

My parents did something for me during my school years, and I don't think I've ever thanked them for it. It was something they used to do every year, and it cost them. It cost them money. It meant they lost free labour on the farm for a week of the school holidays every year. And it meant they had to travel miles and miles that they wouldn't of otherwise had to travel.

At the beginning of every year, we'd try to get hold of a brochure, listing all of the ISCF (Inter-School Christian Fellowship) camps that Scripture Union were planning to run for the year.

And each of us kids would go through the list, and we'd read about all the different camps... Would we go on a cycling camp through the Downs and South Burnett; or would we go to a beach camp; or would we go to a ski camp at one of the dams; or would we go on a canoe camp down the Mary River?????

And we'd just pick the one that we thought was going to be the most fun, and perhaps the one where we thought we might be able to get one of our mates to come along with us.... And that'd be the Scripture union camp we'd go on that year... And mate,,, didn't we have fun...

We used to have a great time on those camps... Heaps of fun...

But also, something that we didn't really think about at the time, but we also had a great time of Christian fellowship. These camps were run by young, excited, Christian leaders... Morning devotions would be a bit of small-group time, led by somebody who was excited about Jesus, and who loved Jesus,

*and their main aim, was for **us** to learn to love Jesus too.... And around lunch time, and after dinner at night, maybe around a campfire, these young Christian leaders would share their testimonies – they'd talk about God, and why they believed and why they follow Jesus....*

*These camps were **unashamedly** Christian. And yep, they did set out to give the campers a good time, but that wasn't one of the two major aims. The first major aim was to introduce us kids to Jesus. And a lot of kids made the decision to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, **at** those camps. But it was the second aim, that's had the biggest and most lasting impact on **my** life.*

Being run by an organisation called 'The Scripture Union of Queensland', it really shouldn't be a surprise that their aim was to get kids reading the Scriptures. On those camps, they got us primary schoolers, and High Schoolers, reading the Scriptures, thinking about them, and answering questions about them.

And after camp, they'd usually send us home with a little daily devotional book, where we'd have a bible reading each day, some discussion and questions about it...

And I'm pretty sure, that it was those camps that have instilled into me, the habit of reading the Bible. It was never a perfect habit, and it's still not – sometimes I'd just stop – for no real reason, and sometimes I wouldn't pick the Bible up for months and months... But then there'd be someone, or something that would challenge me to start reading it again, and I would...

Maybe I should ring my Mum up, and thank her, for making it a priority to send us kids away on those camps... I don't know

if she ever knew that it would play such a large part in my spiritual development, but it did.

Parents, your kids are never too young, to start them off reading the Bible. If they're too young to read, you can read it to them... And there's probably more than a few **Adults** here, who are not in the habit of daily reading the Scriptures...

And I'm not saying this to make anyone feel guilty – because look, I've been there... But I cannot say it, any simpler than this: “If you have a desire to be closer to God – to have a deeper relationship with your Lord – to have a greater spiritual awareness, to gain wisdom and insight into God's ways, there is no better way to do it, then to begin reading the Scriptures daily, and praying about what you've read.” I cannot say it any simpler than that.

If you want to play footy, and you start going to training once a week, and that'll help your fitness and ability a little bit, but if you want to really get good at it, and be the best that you can be, well you need to be going for a run each day, and exercising at home, to increase your fitness, and to practice with a ball, to increase your skills...

And it's the same with our walk with God – Coming along to church once a week, to get fed on the Scriptures – the word of God – for a bible teacher to explain to you the Scriptures, is great. It's fantastic – you will grow in God...

Going along to a Bible Study group once a week – where you can sit down with other men and women, or with other youth – and to read the Bible together, and to discuss the Scriptures, and to pray together, is a fantastic way to grow in God.... But if you really, really, want to deepen your relationship with

your Heavenly Father... – nothing will take the place of daily prayer, and the reading of God’s word.... Nothing...

In the past, there’s been times when people have made me to feel guilty – that I **haven’t** been reading the bible every day. (and for some people, you’d think that they worshipped the Father, Son and Holy Scripture). And I’ve got to tell you, “For me, maintaining a habit of daily bible reading, is not an easy thing – I’m actually a bit of a slow reader”. And there’s always something there wanting to distract me, and to take my attention off what I’ve been reading...

And sometimes it’s like people look down their noses at you and “Oh you’re not really a Christian – you can’t really love Jesus, otherwise you’d be into His word, reading it morning, noon and night – You’d have it memorised, and you’d be able to quote just the right Bible verse for every occasion...”

And so I’ve been made to feel guilty for **not** reading the Bible... And it’s like “I’ve just got to try that little bit harder, and then I’ll be a better Christian”... .. **That’s not at all, what it’s about....** God loves me just as much if I’m **not** reading my Bible, as what He does when I am...

God has forgiven me, just as efficiently, whether I regularly read my bible or not...

What it’s about, is receiving from God, the best He has to offer.

If I’m **not** reading the Scriptures,,,,, I’m missing out. You see, I get to know God better, when I **am** reading His word:

- I know better, the grace and mercy that God has given me, as the apostles explain it, right there in His word.
- I learn about the character of God, and reflect in wonder, at His love; His patience; His forbearance; His justice; His mercy; His sacrifice, right throughout the Old Testament, and the New – it’s one continuous story....
- As I read His word, I discover His promises, and as I study it more and more, I begin to understand the difference between the promises He has made to Israel in the past, and the promises He makes to us today.
- As I read His word, I’m continually reminded “This life is short – so live for eternity (Even when life’s going to crud – it’s all good in the long-run)”, and so it gives me hope.
- As I read His word, I find that a natural resistance to false teaching just becomes built-in, because there’s the truth – right there in His word... And when someone starts telling porky-pies, you recognise the lies for what they are.....
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- And then there’s what we’re going to discover today: The **power** of God’s word, to stand strong against the evil one.

We’ve been working our way through the armour of God, and today we’ve come to the final piece – the Sword. Verse¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,

A few weeks ago (before I went on holidays), we talked about ‘salvation’, and how salvation is something we have to take (we have to receive it). It’s on offer, but we have to receive it... And it’s actually the same as **the sword of the**

Spirit, which is the word of God... The word of God, is available for each and every one of us – we’ve just got to open it up, and start reading....

*There **are** countries in the world, where the Bible is a prohibited item. And Christians in those places, are starving for God’s word. And when bibles are smuggled into such places as North Korea, and get placed into the hands of Christians under persecution, to them, well it’s like the greatest gift that they could ever be given But then there’s us – Bibles on the bookshelves that never get opened....*

The word of God available – All Christians have access to the word of God, and so we’re urged, take (receive) **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.**

God is speaking – all we have to do, is to open up our ears and hear Him.

But, what **is** the word of God? I’ve been talking as if the Bible is the word of God, and it is... But it’s **more** than the bible..., because the bible very clearly teaches, that God still speaks to us today.

In the Greek, ῥῆμα θεοῦ (*rhēma theou*) “The word of God” is the divine utterance or speech (“the words that come from God” NEB).ⁱ And of course, the Bible is packed full of God’s word...,

But the word of God becomes living and active and powerful and life-changing, through the power of the Holy Spirit, which is why it’s called the Sword of the **Spirit**....

ῥῆμα θεοῦ (*rhēma theou*), is the word that God speaks, and as such, it includes prophecy from God, and right here in Ephesians, *rhema* is used of the Gospel itself^{fi}, so when the gospel is preached, this is the word of God.

Alright, so the sword of the Spirit – the word of God, is what God says.... God speaks through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church (that is other Christians). And the sword of the Spirit is available for all who will receive it. God wants to speak to you and I – We've just got to start listening.

And of course God's written word (the Bible), remains our primary source, and the most trusted way in which we hear the word of God today. The Bible is the unchanging, and the ever-reliable word of God, against which all other voices must be tested.

Today, I want to share with you 3 ways that the word of God is a sword to both protect us **from** the attacks of the Devil, and with which to go on the offensive against him – to cut him down.

1. Firstly, the word of God, counteracts the lies (or the half-truths) of the devil.

After Jesus was baptised, the first thing that happened, was He was led out into the desert, and there He was tempted by the devil. And at each temptation, Jesus used the sword of the Spirit – the word of God, to deflect away the temptation.

Matthew 4:1-11 (ESV)

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, " 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word (*rhema*) that comes from the mouth of God.' "

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

" 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and

" 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.' "

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' " ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

" 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.' "

11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

You see, even when Satan **mis-used** Scripture, and twisted Scripture to try and get Jesus to sin, ... he failed. And why did he fail? Because Jesus knew the word of God.

Now, those temptations are very specific temptations to Jesus. They're not the same temptations that you and I are tempted with. I don't know about you, but I can't remember the last time I was tempted to turn stones into bread. I can't remember the last time I was tempted to jump off the top of a tall building to be caught by angels – We're tempted by different things....

So, you might be tempted to gossip – you've come by this very juicy piece of information, and you want to quietly tell it to somebody else, but you are reminded that the word of God says that gossip is one of the vilest of sins – it's listed right there in Romans 1.

Or you might be tempted to store up a big heap of money or stuff, but you know God's word on the matter: In Luke 12:15, Jesus said ... **“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”**

Or, when God has commanded us to share the good news out into the world, you might be tempted to step back from that, because you realise that some people are offended by it. But you know the word of God: Acts 5:29 says **“We must obey God rather than men.**

Or, someone might have done something wrong by you, and Satan's tempting you not to forgive them... But you know the word of God says, in **Matthew 6:14-15** ¹⁴ **For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,** ¹⁵ **but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.**

The word of God – the sword of the Spirit, cuts down those temptations.

The lies we start to believe:

- It's not really gossip if I know it's true...
- I'm not really greedy – so-and-so's got more than me
- I don't have to be obedient to God in **everything**...
- I have the **right** to be unforgiving

These lies we start to believe – the sword of the Spirit – the word of God, cuts right through them....

Secondly, the word of God, saves those who are perishing.

Romans 10: ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word (*rhema*) of Christ.

When the gospel is preached – when you share your faith with someone – that's not just a physical act. When you share your faith, you have drawn the sword of the Spirit, and you are taking part in a spiritual battle.

It's not a battle that you can fight – you can't convince anyone to come to Jesus – it's a spiritual battle – the only part that we play, is to simply speak the word of God – the Gospel of Christ. We draw the sword of the spirit – the sword that's sharp enough to cut the heart – to cut loose the shackles of sin that bind us... The word of God, is the power to save those who are perishing.

Thirdly, the word of God helps us to stand strong in His promises. This whole image of the armour of God, is to enable us to **stand**.

Sometimes in life, things don't go so well, do they???? A loved one dies of cancer, way before their time... A son or a daughter runs amuck and makes a mess out of their lives, and there's nothing a parent can do about it... A secure job is snatched away... You're sent to prison because you worship God...

Bad stuff happens.

And a lot of modern western Christians these days can't handle this sort of stuff, because we've somehow gotten into our heads, an expectation of life, that matches better with the Hindu idea of Karma, then what it does with true Christian discipleship – we get it into our heads that, provided I do the right thing, everything's going to go well for me...

But that's not the way of discipleship. God's word has told us to **expect** trouble – expect persecutions – expect tribulation.

But with this expectation, He also gives us something to look forward to – The Lord gives us a promise. God's word gives us a promise that we can stand on, and trust that it will happen... He says to expect persecutions, and in the age to come eternal lifeⁱⁱⁱ.

He says, In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.^{iv}

And when we turn to the very end of the Bible, we can see what this new world is going to be like. All evil is gone. Those who have been made righteous in Christ, will live in the very presence of God. And those who have persecuted the believers, and Satan (the one who's been pulling the strings for all these years) – the one against whom the spiritual battle has been fought – will be bound and cast into hell. That's the promise of God, and we can stand on it.

Yep, there might be tough times now, but the sword of the spirit – the word of God, that helps us to stand strong in the Lord – the promise we can depend on – is it won't be like that forever. It's going to get far, far better.... God's word says: Revelation 22:²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Friends, God speaks. And He wants to speak to you. He wants to speak to our church. The word of God will help you to stand strong against the devil... Better than that – the word of God has the power to save.

If you want to hear God better, just tell me, “Michael, come and have a cup-of-tea with me one day”, and we’ll talk about it... The word of God is available – we’ve got to want to receive it

ⁱ Garbling, F.E. et al., 1981. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

ⁱⁱ Christ sanctifies the church **having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word** (rhema).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 10:30

^{iv} John 16:33