jesus is validated as God's Son by the Father speaking from heaven when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Immediately, Satan tries to separate Jesus from that title. If Satan can lure Jesus into ignoring God's will, Jesus would have disqualified Himself to be the redeemer of mankind. The second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) would have failed just as the first Adam did.

It is also important to note that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where the confrontation with Satan would take place. It was necessary for Jesus to pass this test before He began His public ministry: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1).

In this encounter with Jesus, Satan used the three basic temptations that he always uses when tempting the people of God: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. These are the three ways he lured Adam and Eve into ignoring the will of God for their lives, choices which plunged the entire human race into sin: the fruit was pleasing to look at (eyes), it was good to eat (flesh), and it would make them like God (pride).

Temptation Number One: The Lust of the Flesh (Matthew 4:1-4)

Fasting for 40 days, Jesus was hungry when the devil came to Him. So Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread so he could relieve His hunger. Satan was saying, "If you are indeed the Son of God, there is no reason you should be hungry. Exercise your power and prerogative and create some bread for yourself. What could be wrong with that?"

The point of the temptation was to get Jesus to act independently of the Father, to do what He wanted instead of what the Father wanted for Him to work a miracle for His own good instead of for the glory of the Father. But Jesus came to earth to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45). He came to earth to do the Father's will, not His own (John 6:38). On the night of His arrest, Jesus could have called for "more than twelve legions of angels" to free Him from His captors, but He didn't—it wasn't the Father's will (Matthew 26:53). No faithful Son acts independently of His Father. Jesus would have negated His role as the Son if He had turned stones into bread to satisfy His hunger. The entire redemptive ministry of Jesus would have stopped before it ever got started if He had yielded to Satan's temptation.

Jesus answered Satan: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus pulled a sword from the armory of Deuteronomy to defeat this first of three temptations: the lust of the flesh.

Temptation Number Two: The Lust of the Eyes (Matthew 4:5-7)

Undeterred, Satan again appealed to Jesus' Sonship, taking Him to the 'pinnacle of the temple' in Jerusalem: "if You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down: and let the angels of heaven catch you before You hit the pavement below.

There was a rabbinic tradition in Jesus' time that when the Messiah came to deliver the Jews from their oppressors, He would descend from the pinnacle of the temple into the temple courts. So if Jesus jumped from the pinnacle and landed unhurt in the temple courts below, it would have proven that He was the Messiah, at least in terms of the rabbinic tradition believed by the Jews.

Since Jesus had refused to act independently of the Father in the first temptation, Satan tempted Him now to work in concert with the Father—let God's angels catch You: let God prove that You are His Son by protecting Your life. But this would have amounted to presumption on Jesus' part, a test for the Father. The Father had not told Jesus to jump off the temple, so it would have been presumptuous for Jesus to assume the Father would intervene to save Him.

So Jesus pulled another sword from the armory, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16: "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'" (Matthew 4:7). This was the temptation of the lust of the eyes—a chance for Jesus to show off in the eyes of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. There is an important lesson here: It is biblical to believe in miracles; it is not biblical to schedule them based on our desires.

It is also important to note that since Jesus rebuffed Satan with Scripture in the first temptation, Satan used Scripture in the second temptation (Psalms 91:11-12; Matthew 4:6). Satan knows the Bible and will twist it and take it out of context with us just as he did with Even in the Garden of Eden and with Jesus in the wilderness. It's another powerful reminder of why we need to know the Word of God so we, like Jesus, can recognize when it is being taken out of context by Satan for his purposes.

Temptation Number Three: The Pride of Life (Matthew 4:8-11)

The final of the three temptations was an appeal to Jesus' human pride—to become ruler of "all the kingdoms of the world" (verse 8). Satan showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world and said they could be His if He would just fall down and worship Satan.

Yes, Satan had a right to make such an offer since he is the ruler of this world (1 John 5:19). Not an absolute ruler, of course—he is a ruler on a short leash held by God. But the kingdoms of this world are under his sway and influence, and he was offering that influence to Jesus in exchange for Jesus worshipping him. In essence Satan was offering Jesus a shortcut to becoming ruler of the world. Why not setup Your kingdom now, Jesus? Why wait and go through the pain and suffering of the cross? I'll hand over the kingdoms of this world now and You can make them Your own. Satan was trying to keep Jesus from going to the cross and accomplishing the redemption of mankind. If he could keep that from happening, God's plan of redemption would be foiled.

Again Jesus went to the armory and pulled out a sword from Matthew 4:10: "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (verse 10). And with that third and final answer, "the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him" (verse 11).

This event in Jesus' life is a perfect illustration of James 4:7: "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." We get a textbook example for Jesus Himself on how to wield the sword of the Spirit and cause the devil to flee. The Holy Spirit brings to our mind a portion of Scripture that fits exactly the circumstance we are in. That is a teaching that we use to defeat the devil's temptation when we stand firmly on it. That is the power of God's living and active Word in the spiritual warfare.

THE EFFECT OF THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

There are three effects of the sword of the Spirit on our life: the dynamic of preaching, the discipline of reading, and the diligence of memorization.

This Truth Explains the Dynamic of Preaching

When preachers proclaim the truths of the Word of God, the living and active swords of the Spirit are flung from the pulpit toward those who are listening. It's a dangerous thing to sit under the preaching and teaching of the Word of God if you are not a Christian or a Christian living in sin who refuses to get right with God. Eventually, one of those swords is going to prick your heart and you are going to have to deal with the truth.

I met a man years ago who told me an amazing story. He had messed up every area of his life and was without hope—he had decided to take his own life to put an end to his misery. He was going to run his truck into a tree and end it all. Just as he was about to put his truck in gear, my voice came over his radio saying, "Some of you out there may be thinking about taking your own life. Don't do it. God loves you and sent Jesus Christ to be your Savior. God has a plan for your life." That truth shocked the man so that he didn't go through with his plan. He accepted Christ, got involved with a church and began growing in the Lord.

That was a truth of God that penetrated that man's heart and brought about an immediate result. That's how powerful the sword of the Spirit is in our life and in spiritual warfare.

This Truth Encourages the Discipline of Reading the Bible Through Systematically.

How do you think Jesus knew what to say to Satan when He was tempted in the wilderness? Because He knew the book of Deuteronomy from start to finish. He knew the progression of the content—what Moses wrote and why. It shows that the Old Testament books we tend not to read as often are full of swords of the Spirit! And that is an argument for reading the Bible systematically—that is, using a reading plan that covers all the books of the Bible instead of just our favorite books.

Remember: the whole Bible is the armory of God in which are stored the swords of the Spirit. But if we're not reading the whole Bible, we'll overlook some powerful swords to use against the enemy in spiritual warfare.

This Truth Exhorts Us to the Diligence of Memorizing Key Passages of God's Word

Finally, Jesus' experience—as well as that of the apostles—teaches us the necessity for committing the Word of God to memory. I don't think Jesus had a scroll of Deuteronomy in the wilderness in which He looked until He found the verses He needed to counter Satan's temptations. Instead, He knew those verses by heart; He had committed them to memory.

I have found that I am rarely tempted by Satan when I am reading my Bible. Rather, temptations come when I am away from the Word and forced to rely on the verses I have committed to memory so the Holy Spirit can bring those verses to our mind when we need them.

The truth of God is the sword of the Spirit—but only if it has become part of our life.