

August 18, 2013

Isaiah 55:9-13 / Hebrews 4:12-13 / Ephesians 6:10-17

The Weapons of our Warfare - The Sword of the Spirit

Out of all the pieces of armor mentioned in this passage, today we come to the one piece that is the most versatile. All the others are primarily defensive. They protected the soldier's body or vital organs from the injury of oncoming arrows, spears or swords.

Or as we saw with the military half-boot (or sandal), they helped him dig in and stand his ground.

Not so with the sword. Because the sword is BOTH an offensive and defensive weapon. It can be used offensively to cut, injure, or take the enemy down, and it can be used defensively to block or turn away the swing, slash or oncoming thrust of the enemies sword.

And it's different in one other way as well. Because the "sword" is also the only piece of armor listed here that really requires constant practice and intense conditioning. The other pieces one simply put on, or wore, or carried. But to use a sword with effectiveness the soldier needed to train frequently and keep himself in tip-top shape.

That's the point many people miss when they consider the sword. To use any sword effectively in battle (battles that often lasted hours on end in exhausting hand to hand combat) demanded that the soldier constantly practice, hone his skills and keep in excellent shape.

That's why Roman soldiers had weapons training for upwards of 1 to 2 hours EVERY MORNING with wooden swords and shields that were twice as heavy as the real ones! Recruits also had to march 20 miles every day, whether sunny, raining, or snowing, with at least 75 lbs. of equipment in less than 5 hours.

They were up at 5 a.m., ate shortly after, trained with the sword in the early morning, marched till noontime, then trained with spear and arrow in the afternoon.

They did not conquer so much of the then known world by being lazy, undisciplined, apathetic, and out of shape! They knew that when you are engaged in a battle (and the Christian life is one, contrary to what many people today think) you must train, and be disciplined, and hone your skills, and keep in shape (Gym/Bible?).

In that regard, Alexander Maclaren's critique of the church in his day could just as easily apply today. Writing in the mid-1800's he says: ***"There are in the Christian ranks, some soldiers who hands are too nerveless (or weak) or too full of worldly things (he says "trash") to grasp the sword which they have received, much less to strike home with it at any of the evils that are devastating their own lives or darkening the world. The feebleness of the Christian's 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 Christian grasps the sword of the Spirit."***

It's true. In fact, that brings us to the **FIRST** thing we come to in our text -- it's the first word of verse 17 -- the word, "take" or "take up," which applies not only to the helmet of salvation, but also to the sword of the Spirit.

Take it up! says Paul. God gives it to you, but you must grab onto it and lay hold of it tightly! You must take it in your hand, clench it in your fist, lift it up, and start using it! Because it's your primary offensive weapon in the battle for your soul -- the battle against sin, Satan, temptation, and evil. Because a soldier who goes into battle **WITHOUT HIS SWORD** cannot help but lose.

He may as well surrender from the very start, for he ceases to be a threat to the enemy. Take away a soldier's weapon in battle and the only one he is a danger to is himself.

You see, our strength in winning the battle against sin, and Satan, and temptation, depends so, so much on having a sword in our immediate possession, being trained in the use of it, exercising with it daily, and improving our knowledge of it and skills with it!

Which means we must read it, and study it, and most importantly apply what it says to our lives if we are to benefit from possessing it! He gives it to us, but we must "take it up" and "lay hold of it"!

In fact, as one who once had 113 separate verses of the Bible, as well as the books of Philippians, Philemon, and James entirely memorized (yes, it's true!) I can tell you from personal experience that the older I get the MORE I need to discipline myself to read and re-read it -- because it just doesn't stick there like it used to!

And I know it's hard folks. In our busy world with so many, many things competing for our attention and affections, it takes great determination to set aside the time we need to, to learn how to handle the Sword of the Spirit well.

But we really need to do it. For other than prayer, no other spiritual discipline will be as helpful to your standing firm in the faith, and growing in godliness, as your grasp of God's Word.

It is His sword (not ours) make no mistake about that. But as Paul says, we must lay hold of it and learn to use it well -- maybe even following the Roman soldiers routine of daily, morning, weapons training with our sword in hand. Surely Paul knew, and was thinking of that practice, intending that we do the same thing daily.

Otherwise, like the lazy, undisciplined soldier, we will lose the skills so necessary to keep on winning the battle against sin, and temptation, and heresy, and greed, and idolatry, and sensuality, and hedonism, and materialism, and worldliness, and sloth, and pride, and all the lies of the enemy.

The most strategically effective thing Satan can do if he wants to defeat you, is get you to neglect or go into battle WITHOUT your sword. It's to get you to neglect or see your sword (or training with it) as unimportant.

Then **SECONDLY**, I need to point out a fact hidden for most by the English translation of this text. It's the fact that the phrase, "word of God," here, does not refer to the Bible as a whole, but rather to specific parts of the Bible -- heard or read at specific times.

You see, there are essentially two words which are translated "word" used in the Greek New Testament. The first and most common is "logos." And out of the nearly 150 times that we find the term "word" translated in our English NT's, 135 are translations of the Greek word "logos," which generally speaking is the word used when the N.T. authors are referring to Scripture in general or the Word of God in all its entirety.

That's the case in Hebrews 4:12, or Acts 6:2 where Peter says, "**we should not neglect the word of God to wait on tables.**" Or again in v. 7 where Luke writes, "**And so the word of God spread.**"

"Logos" most frequently refers to the Bible or God's revelation as a whole. But that's not the word Paul uses here. Here he uses the far less common word "rhema," which is used only 15 times in the NT. And "rhema" tends to refer to a specific saying of God.

Thus, as **Ray Steadman** points out, "rhema" tends to refer to: ***"a passage or a verse that has special application to an immediate situation... Logos refers to the total utterance of God, the complete revelation of what God has said, but Rhema means a specific saying of God, a passage or a verse that has special application to an immediate situation. To use a modern term, it is the Word of God applied to experience, to our existence. The sword of the Spirit is the saying of God applied to a specific situation."***

Most everyone here has probably experienced this at one point or another in your life. You were in the midst of trial. You were confused. You were struggling or despairing and didn't know what to do. And then all of a sudden, as if you'd never seen it before (even though you had) one particular verse, or promise hits you with such power that it dispels your confusion, eradicates your doubts and confusion and sheds a whole new light on everything!

One of the more memorable times for me was back in 1989. I was in the midst of burn out, spiritually exhausted, and questioning my call to the ministry -- until I came across one profound very verse -- Isaiah 30:15. And as I read it that one verse infused my soul with strength and hope! I could feel it happening!

As one who had tried to make up for the 12 years I ran from God (nearly killing myself emotionally in the process and even bringing on a stomach ulcer in the process) it was so liberating to read these words: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength."

To this day I still find it hard to describe how that 1 verse struck me with such power, bringing healing to my body, marriage and family.

And if you've walked with the Lord for any amount of time, you can surely testify of other verses which God has used in a similar way in your life. With the guilt ridden yet sensually enslaved **ST. AUGUSTINE**, it was Rom. 13:13.

He was miserable, and sitting in a garden, when children began singing a song where the chorus line was, "*tolle lege*" ("take it up and read it"). Since the only book close by was a Bible, he picked it up and it fell open to this verse: ***"Not in orgies or drunkenness, not in sexual immorality or debauchery, not in strife or envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof."***

"Instantly," says Augustine, *"there was infused into my heart something like the light of full certainty and all doubt and gloom was gone."*

With **MARTIN LUTHER** in his quest to be righteous enough to be acceptable to God, it was the simple phrase from Rom. 1:17: ***"In the Gospel a righteousness FROM GOD has been revealed, for as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith."*** He realized from that one verse that the righteousness that saves is not a righteousness we produce, but the perfect righteousness of Christ which God mercifully credits to the one who believes in Jesus!

That one verse stuck him with such inner force, that he went on to write: *"Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself..."*

And with **CHARLES SPURGEON**, it was Isaiah 45:22. He had taken shelter from a snow storm in a small primitive Methodist Chapel where there were only 12-15 people. The minister didn't show up, so a very thin, poor, uneducated man stood up to preach. ***"He was obliged to***

stick to his text," says Spurgeon, "for the simple reason that he had little else to say. He did not even pronounce the words rightly. But it did not matter. The text was, "Look unto me and be saved all the ends of the earth."

Then, after relating the text to Christ and the need to look to Him in faith as the One who lived, and died, and rose, and ascended into heaven, and is now sitting at the Father's right hand, Spurgeon says, ***"he looked at me under the gallery and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, 'Young man, you look miserable.' Indeed I did," says Spurgeon, "but I wasn't used to such remarks about my personal appearance from the pulpit."***

"However, it was a good blow; struck right home. Then the man continued, 'and you always will be miserable -- miserable in this life and miserable in death -- if you don't obey my text. But if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.' Then lifting his hands he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could, 'Young man, look to Jesus Christ! Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live!"

"At once," says Spurgeon, "I saw the way of salvation.... I had been waiting to do fifty things (that is, to earn his salvation), but when I heard that word "look" what a charming word it seemed to me! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun, and could have risen that instant and sung with the most enthusiastic of them about the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh that somebody had told me this before."

THAT, my friends, is what the author of Hebrews was speaking of when he said: ***"The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two edged sword, cutting to the dividing of the soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and judging the thoughts and intents of the heart."***

You see, the read or spoken word of God acts like a sword in the hands of the Spirit that cuts deep, and wounds in order to heal! It acts like a knife in the hand of a parent or doctor, lancing the pussy abscess on a child's body in order to let the poison drain out!

As Isaiah 30:26 says: ***"The LORD will bind up the bruises of His people, and heal the wounds He inflicted."***

He doesn't use the whole Bible, but a "rhema" (a word, a verse, or a promise) that cuts deep into our soul, and strikes a nerve so deep that we cannot ignore it, or resist it, or get it out of our minds, or shake it from our consciousness until it has completed the work God intended it to carry out in our soul!

He says as much in Is. 55:10-11: ***"As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth, and making it flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word (and interestingly the word used here in the Greek translation of the OT is rhema and not logos -- meaning a specific word or command) that goes forth from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."***

When the Spirit uses a specific "rhema" like a sword, cutting deep into the sin-sick soul it WILL DO what God sent it forth to do!

With **AUGUSTINE** God "sent forth" Rom. 13:13 as a divinely spoken command to cease immediately from his drunken, hedonistic and sensual ways.

With **LUTHER** God "sent forth" Rom. 1:17 that he might see that we are saved by the righteousness of Jesus, by faith, and not any flawed righteousness we attempt to produce!

And with **SPURGEON**, God "sent forth" Is. 45:22 commanding him to simply look unto Christ and be saved by faith alone (and not to his own works). To forget the 50 things he'd been trying to do to earn salvation and simply trust in Jesus to save him.

Which brings us to the only **CONCLUSION** we can draw from this metaphor of the word of God as the soldier's sword: If you want to stand your ground or win the battle against "the world, the flesh, and the devil," "the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life," or against "every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" -- you must somehow have the divinely given truths of Scripture in your possession and know how to use them. Because Satan is the master of the ambush. He usually attacks when we least expect it.

You must have your sword in its sheath, ready to be pulled out at any time, that it might do its cutting work in you or others. A cutting or wounding that is intended to bring healing (Is. 30:26). For in a battle (and you are in one daily) you must NEVER be caught without your SWORD!

When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, His first line of defense was Scripture. Three times Satan tempted Him and all three times He fought off the temptation with Scripture.

In the same way, you should have it with you at all times -- in your mind, or in your pocket. And it's easier today than ever before! For even if you're not good at memorizing it (or don't retain things well -- a growing problem in a society that has immediate access to nearly any information) you can download the entire thing (in multiple versions with study helps!) onto your iPhone or iDevice -- for easy access.

Because I can't stress it earnestly enough: You will NEVER be able to stand your ground when attacked, or win the battle against all Satan's schemes, unless you have your sword with you, know how to use it, and are practiced with it.

That's why we need to do daily, morning, "weapons training." Quick access to God's truth is good. But internalized truth that is part of you is better!

And that's what training in the word does. It guards the heart and prepares us for battle. As the Psalmist declares: ***"I have hidden YOUR word in MY heart that I might not sin against you."***