

## Ephesians 6:17b

### Introduction

Paul has been describing for us the “panoply” of God. He’s been describing that “complete set” of armor that is God’s gracious provision for our “intense struggle” against Satan, and all the forces of evil in the heavenly places. There is a battle that rages. And that battle is for our souls. But we stand on ground that’s already been won by Christ. And we enter the battle clothed in armor not of our own making, but of God’s. So as long as we’re putting the armor on and engaging in the fight, we can *know* the outcome is secure. We can know already that the victory will be ours.

As Paul describes this armor, he uses, on one level, the imagery of a Roman soldier arming himself for battle. But, of course, Roman soldiers don’t arm themselves with “truth,” and “righteousness,” and “peace,” and “faith,” and “salvation,” and the “word of God.” That’s because they’re fighting a very different kind of enemy than the one we’re fighting. Our battle is not against blood and flesh, but against the spiritual forces of evil *in the heavenly places*. So already for three of the pieces of armor Paul has used Old Testament imagery not of any human soldier, but of *God* Himself fully armed as a warrior and going forth to battle.

- ✓ Isaiah 59:15–17 — Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on *righteousness as a breastplate*, and a *helmet of salvation on his head*; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.
- ✓ Isaiah 11:4–5 (ESV/LXX) — With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth... he shall have his *loins girt with righteousness, and his sides clothed with truth*.

This armor is truly the armor *of God* not just because God gives it to us, but because in some sense it’s the armor that He Himself *wears* when He goes forth to battle. Just think about that. This is truly supernatural armor! So how can this armor not equip us fully, and completely, and totally to meet the enemy and fight the good fight, and be victorious? This morning we come, lastly, to the sword. Paul says:

### I. “and [take] the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”

It’s often pointed out that while all the other pieces of armor are defensive, the sword is the only offensive weapon. Paul uses the specific Greek word not for the long sword (rhomphaia), but for “the sharp short sword... the crucial offensive weapon in close combat.” (Lincoln) It’s usually described as the “cut-and-thrust” sword. (cf. Wood) And so once again we can’t help but feel the intensity of the battle. This isn’t play armor we’re talking about. The stakes are very literally life and death. But whereas if the Roman soldier’s equipment was not superior to his opponent’s, *he* might have to depend on luck or his own superior skill in battle, we know that every time we go

into battle – every time we face the enemy – the armor we wear is superior. The armor we wear is truly “fail-safe” – so long as we put it on and take it up.

The sword that we wield is not just any sword. It’s the “sword *of* the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Remember the many hats that “of” can wear? So is this the sword which *is* the Spirit? (No! This is the sword of the Spirit *which is the Word of God*.) Is this the *Spirit’s* sword? (That’s probably not the point.) Is this the sword which the Spirit *gives us* (cf. Thielman)? (But *all* of this armor is the armor *of God* – the armor that God supplies.) So out of all the different pieces of armor, why is the *sword* – why is the “word of God” – so especially *connected* with the Spirit? (What hat is the “of” wearing?)

## II. “and [take] the sword of the Spirit, which is the WORD OF GOD”

In the Greek language, there are two words for “word.” The most common one, and maybe even one that might sound familiar to you, is “*logos*” (330 x’s). But there’s another, less common word for “word,” and that’s “*rhema*” (67 x’s). Paul says, “And take the sword of the Spirit, which is the *rhema* of God.” *Logos* is the big, multi-talented word that kind of “does it all.” But *rhema* can’t do *everything* *logos* does (cf. Mat. 5:32). *Rhema* is always focused on the *word* as something “*spoken*.” The word, not as something representing an “idea” or a “thought,” the word not as something written down on a page in a book, but the word as something that has come to life with breath and sound – something uttered and spoken out loud. (cf. Hoehner; O’Brien; Bruce; Hendriksen; Lenski) There’s a word that exists in at least two places right now – in my own mind and also on the screen behind me. But now we can bring that word to life by speaking it – by using breath and sound so that it fills the room. Are you ready? “JOY!” That’s pretty cool. But it’s not like what happens when God speaks words. When God speaks words, it goes like this:

- ✓ Genesis 1:3, 6-7 — God said, “Let there be...” and there was... God said, “Let there be...” And it was so.

God creates by the speaking of a word.

- ✓ Hebrews 11:3 — By faith we understand that the universe was *created* by the *word* [*rhema*] of God.

God upholds and sustains the universe by the continual speaking forth of His word.

- ✓ Hebrews 1:3 — He is the radiance of the glory of God... and he upholds the universe by the *word* [*rhema*] of his power.

God cleanses and purifies and saves by the word that He speaks.

- ✓ Ephesians 5:25-26 (cf. John 6:68; Acts 5:20; Rom. 10:8, 17-18; 1 Pet. 1:25) — Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the *word* [*rhema*].

Try to wrap your minds around what God says in the Old Testament to His Servant, the Messiah:

- ✓ Isaiah 51:16; 66:22 (NASB/ESV) — “I have put My **words** in your mouth... to establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, ‘You are My people.’ ... “For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me... so shall your offspring and your name remain.”

Here we see God consummating both His works of creation and of redemption just by the speaking of His powerful **word**.

- ✓ Jeremiah 1:9–10 (cf. 18:7-10; Isa. 44:26-28; Rev. 11:3, 5) — The LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, “Behold, I have put my **words** in your mouth... to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”
- ✓ Luke 1:35–38 (v. 37 ASV) — The angel answered [Mary], “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For no **word** [*rhema*] from God shall be void of power.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it *be* to me according to your **word** [*rhema*].”

For God to *speak* is the same thing as for God to **do** – to create and sustain, to judge and destroy, to save and redeem. God never speaks empty words. I can take the word that’s in my mind and on the screen and bring it to life with breath and sound, but that word doesn’t have the power in itself to do and accomplish anything. Not so, the word of God!

- ✓ Psalm 147:15 — He sends out his command to the earth; ***his word runs swiftly***.
- ✓ Isaiah 55:10–12 (cf. Isa. 45:23) — 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.***

So why is the word of God so different from ours? It’s the word of **God(!)**, yes, but there’s something else that can be said – something else that helps us to see the living, moving, working power of the word that He speaks. Paul says:

### **III. “and [take] the sword of the SPIRIT, which is the word of God”**

When God speaks words, they are carried forth into the world on the **breath** of His mouth. We can’t speak without exhaling – without breathing. But what is God’s breath? (Now remember, God doesn’t have a body. So He *pictures* the truth for us in ways that we can understand. In fact, God purposely created the world so it would be perfectly suited to His purposes of revealing the truth about Himself to us.) In the Scriptures, it’s the Holy Spirit Himself, the third person of the Trinity, who is described and pictured for us as the breath of God’s mouth. Elihu says in the book of Job:

- ✓ Job 33:4 — The *Spirit* [*ruah*] of God has made me, and the *breath* of the Almighty gives me life.

So if the Spirit of God is God's breath, then we can think of the Spirit of God as the one who carries forth God's *words* into the world.

- ✓ Psalm 33:6 (cf. Gen. 1:2) — By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the *breath* [*ruah*] of his mouth all their host.

In Genesis, before God ever spoke the *word* and said, "let there be," we're told this:

- ✓ Genesis 1:2 — The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the *Spirit* [*ruah*] of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And so we see how the Spirit of God and the Word of God go together. In fact, they don't just "go together," they're literally *inseparable* (cf. Acts 4:31; 1 Thess. 1:5; John 14:16–17; 15:26; 16:13). So Jesus can say in the Gospel of John:

- ✓ John 6:63 — It is the *Spirit* who gives life... The *words* [*rhema*] that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.
- ✓ John 3:34 (NIV) — The one whom God has sent speaks the *words* [*rhema*] of God, for [God] gives [Him] the *Spirit* without limit.

When we bring words to life on the breath of our mouth they exist for a moment and then they're gone. But when God brings *words* to life on the *breath* of His mouth, they live, and remain, and continue *forever* as they run throughout the earth accomplishing God's will. So the Apostle Peter writes, quoting Isaiah:

- ✓ 1 Peter 1:23–25 — You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of *imperishable*, through the *living and abiding word* [*logos*] of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the *word* [*rhema*] of the Lord *remains forever*."

Peter likens the word of God to a seed because of its creating, life-giving power. But what happens when the word that goes forth from God's mouth is one of judgment, and death, and destruction? What might we liken the "*word*" to then? Paul says:

#### IV. "and [take] the SWORD of the Spirit, which is the word of God"

So now it's all coming together. Here's what God said through the prophet Hosea:

- ✓ Hosea 6:5 (cf. Isa. 49:2; Jer. 1:9–10; Rev. 11:3, 5) — I have *hewn* them by the *prophets*; I have *slain* them by the *words of my mouth*, and my judgment goes forth as the light.

The writer of Hebrews warns his readers:

- ✓ Hebrews 4:11–13 — Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the **word of God** is living and active, **sharper than any two-edged sword**, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart... All are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

And then listen to how the Bible describes the final battle between the Messiah and His enemies:

- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 2:8 — Then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will **kill** with the **breath of his mouth**.
- ✓ Revelation 19:15 (cf. 1:16; 2:12, 16; Isa. 49:2) — From his **mouth** comes a **sharp sword** with which to strike down the nations.

Jesus said it like this in the Gospel of John:

- ✓ John 12:48 (cf. 8:47, 51; 14:23-24; 1 Jn. 2:4-5) — The one who rejects me and does not receive my **words** has a judge; the **word** that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.

Remember how Paul has borrowed the Old Testament imagery of God Himself as a fully armed warrior going forth to battle? We see this again in Isaiah chapter 11:

- ✓ Isaiah 11:4–5 (ESV/LXX) — With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the **word** (Hebrew, “**rod**”) of his mouth, and with the **breath** [*pneuma*] of his lips shall he destroy the ungodly one. And he shall have his loins girt with righteousness, and his sides clothed with truth.

## Conclusion

When the word that God speaks is a word of judgment, it’s like a sword coming forth from His mouth – a sword that never returns to Him empty, but always accomplishes His purpose and succeeds in the thing for which He sent it. When the word that God speaks is a word of judgment, it’s like a sword going forth upon the breath of His mouth.\* And so it’s with all of this background in mind that Paul now says to each one of us here: “And **take** the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Now we know what “hat” the “of” is wearing. This is the sword that receives its life and efficacy and power from the Spirit. And so this is the sword that is so powerfully able to cause Satan and all his demon hosts to flee! James 4:7 says:

- ✓ James 4:7 — Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

The utterance of God—the spoken word of God—is the sword of the Spirit that smites, and crushes, and defeats our enemy (cf. Lenski).

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\* Bruce actually paraphrases Paul’s words like this: And take “the sword of the breath of God,” which is the word of God. (Bruce still understands “*pneuma*” to be a reference to the personal Holy Spirit.)

So *what is* the utterance of God? *What is* the word that He has spoken?† Peter says:

- ✓ 2 Peter 1:21 (cf. 2 Sam. 23:2; Isaiah 28:25) — No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men *spoke from God* as they were *carried along by the Holy Spirit*.

And Paul reminds us where to find that spoken word of God today when he says:

- ✓ 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV) — *All Scripture is God-BREATHED*.

All of Scripture is as a terrible, deadly sword to Satan. *Every* God-breathed Scripture is to Satan a word of judgment, and destruction, and defeat. And so this is why Paul calls us to “*take* the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” and to *wield* it against the enemy. When Jesus responded to Satan’s temptations with the word of God, He wasn’t just in defensive mode. He was turning the tables on Satan, and actually going on the attack.

- ✓ Matthew 4:3–11 (cf. 2 Cor. 10:3–6) — The tempter... said, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “*It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’*” Then the devil... set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...” Jesus said to him, “*Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’*” Again, the devil... showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 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.’*” *Then the devil left him.*

The sword that Jesus wielded is the *same* one that we can wield today. We have a supernaturally powerful offensive weapon that will cause the enemy to *flee* every single time. It’s just that there aren’t any “short cuts” for using it! And so how little do we take it up! Sometimes we might not even know how to use it if we haven’t already girded our waist with truth – if we haven’t already steeped our hearts and minds in the truth of God’s word (cf. Lenski). The Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 119:11 (cf. Col. 3:16) — I have *stored up* your *word* in my *heart*, that I might not sin against you.

So instead of turning the TV on, read the word that God has *spoken*. When you’re laying in bed before you go to sleep, meditate on the word that God has *spoken*. And then when those temptations and trials come, *attack* the enemy with the Word that God has *spoken*! – With the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Quote it. Speak it. Proclaim it. Wield it by faith, to the glory of God! And the devil *will* flee from you—the devil *must* flee from you—every time.

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† See Wood for a brief summary of the different ways people answer this question. Some of the more “experiential” answers fail to take into account the biblical background and significance of the Spirit’s connection with and relationship to the word. The common suggestion that the “word” is uniquely the “Gospel” (cf. Lincoln) seems an unnecessary “limitation.” On the one hand, I’m not sure that this view does full justice to the contextual picture of being shot at and attacked by Satan. It would certainly seem to disallow Mat. 4:1–11 as a text that sheds any light on the meaning of Ephesians 6:17. On the other hand, I’m not sure that this view can do full justice to the image of the “sword.” (cf. Hoehner; Wood; Bruce)

“Stand, therefore,” brothers and sisters, “having girded your waist with **TRUTH**,  
and having put on the breastplate of **RIGHTEOUSNESS**,  
and having shod your feet with the **PREPAREDNESS OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE**,  
in all things, having taken up the shield of **FAITH** with which you will be able to extinguish all  
the flaming arrows of the evil one.  
And take the helmet of **SALVATION**  
and the sword of the Spirit, which is the **WORD OF GOD.**”