

'TAKE THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT...'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

This past Easter Sunday I spoke at the Easter Sunrise Service at Stanford University amphitheater. Our college pastor, in association with Christian students on campus, asked me to take the "sword of the Spirit," as Paul describes the Word of God in his Ephesian letter, and share the message of living hope which Christians possess because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I arrived on campus well before 6 a.m. but I could not find the location of the prayer meeting which was to be held before the service. When I finally got to the amphitheater and met with the leadership team, I realized that it was an extremely chilly morning and that I had not dressed adequately. Although I borrowed a coat, and it helped keep out some degree of cold, I sat shivering as the crowd began to file in for the service.

Then I felt another shiver, this time a shiver of fear, as I found myself thinking, what in the world was I doing there in the first place? Why had I even accepted this invitation to speak? I wondered. What could I possibly accomplish among so many bright and intelligent people? Why would they even listen to me?

A chill of foolishness quickly followed. Was it realistic to hope that God would use his Word to pierce the closed hearts of people on a cold Easter morning? Would some respond to God's invitation to forgiveness of sin and his promise of eternal life through saving faith in Christ?

As the introductions came to an end and it was time for me to preach, I prayed for courage. "Dear Lord," I prayed, "Please use your Word to bring many into your kingdom this morning. In my flesh I am filled with doubt and fear, but in my spirit I have great hope." Slowly, I felt a sense of peace and calm come over me. I began to speak, but I cannot tell you what the Lord taught through me. From conversations which I have had since, however, I learned that the "sword of the Spirit" had pierced several hearts that morning and some had come to faith in Christ through what the apostle Paul once called the "foolishness of preaching."

I share this to illustrate once more the fact that we are involved in a spiritual battle. And although my several chills that Easter morning at Stanford may not seem to have been very threatening, they were nevertheless instances of spiritual warfare, reminders of Paul's words in his Ephesian letter that Christians "wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph.6:12).

This is what we have been learning in our series of studies in the life of Paul which we have been following from the book of Acts. The apostle's experiences as he traveled about on his missionary journeys must surely have been on his mind when he later wrote the book of Ephesians from his prison cell in Rome. What enables the Christian to stand in the face of the "schemes of the devil"? We find the apostle's answer to this very important question, once again in chapter 6 of Ephesians: "Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day..." Paul then goes on to describe this armor: "Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The Roman soldier's sword had a blade about 24 inches long. It was sharpened on both edges and came to a very sharp point. It was both an offensive and defensive weapon, designed so that a trained legionnaire could cut and thrust from any position.

"The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God," is the weapon which the Christian must use in the spiritual battles to which he is called. Paul is suggesting how the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God in the

midst of our spiritual battles. The "word of God" in this instance is not the Greek word *logos*, i.e. all that God has spoken and written by and through his Son Jesus, through the prophets and the apostles. The word, in fact, is the Greek word *hrema*, which is the specific word of God for a specific situation.

An example of a defensive use of the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" is the occasion when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Our Lord responded to three different spiritual attacks by quoting three verses from the Old Testament to deflect the attacks and force the evil one to retreat. On the other hand, the book of Hebrews illustrates in the following verse how damaging the "sword of the Spirit" is when it is used offensively: "For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12).

This is clearly demonstrated in Acts 2 following Peter's sermon after the Holy Spirit had come on the day of Pentecost and filled each of the disciples. Peter had demonstrated from the Old Testament that the Jesus whom the Jews had crucified was their Messiah and God the Father had raised Him from the dead. Here is what he said, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ because of the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

Today we will look at Paul's use of the "sword of the Spirit" in his address to the Supreme Court of the Jews in Jerusalem. Following a riot in the temple area over the apostle's alleged introduction of a Greek into the temple, Paul had been rescued by the Roman cohort and brought to his barracks to be examined by scourging. "Wishing to know for certain why Paul had been accused by the Jews," Acts 22:30 says, next day the commander brought the apostle before the chief priests and all the Council and set him before them. As he stood before the Council, the "sword of the Spirit" was the only weapon Paul had in the confrontation which he would soon face. I am reminded of the words of Jesus to his disciples, "Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to courts and scourge you in their synagogues, and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for my sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak, for it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt.10:16-20).

I. The defensive use of the sword. Acts 22:30-23:5

But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them. And Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?" But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

It is easy to imagine the tension in the court when Paul began to speak. On one side stood the hated and confused Romans, and on the other side the high priest, in company with the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Scribes. In the middle, standing on the very stones upon which Jesus, and later Peter and John, stood some 24 years earlier was the apostle Paul. The issue once again was Jesus, the man whom the Jews had crucified such a long time ago. How this must have frustrated the Supreme Court! Year after year they kept having to confront these pests who called themselves followers of the Way, these fanatics who claimed that the Jesus who was crucified had risen from the dead.

What was the apostle's point in his opening statement about his having a "perfectly good conscience before

God up to this day"? He was not saying he was perfect, or that he never made a mistake. What he was saying was that to the best of his knowledge, as he had walked before men and God as a Pharisee, a Roman citizen and a follower of Christ, his conscience was clear and clean. He had not broken any Jewish, Roman, or spiritual laws. He was neither a renegade Jew nor an opponent of the Law.

The high priest reacted to this statement by ordering that Paul be struck on the mouth. Ananias, the high priest, was not the same man who held that office in Jesus' time. He was a man of bad character who was later called to Rome to answer cruelty charges pressed by the Samaritans. Paul responded by defending himself from Scripture, the "sword of the Spirit," saying, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?" It was illegal to strike a Jew before he was properly and legally accused. And it was all the more offensive for a Jew to be struck by another Jew, especially in front of Romans. The Lord Jesus experienced the same treatment at his late-night trial (John 18:22).

Faced with this spiritual test, the Spirit of God brought to Paul's mind two particular verses from the Law of Moses First, from Leviticus 19:15: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly...I am the Lord..." And then from Deuteronomy 25:1-3: "...judgment by beating only if found guilty..."

Calling the high priest a "whitewashed wall," Paul was saying, in effect, "I walk before the Law blamelessly, yet you, you religious hypocrite, hit me, breaking the very Law you are required to uphold" Informed that he was addressing the high priest, Paul immediately realized what he had done and once more was willing to stand under the Law. He may have been unable to recognize that the man was high priest either because of his poor eyesight or perhaps because the priest was not wearing his robes of office. In any case, once again the Holy Spirit moved to Paul's defense with the Word of God from Exodus 22:28: "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people."

The spiritual principle here is articulated in Psalms 119:11: "Thy word have I treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee." Paul had hidden the Word of God in his heart, and the Spirit of God brought that word to his lips in his defense. In this case the Lord led Paul to apologize to the high priest, based on his Word, not on Paul's feelings. Hiding God's Word in his heart was the key to Paul's blameless life before God and man.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote from prison to a German soldier on the front lines of battle:

When I think of you...I have to try very hard not to let all my thoughts dwell on the many cares and anxieties that beset you, instead of praying for you properly. In that connection I must talk to you sometime about prayer in time of trouble. It is a difficult matter, and yet our misgivings about it may not be good. Psalm 50 says quite clearly, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." ...And I must say that the last two nights have made me face this problem again in a quite elementary way. While the bombs are falling all around the building, I cannot help thinking of God, his judgment, his hand stretched out and his anger not turned away...

The key to Bonhoeffer's faith was his knowledge of the Word of God which he had hidden in his heart. He was ready to use that Word both defensively and offensively to minister to himself as well as to his friends and his captors.

Having employed the "sword of the Spirit which is the word of God" defensively before the high priest and his court, the apostle Paul is now led by the Holy Spirit to use the Truth of God offensively.

II. The offensive use of the sword, 23:6-11

But perceiving that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and

resurrection of the dead!" And as he said this, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there arose a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks. But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."

Following his apology for his remarks about the high priest, Paul looked at his accusers and perceived that they were divided between Sadducees and Pharisees. The Pharisees were the separatists of the priestly leaders. Fundamentalists to the core, they held to the letter of the Law. They believed in angels, spirits, and the resurrection of man to either heaven or hell. Among the religious of their day they had the greatest spiritual influence over the Jews. But they struggled with self-righteousness, and with the notions of good works, mercy and judgement. But in spite of their struggles men like Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, and others of their persuasion came to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah and they placed their faith in him as Lord.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were the aristocrats of Jewish society. They were the nation's lobbyists to the Roman government. They believed only in the written Law and did not recognize the oral or traditional sayings of the fathers. Rigid in their judgments, they did not believe in the resurrection of the body or retribution of the individual in a future life because Moses never mentioned these things. They did not believe in angels, or spirits, but only in God.

This, then, was the make-up of the court to whom Paul began crying out, as the text says, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of the Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" The Lord Jesus once was brought to this very room to be tried before the high priest and his court. "Tell us whether You are the Christ the Son of God," he was asked. Our Lord responded by using the Word of God offensively, saying, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.

These were the very stones upon which the apostle Peter stood also following his arrest for healing a lame man at the temple gate. Acts 4:8-12 records Peter's words to the council on that occasion, "Then Peter filled with the Holy Spirit said to them, 'Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for benefit done to a sick man as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by this name this man stands here before you in good health.'" "We are innocent," Peter was saying, "it was Jesus who healed this lame man, not us."

Stephen, who was full of grace, power and wisdom also was falsely accused by the Jews of uttering blasphemous words against Moses and against God. He too was dragged before this council for declaring that "this Nazarene Jesus will destroy the temple and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (Acts 6). When the high priest asked, "Are these things so?" Stephen used the "sword of the Spirit" offensively against the supreme court of Israel. "Now when they heard this they were cut to the quick..." Acts 7:54 records.

Let us look at Paul's so-called crime. The apostle had shared with the Jewish crowd that 20 years earlier he had been the Christ's enemy before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Following that, his life had been totally changed from the inside out, and now he found himself a prisoner of the Lord. "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees, I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead...." said the apostle, thereby aligning himself with the teaching of the Pharisees. But he wanted to take things a step further. That is why he let them know, as he had done the day before, that in light of that teaching he personally had experienced the fulfillment of that hope in meeting and speaking with the risen Jesus.

Suddenly the focus of the court shifted from Paul to the chief doctrinal differences which were being debated

between the two schools of belief. The debate resulted in a partial verdict. Some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party said, "We find nothing wrong with this man: suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" The unfortunate Claudius, the Roman cohort, had another riot on his hands! He had failed in his quest to get to the bottom of the first riot and discover why Paul had been accused. For the third time he has to rescue Paul from the mob and once more take him to the Roman barracks.

But Paul has an encouraging word awaiting him from his Lord, as the text says, "...on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, 'Take courage for as you solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.'" The risen Lord had promised his disciples that as they witnessed of him in the Age of the Spirit he would be forever spiritually and at times physically present with them. He had spoken to Paul on the Damascus Road; he spoke to him again in the temple three years later; he had spoken to him in Corinth; and now once again he speaks to Paul in the Roman barracks in Jerusalem.

We have come full circle. Christians today are living in the Age of the Spirit, and our commission is the same as the one given to the apostles and disciples: "...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Our Lord is still ministering through us to call out of the Gentile nations a people for his name (Acts 15: 4). Paul has shown us that he was involved in a spiritual battle, the same kind of warfare that we now are involved in. He also demonstrated in his own life the truth that he had written to the Ephesians some years after he had left them to take this trip to Jerusalem, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day... Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Christians face spiritual warfare on all levels, physical, emotional, and spiritual. That is why God has provided all of these resources in Christ to enable us to stand. In Him, we have everything we need to survive. Thus, what the apostle is saying in Ephesians is that Christians should wrap themselves in the Person, the power and love of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If we do this we will be enabled to fulfill in our lifetime the commission to witness to the Gentiles up until the moment of Christ's return. Let us take courage then, remembering His words, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

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