Stand Strong taking up the sword of the Spirit

Text: Ephesians 6:17b

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 6:10-20

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 19, 213, 421, 117

Series: Spiritual Warfare (#6)

Theme: The Apostle Paul completes the list of the six items of the spiritual armour of God with a call to take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Proposition: Take up the Word of God, relying upon the Holy Spirit to rightly handle this powerful sword in order to repel the enemy.

**Introduction**

A sword is a weapon used in close combat with one or two sharp edges and/or a point for cutting or piecing the protective armour and then the flesh of an opponent. Swords have been used in armed conflict throughout much of human history. For example: the Israelites used swords in the conquest of the land of Canaan (e.g. Josh 6:21). David did not use the sword Saul gave him to fight Goliath, but having inflicted a mortal wound with a stone from his sling he then finished off Goliath with the giant man’s own sword (1 Sam 17:51). The large crowd who came to arrest Jesus were armed with swords and clubs. When one of those who was with Christ drew his sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, Jesus told him to put his sword back into its place (Matt 26:52).

The sword is also used symbolically in the Bible, for example: as a metaphor for war (e.g. Jer 14:15); as an instrument of divine justice (e.g. Eze 21:3); as a symbol for the power of the civil state (Rom 13:4).

Here in our text from Ephesians 6:17 the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God is the last of six pieces of spiritual equipment for the Christian who is called to ‘*put on the whole armour of God in order to stand against the schemes of the devil*’. This is the sixth and last sermon in a short series which focusses on spiritual warfare. We have already looked in detail at the previous five pieces of armour as the Apostle Paul has described them to the Ephesian Christians: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes for your feet, the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation.

This morning we are going to look firstly at the Word of God, then at the work of the Spirit with the Word and then finally at how we can effectively take up this powerful spiritual sword.

1. **The Word**

There’s an old saying which you may have heard: "*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me*". This is certainly true in a physical sense. Words themselves do not cause bruising or bleeding to the body, nor do they break bones. However our words are powerful – either to bring healing or harm. Proverbs 12:18 wisely says “*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing*”. Most of us can remember things others have said to us which have wounded us greatly and we still remember the pain long afterwards. Most of us can also recall upbuilding words of encouragement which have been kindly spoken to us when we felt like giving up, or words of comfort given when we are sad and grieving.

We are all familiar with words. We hear them, we can see them written and we can speak them. A word is a unit of language. It consists of one or more spoken sounds or the representation of these sounds in a written script. Just as an aside: how many words are there in the shortest sentence in the English language? The answer is probably ‘Go’. ‘Go’ is a verb which can be used in the imperative (command) mood and does not require a direct object. The subject is implied by the command – the sentence ‘Go’ means ‘You go!’.

Words (even small ones!) are powerful in conveying information, such as descriptions, ideas, concepts, and desires. This truth is expressed in the phrase (first written by English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839) "*The pen is mightier than the sword*" indicating that written language communicated can be a more effective tool for change than engaging in physical conflict.

‘The Word of God’ describes divine communication which is conveyed to mankind in the form of commandments, prophecies, promises, warnings, and encouragements. The Word of God is more powerful than any human words because it uniquely comes from the One who is all powerful. It is the word of life (Phil 2:16), of truth (Eph 1:13), of salvation (Acts 13:26), of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19) and of the cross (1 Cor 1:18).

When Paul writes to the Ephesians about the ‘*sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*’, he is referring to the written Word of God in the Scriptures. God’s Word is part of His divine personality and conveys his power, authority, truth, justice, love and grace. Jesus Himself is the Living Word who was with God in the beginning and has now become human flesh (John 1;1, 14). Like God Himself, His Word does not change (e.g. Isaiah 40:8) it always fulfils His purposes (e.g. Isaiah 55:11), it will always exist (Matt 24:35) and it is perfect (Ps 119:96). Theologians have described the ‘perfections’ of Scripture with the words: authority, necessity, inerrancy and perspicuity. Let’s look briefly at what these terms mean.

1. ‘**Authority**’ describes the supreme power of the Bible. The Protestant Reformation affirmed that Scripture is ‘*the only rule for faith and obedience*’ (WLCA3) in the Latin slogan ‘Sola Scriptura’ (‘Scripture alone’). This does not mean that other books or sources of information, like creeds and confessions for example, are of no benefit. However, the ultimate authority for everything that is true concerning God and what He requires of mankind is the Bible.
2. ‘**Necessity**’ expresses the essential nature of the Bible to provide true knowledge about the person and work of God and our own nature in addition to the general revelation of God through Creation. There is no other way to know the truth about salvation other than through the central message of Scripture – the gospel.
3. ‘**Inerrancy**’ – the absence of any errors in Scripture. “*All Scripture is breathed out by God*” (2 Tim 3:16). The power of the breath of God is seen when: God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of Adam (Gen 2:7); Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, ‘receive the Holy Spirit’ (John 20:22). Because the whole Bible is the powerful work of God Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit, He enabled it to be written down by the authors of the 66 books of Scripture without error.
4. ‘**Perspicuity**’ is a less familiar word used to express the clearness/clarity of the Bible. The Scriptures can be understood by all who hear or read them without the aid of a priest or church, but only with the illumination of the Holy Spirit (more about this in our second point!). However, this does not mean that **all** of the Bible is easy to understand. The WCF (1:7) expresses this well in these words: “*Not all things in Scripture are equally plain in themselves or equally clear to all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly stated and explained in one place or another in Scripture”.*

The Word of God has ultimate authority, it is necessary revelation of God’s person and work, it was written down without error and the central message of salvation is clearly explained. It ‘breathed out by God’ (2 Tim 3:16) and is the very power of God (1 Cor 1:18). The sword, which is the Word of God is a very potent spiritual weapon when handled well. When we read that “*All Scripture is breathed out by God*”, it is helpful to know that in the Greek language of the New Testament the word for ‘breath’ is the same word for ‘spirit’. Which brings us to our second point:

1. **The Spirit**

Most people who follow rugby in Christchurch will be Crusaders supporters. It’s good to support your local team who do battle on the sports field. However, the Crusaders who went to Jerusalem in medieval times under the direction of the Roman church in order to fight paganism, heresy and Muslims were sadly and destructively misguided. These crusades are a dark blot on the history of the church. Taking up physical arms, including swords, in order to fight those who do not profess Christ is not the will of God. Such a war is never just.

In contrast to the Crusades and other periods of history when people have fought physical battles in the name of Christ, the sword which completes the armour of the Christian is **not** a physical weapon, it is the ‘*sword of the* ***Spirit****, which is the word of God*’. This is a spiritual’ instrument’ which the Spirit has produced.

The word of God is the work of the Holy Spirit who inspired the human authors of Scripture to set down in writing the revelation of God to mankind. This process is described in 2 Peter 1:21 “*For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*”. The Holy Spirit-inspired authors of Scripture were used by God to produce the 66 books of the Bible. The Belgic Confession (Article 3) describes this ‘*special care of God for us and our salvation*’ in this way ‘*God commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit his revealed Word to writing*’.

The Holy Spirit did not direct the authors of the books of the Bible in a mechanical way as though they were somehow ‘possessed’ and functioned like robots, being mere passive instruments in God’s hands (‘mechanical inspiration’). Neither did the Holy Spirit just inspire the authors themselves so that they conveyed their own religious thoughts and ideas; being limited by their own particular understanding, cultural setting and human weakness (‘dynamic inspiration’). At times the Old Testament prophets did not understand the message that they brought from the Lord – which shows that it did not originate with them (Dan 12:8,9; Zech 1:9; 4:4 cf. 1 Pet 1:10,11). The character, personality and perspective of each author was retained and through their individual authorship the precise words which God ordained to be written down were ‘inscripturated’. The word ‘inscripturated’ simply means that God, through His Holy Spirit, illuminated chosen men and granted them unique insight, conveying His divine revelation to and through them.

Every single part of Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit (‘plenary inspiration’) and every single word of the Bible is also inspired (‘verbal inspiration’). More than once, Jesus based His reasoning from the Scripture on a single word in the Old Testament (Matt 22:31-32, 43-45; John 10:35). Christ said that not the smallest part of the Scripture – an iota (smallest letter in the Greek alphabet) or a dot – will pass away until all is accomplished (Matt 5:18).

Great care has been taken down through history to ensure that the Scriptures were accurately copied from one manuscript to others. The accurate preservation of the Bible over time is astounding and unlike any other written work in the entire history of the world. However, differences between the many manuscripts have developed due to copying errors. Yet, of the large number of manuscripts which have been discovered of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures, the differences are less than 1% of the whole Bible and none of these small discrepancies affect any of the major truths of God’s Word.

Translations of these Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek manuscripts into other languages can result in inaccuracies, which is why it is important to have a reliable version, especially for Bible study, preaching and teaching. When we have a solid version of the Bible, we can be confident that we have the Word of God which is the work of the Holy Spirit. We have the spiritual sword which is the ‘sword of the Spirit’.

However, it cannot be ‘taken up’ for effective spiritual combat by anyone who has not been born again of the Spirit (John 3:6). If you have not yet come to Christ in faith and trusted in Him, then do not delay. "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*." (Romans 10:13). To be without Christ is to be defenceless against the schemes of the devil.

In contrast, to be in Christ is to have access to the whole armour of God, including the sword. The Lord calls each one of us, brothers and sisters to put on this armour, taking up the sword of the Spirit, which brings us to our last point.

1. **The Sword**

A physical sword can be a powerful weapon against an enemy when handled skilfully; however, if the swordsmanship of a soldier is lacking then the sword will be much less effective both in defensive and offensive action.

We see the way in which Christ wielded the Word of God when He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. The first test was whether he would take up his divine powers for his own personal benefit and satisfy his own hunger (after 40 days without food) by turning stones into bread. He masterfully used the sword of the Spirit to resist Satan, quoting from Deut 8:3: "' *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*'".

The second temptation was to appeal to pride by calling Christ to purposefully throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple so that God would be obliged to miraculously save him. Here the devil quoted Psalm 91:11-12 but instead of using this Scripture in its context of trust in God, he tried to give it the opposite meaning by using it as a test of God’s faithfulness. Jesus skilfully responded with the sword of the word of God: “*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test*” (Deut 6:16).

In the final temptation, Satan offers Christ the kingdoms of the world, seeking to appeal to a desire for possessions. The Devil shows both his falsehood (the kingdoms are not his to give) and his prideful desire for the glory which is God’s alone when he wants Christ to fall down and worship him. Jesus wields the sword with precision to great effect when He quotes Deut 6:13, saying: “*You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve*”. The result was that the ‘devil left him’. The enemy was repelled.

In this event and throughout His whole life on this earth, Christ shows that He was ‘*tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin*’ (Heb 4:15). Jesus is both the source of the righteousness which God credits to all who believe in Him **and** He is the perfect example of how the sword of the Spirit is to be taken up in order to beat back the devil. Here are three aspects of Christ’s swordsmanship to note: He was filled with the Holy Spirit (e.g. Matt 3:16); He had complete confidence in the truth of God’s Word (e.g. John 17:17) and He was a man of much prayer (e.g. Heb 5:7). Let’s look at each of these briefly in turn as they apply to us as we ‘put on the whole armour of God’, ‘to take up…the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’.

**Firstly**, brothers and sisters, we too have been filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not only the Divine Author of Scripture, He is also the Divine Interpreter. We could say that He is the ‘Swordmaster’ who teaches us who to rightly handle the powerful Word of God. Jesus said of the Spirit and His work that He would help us by instructing us in the Word of Christ and by helping us to remember the Word: “*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” (John 14:26).

The Holy Spirit works through the Word heard, read, preached, taught, studied and memorised to enable us to store the Word inside us (Ps 119:11). We are then ready and able to us it when needed. The Spirit also enables us to rightly interpret the Word of God. The Apostle Paul explains this to the Corinthians this way: “*Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God*”. (1 Cor 2:12).

To handle this sword rightly the understanding of both the Word and the Spirit must be in balance. If the concept of the spirit is believed apart from the Word, then this cannot be the Holy Spirit. This was the error of George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement who believe in an ‘inner light’ apart from the Word. This is also the error of many in the charismatic church movement who believe that God can speak new private revelations to individuals independently of His Word. If the Word is viewed apart from the internal work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian then the result is mere mechanical, theoretical, intellectual, academic knowledge. This is dead orthodoxy; somewhat like that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

**Secondly**, we too can have certainty about the truth of the Bible. The sword is the sword of the **Spirit** which is the Word of God. Christ is certain about the truth of God’s Word. He is the Word! If we are to stand against the schemes of the devil, we must be sure too. Minister and author Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones helpfully noted that “*If you are not certain that it is the Word of God, if you do not rely utterly, absolutely upon it, if you do not believe it is inerrant, then you have a broken sword in your hand and you are already defeated by your enemy*”. The perfections of Scripture, the accuracy of historical and prophetic details and the providential preservation of manuscripts over time are some of the good grounds for confidence in the Word. The full confidence of Christ in the Scriptures which speak of Him (Luke 24:27) means that we have no reason to doubt the Word.

**Thirdly**, we must also be swordsmen and swordswomen of prayer. Notice in verse 18 that the sword is to be taken up whilst “*praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication*’. Dependent prayer is to accompany not only the wielding of this sword but also the putting on of the other parts of the whole armour of God. The Christian soldier must wield this sword whilst praying under the Holy Spirit’s influence and with His assistance. This prayer is thoughtful (e.g. 1 Cor 14:15), watchful (e.g. Luke 21:36) and dependent on the intercession of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8.26).

In John Bunyan’s allegory of the life journey of the believer, when Christian fights the devil in the form of Apollyon, it is a fierce and prolonged conflict. Bunyan writes “*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, must needs grow weaker and weaker*”. But then “*as God would have it, while Apollyon was fetching of his last blow, thereby to make an end of this good man, Christian nimbly reached out for his sword, and caught it, saying “Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy when I fall I shall arise”; 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”. And with that Apollyon spread forth his dragon’s wings, and sped him away, that Christian for a season saw him no more*”.

For Christian in Bunyan’s Pilgrims Progress, spiritual conflict was an inevitable consequence of journeying to the Celestial City. It is the same for each one of us, brothers and sisters. Spiritual conflict is an unavoidable consequence of being a disciple of Christ. The battle for us at times will also be a ‘sore conflict’ and we may experience increased weakness and fear that we shall be overcome by the enemy.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, before He went to conquer sin and death at the cross, said to his disciples about His words to them: “*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33).

Beloved congregation of our Lord and Saviour - take heart in the Christ today. “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*” (Eph 6:10-12).

AMEN.