

Spiritual Warfare Sermon 12: Ephesians 6:17: The Sword of the Spirit: Part One

OUTLINE

The sword that gives life

The sword that transforms character

INTRODUCTION

In Pilgrim's Progress in the Valley of Humiliation on Christian's journey to the Heavenly City he encounters Apollyon, i.e. the devil. Here is how it went:

'Apollyon. Whence come you, and whither are you bound?

Chr. I am come from the city of Destruction, which is the place of all evil, and am going to the City of Zion.

Apol. By this I perceive thou art one of my subjects; for all that country is mine, and I am the prince and god of it. How is it, then, that thou hast run away from thy king? Were it not that I hope thou mayest do me more service, I would strike thee now at one blow to the ground.

Chr. I was born indeed in your dominions; but your service was hard, and your wages such as a man could not live on, for the wages of sin is death;

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;" Romans 3:23

therefore, when I was come to years, I did as other prudent persons do, look out, if perhaps I might mend myself.

Apol. There is no prince that will thus lightly lose his subjects; neither will I as yet lose thee. But since thou complainest of thy service and wages, be content to go back; what our country will afford I do here promise to give thee....

Christian resisted him and warned him....

'Apol. Then APOLLYON straddled quite over the whole breadth of the way, and said, "I am void of fear in this matter: prepare thyself to die! for I swear by my infernal den that thou shalt go no farther; here will I spill thy soul." And with that he threw a flaming dart at his breast; but CHRISTIAN had a shield in his hand, with which he caught it, and so prevented the danger of that. Then did CHRISTIAN draw, for he saw 't was time to bestir him; and APOLLYON as fast made at him, throwing darts as thick as hail; by the which, notwithstanding all that CHRISTIAN could do to avoid it, APOLLYON wounded him in his head, his hand, and foot. This made CHRISTIAN give a little back; APOLLYON therefore followed his work furiously, and CHRISTIAN again took courage, and resisted as manfully as he could. This sore combat lasted for above half a day, even till CHRISTIAN was almost quite spent. For you must know that CHRISTIAN, by reason of his wounds, grew weaker and weaker.

Then APOLLYON, espying his opportunity, began to gather up close to CHRISTIAN, and wrestling with him, gave him a dreadful fall: and with that, CHRISTIAN'S sword flew out of his hand.

Then said APOLLYON, "I am sure of thee now"; and with that he had almost pressed him to death, so that CHRISTIAN began to despair of life. But as God would have it, while APOLLYON was fetching his last blow, thereby to make a full end of this good man, CHRISTIAN nimbly reached out his hand for his sword, and caught it, saying, "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy; when I fall, I shall arise";

"Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD *shall be* a light unto me." Micah 7:8

and with that, gave him a deadly thrust, which made him give back, as one that had received his mortal wound. CHRISTIAN perceiving that, made at him again, saying, "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through him that loved us".

"Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." Romans 8:37

And with that, APOLLYON spread forth his dragon's wings, and sped him away,
"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." James 4:7
that CHRISTIAN for a season saw him no more.'

Here we see a wonderful picture of the Christian engaged in battle and how by the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, the Christian is able to resist the devil and not be destroyed in the valley of humiliation.

This is the next piece of armour to which Paul turns our attention in Eph. 6:17, 'and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.' It has often been pointed out that this next piece of the armour is offensive as well as defensive, and that with the Word of God we not only ward off the devil's attacks but do damage to his kingdom. Today as we look at the sword we want to see that God's word is a sword that gives life, transforms character.

The sword that gives life

As we begin looking at this next piece of armour let us make two observations. Firstly, the sword is the sword of the Spirit. In other words, the effectiveness and power of the sword is not dependent upon the flesh but the power of God. It is not the sword of dependence upon human effort, it is not the sword of psychology, it is not the sword of self-esteem and self-help, the power of the sword is the Spirit. Secondly, the sword itself is interpreted for us so that we do not need to guess or get inventive; it is the Word of God. That about which we can say, 'Thus says the Lord,' or, 'it is written.'

The thing against which the devil cannot stand is the word of God. It is the thing which he hates and seeks to hinder. We see this in the parable of the sower. When the sower scatters seed, the devil comes and steals that word away. Or when we see Paul going from town to town, he complains of a messenger from satan who will not stop trying to hamper him. The devil hates the word and seeks to prevent the word from going out because the Spirit causes sinners to believe and be born again when they hear the word and they are delivered from his kingdom. He wants to do away with bibles and so has been behind the burning of bibles and books that have biblical teaching. He wants to do away with correct interpretation so he infiltrated the bible colleges with liberalism and philosophy and exalted human reason above the clear teachings of the bible. He wants to stop expository preaching in churches so preaching has been replaced with drama, poem recitals, short homilies, skits, movie snippets, etc. He wants you to stop reading good books about the bible and fills up Christian book shops with fluff. He wants you to stop reading your bible and distracts you.

The bible is the sword of the Spirit, be it the preached word, the read word, the heard word, God blesses His truth and uses it to set the captive free. In particular God uses His word to raise the spiritually dead. We are born dead in sin, this does not mean that we are walking around like Zombies but that when it comes to spiritual things we are dead. We default to rejecting God, His laws and thinking in terms of His reality and purpose for our lives. And when we are confronted with the truth there is a natural resistance in our hearts that seeks to suppress it. It contradicts our sinfulness and we want to rage against it. It accuses us so we want to silence it; it teaches things about us that would really make us living a self-pleasing life impossible; it contradicts the self-ruling law of our lives and tells us that God is God not us; it insults our pride and calls for us to trust in a Saviour who outwardly appears

weak and to say we need Him because we are helpless. So Paul tells us that that natural man cannot grasp or agree with the Gospel, that it is foolishness to him. This is why the bare word is useless unless it is attended by the Spirit. The devil can quote the bible but apart from the Spirit it has no power, but if a feeble, uneducated person faithfully declares the gospel and the Spirit blesses it, it is the means by which the dead are raised, the blind see, the deaf hear and the sick healed.

Listen to how the bible talks about the word being the instrument to give us life:
James 1:18, 'Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.'
1 Pet. 1:23, 'since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.'

It is this confidence in the word of God as the sword of the Spirit that has driven Christians in the past to insist that the bible be translated into the mother tongue of the people. John Foxe reports an argument between Wycliffe and a clergyman over whose law is supreme. The clergyman stated, 'We had better be without God's laws than the Pope's.' Tyndale responded: "I defy the Pope, and all his laws; and if God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!" Wycliffe's translation largely influenced the KJV and this in turn set England alight for God.

It is our confidence in the Bible as the sword of the Spirit which shapes how we do church. Because we are benefitted by the Spirit by means of the word the word is central to all that we do. We sing the word, pray the word, observe the visible word, hear the word, read the word all in order to do the word. We have long expository sermons looking at every word of a text, and we declare the message of Jesus as our only hope for salvation from sin, and salvation by faith in Him, as the heart of the word.

This should be your confidence when you have opportunity to share with others. Quote the bible, read portions of Scripture to them that clearly teach that we are all helplessly sinful and Jesus Christ is our only hope for salvation. God loves to bless His word, it is His chosen means of working, the Spirit uses it as a sword to convict the conscience of sin, to convince of the sufficiency of Christ and to assure that God's promises of life are true. This was Paul's method, Acts 17:1-2, 'Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.'
2 Cor. 2:14-17, 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.'

And it was Jesus method as well, Luke 10:25-26, 'And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"'

God gives us this assurance, Is. 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.'

The word that transforms

By the word the Spirit not only brings the dead to life but transforms the living. Jesus prayed, 'sanctify them by your truth, your word is truth.' The Spirit not only applies the victory and resurrection power of Christ to the dead hearts of unbelievers, but He also brings the scalpel to bear upon the remaining indwelling sin in the believer. This is vital to understand for spiritual warfare. The devil always has a launching ground against us within our own hearts because of indwelling sin. But God wants to begin the work of glorification early by the internal change of our character and the production of the heavenly fruit of the Spirit. Jesus reveals to us that this happens by means of the word.

The bible reveals to us that spiritual growth takes place when we have our minds renewed according to God's will, Rom. 12:2, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.' Col. 3:10, 'and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.' We find this knowledge of God's image and will in the Word, that is why Jesus prayed that we would be sanctified by it. Do you want to overcome the sin within you? Do you want to remove those places from which satan launches an attack? Then we must apply the word to ourselves.

Let me recommend to you the Puritan method of meditation upon Scripture. Psalm 1 describes the man whose life is characterised as being rooted next to a river and never running dry, a life that always brings forth its fruit and prospers and all this because he meditates upon God's word day and night. The Puritans well understood that the sword of the Spirit is the word and the more you want the Spirit to work in you, you do this by letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly. The word 'meditate' means to mutter, in other words preaching it to yourself. It is not the mystical meditation techniques borrowed from Catholic mystics taught by Richard Foster, but a mind sunk into the text that it might have its full effect in us.

Let me give you a short overview of the Puritan method in four parts: Preparation, Guidelines, Subjects, and Benefits.

In preparation for meditation the Puritans encouraged the proper heart preparation. One cannot meditate upon the word cold or without such preparation. Things such as putting out of your mind the urgent, the agitations, the things that would clutter your thinking. Before meditating confess your sins. Try and stir your heart up to spiritual things by going over some verses already memorised. Come to it with a sense of seriousness, and not with a casual attitude remembering the greatness of God. Find a time and place where you will not be interrupted. Even adopt a body posture that will encourage devotion, not sleep, or sloth.

Guidelines for the meditation itself include.

Praying for aid.

Read the Bible and choose a verse or doctrine to meditate on. When new to meditation choose easy topics.

Choose a verse or topic that is relevant to your present position. So, "If your conscience troubles you, meditate on God's promises to give grace to the penitent. If you're financially afflicted, meditate on God's wonderful providences to those in need" (Beeke, p15)

Memorise the verse.

Think about what the rest of the Bible says about your topic of meditation. Do not go beyond what Scripture says in your meditations.

When approaching a subject dissect it. Think of its name, its causes, qualities, fruits, effects. Think of illustrations, and opposites. Here's an example from Calamy. If you would meditate on the subject of sin, "Begin with the description of sin; proceed to the distribution of sin; consider the original and cause of sin, the cursed fruits and effects of sin, the adjuncts and properties of sin in general and of personal sin in particular, the opposite of sin, grace, the metaphors of sin, the titles given to sin, [and] all that the Scripture saith concerning sin.." (Beeke, p15).

Don't be bound by method

Keep a tight reign on your mind

Stir your emotions by preaching to yourself

Bring your applications to God as prayers

Believe that God will hear you

Move to resolutions

Conclude with prayers of thanksgiving and psalm singing.

Regarding topics. The Puritans favoured meditating upon doctrines and subjects from the various texts, and here is a list of suggested topics.

"fame and greatness, ignorance, depravity, holy living, gossip, evil companions, God's promises, love of the world, contentment, hypocrisy, happiness, love of the world, companions, heaven and earth, work and pain, riches, heaven and hell, death, affliction, godly warfare, sin, success, growing in grace, pride, hatred of sin, prejudice, covetousness, prayer, love, blasphemy, nobility, prayer, temptation, the use of means, worship, happiness, obedience, repentance, ambition, conceit, the shortness of life, self examination, adversity, affliction, faith and philosophy, pleasure, sin, faithful friends, schism and truth, grief and worry, fear, the heathen and the Christian, the light of the eye, the mind and the heart, heartfelt religion, hurting ourselves, the heart and the tongue, the use of time, cares, providence, love, displeasure, friendship, bargain hunting, reproof, envy, worldly pleasures, following good examples, time, enjoyment, good works, fruitfulness, foolishness, doing good, hermitage, a happy life, heavenly correction, heavenly hunger, repentance, spiritual warfare, strength in trials, heavenly-mindedness, humility, death, purpose in life, good from evil, madness, and the practice of meditation itself." (Beeke, p20).

Meditation was felt to be the best preparation and response to preaching. "Richard Baxter wrote, "Why so much preaching is lost among us, and professors can run from sermon to sermon, and are never weary of hearing or reading, and yet have such languishing, starved souls, I know no truer or greater cause than their ignorance and unconscionable neglect of meditation.. Some hearers have spiritual anorexia, Baxter said, for "they have neither appetite nor digestion," but others have spiritual bulimia, "they have appetite, but no digestion." (Beeke, p21-22). The Puritans encouraged the listeners to take sermon notes and use them for meditation. And this was thought to be one of the highest uses of the Lord's day.

"• Meditation helps us focus on the Triune God, to love and to enjoy Him in all His persons (1 John 4:8).intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically.

• Meditation helps increase knowledge of sacred truth. It takes the veil from the face of truth. (Prov. 4:2).

• Meditation is the 'nurse of wisdom,' for it promotes the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:8).

• Meditation enlarges our faith by helping us to trust the God of promises in all our spiritual troubles and the God of providence in all our outward troubles.

- Meditation augments one's affections. Watson called meditation 'the bellows of the affections.' He said, 'Meditation hatcheth good affections, as the hen her young ones by sitting on them; we light affection at this fire of meditation. (Ps. 39:3)'
- Meditation fosters repentance and reformation of life (Ps. 119:59; Ez. 36:31).
- Meditation is a great friend to memory.
- Meditation helps us view worship as a discipline to be cultivated. It makes us prefer God's house to our own.
- Meditation transfuses Scripture through the texture of the soul.
- Meditation is a great aid to prayer (Ps. 5:1). It tunes the instrument of prayer before prayer.
- Meditation helps us to hear and read the Word with real benefit. It makes the Word 'full of life and energy to our souls.' William Bates wrote, 'Hearing the word is like ingestion, and when we meditate upon the word that is digestion; and this digestion of the word by meditation produceth warm affections, zealous resolutions, and holy actions.'
- Meditation on the sacraments helps our 'graces to be better and stronger.' It helps faith, hope, love, humility, and numerous spiritual comforts thrive in the soul.
- Meditation stresses the heinousness of sin. It 'musters up all weapons, and gathers all forces of arguments for to presse our sins, and lay them heavy upon the heart,' wrote Fenner. Thomas Hooker said, 'Meditation sharpens the sting and strength of corruption, that it pierceth more prevailingly.' It is a 'strong antidote against sin' and 'a cure of covetousness.'
- Meditation enables us to 'discharge religious duties, because it conveys to the soul the lively sense and feeling of God's goodness; so the soul is encouraged to duty.'
- Meditation helps prevent vain and sinful thoughts (Jer. 4:14; Matt. 12:35). It helps wean us from this present evil age.
- Meditation provides inner resources on which to draw (Ps. 77:10-12), including direction for daily life (Prov. 6:21-22).
- Meditation helps us persevere in faith; it keeps our hearts 'savory and spiritual in the midst of all our outward and worldly employments,' wrote William Bridge.
- Meditation is a mighty weapon to ward off Satan and temptation (Ps. 119:11,15; 1 John 2:14).
- Meditation provides relief in afflictions (Is. 49:15-17; Heb. 12:5).
- Meditation helps us benefit others with our spiritual fellowship and counsel (Ps. 66:16; 77:12; 145:7).
- Meditation promotes gratitude for all the blessings showered upon us by God through His Son.
- Meditation glorifies God (Ps. 49:3)" (Beeke, p23-25).

Do you find meditation hard, boring, a waste of time? Let me end with one last quote on the importance of meditation, "To be weary of the thoughts of God is to degenerate into devils." (Beeke, p29). Meditation was the backbone of Puritan devotion, a mighty pillar supporting the amazing effectiveness of the Puritans in history. If we are to become effective in offensive warfare against the devil's works in the world and the sin in ourselves we must be faithful in proclamation and meditation.