

“The Sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:16-17)
Pastor John Bronson

March 13, 2011

Order of Worship for March 13th
Pre-service Song: OCS Flag Team
Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: OCS featuring the Science Fair and Worship Flag team

Call to Worship: Isaiah 55:6-11 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“Come, Now is the Time for Worship”

“Thy Word”

“How Firm a Foundation”

“The Deep Love of Jesus”

Overhead

Song # 184

Song # 408

Overhead

Offering and Offertory

Special Music: OCS Flag Team

Message: “The Sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:10-20)
by Pastor Bronson

Closing Song: “God Be with You”

Song # 232

Parting Word of Grace

Evening Studies in the Word

Hebrews 6:13-20

5:00 – 7:30 pm

The Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

March 6, 2011

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **Joel and Virginia Cook, serving as AWANA missionaries in Northern California and Nevada:** [Marjorie, contact the Cooks for this]
2. **President Obama:** the Lord will protect and preserve him and his family from all evil; that the Spirit will open his mind to the truth; that he Spirit will strengthen him to see and then to carry the full weight of the presidency
3. **The Deaconesses:** that they will enjoy genuine unity of purpose and Spirit as servants in he congregation; that the Spirit will lead them to those needing comfort, help and encouragement; that they will quickly find help and resources to meet the needs of others
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: SPC Rebecca Wagenaar** (sister of Pam Cervantes and daughter of Kent and Elaine Rankin):
5. **College Student of the Week: Emily Lundberg at UCLA** (daughter of Mark and Susan Lundberg):

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Turn with me to Ephesians 6:16-17. This is what Paul says: *“In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...”* This is the end of the list of the whole armor of God. By way of review we began by looking at the belt of truth. Remember that the belt of truth signified that [as] in the ancient world men often wore robes or tunics, so that when you took the belt you gathered up those skirts, tied them tightly around your loins and it made you free to act. You were ready to move with purpose. So it indicates the seriousness of purpose to engage in whatever is going to be happening next. The breastplate of righteousness: we spoke of that and realized that it is a reference to the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ which is wrapped around your heart, protecting the center of your person with the righteousness of God against all the insinuations of evil that the deceiver slips into our minds in order to bring about self-doubt. So the breastplate of righteousness refers to our assurance of salvation. When God has grabbed hold of us, He does not let go of us, regardless of our circumstances. Next was the “shoes”: we are prepared with shoes of the gospel of peace. We don’t run out on dangerous ground where we might suddenly step on something that would cause us to stumble and fall. Equally important is to recognize that when we begin to dress ourselves in the armor of God, we go as the warriors of God for peace! That is always the objective of our engaging in warfare. The shield of faith is designed to quench the fiery darts, the specific temptations, the doubts that the deceiver throws at us. We are able to quench them as we remember the promises of God that will sustain us through all the adversities that we face in life. The helmet of salvation covers the mind. The helmet of salvation refers to our absolute certainty, our convictions regarding the certainty of our salvation by God’s grace.

Today we will look at the sword of the Spirit. Someone made this observation: the sword is the only weapon that is more than strictly defensive. All the rest of them, you dress yourself up in them, you are prepared to meet the onslaught: but until you put the sword in your hand you have no capability of actually approaching the enemy. We are called by God to stand in the midst of the world and address the world with the word that God has given us. We dress ourselves in the doctrines, we saturate our minds and our hearts, we know that we are well defended, we are ready to engage the enemy. Then we take up the word of God and we step forward into the world and we say: “This is what God has done. This is what God has done for you. I come proclaiming the gospel, and I invite you to believe. I invite you to come to the God Who heals the wounds of sin. I come to let you know of the God who breaks the power of sin, so that you are no longer the slaves of those distorted and misplaced desires. I come to declare to you the God who brings freedom from the fear of death, so that in the recognition that you now are alive not just within the span of this time, but you are alive with God for eternity, you no longer need to live in fear that somehow you will be robbed of the goodness of life, for all the goodness of life will be yours through our gracious Lord Jesus Christ.” But ultimately when I come with the gospel, with the Word, the sword of the Spirit, I come to let you know you can be reconciled with the Living God.

So we lift up the truth about what God has done. That is the sword. But when we lift up that sword we should be very conscious of the fact that at the very time we proclaim the truth, we are speaking against the prince of the power of the air. We are speaking against the one who is constantly endeavoring to move us off the foundations, to turn us away from the path, to destabilize us so that we don’t stand solidly on the ground. It is important for us to remember at all times that it is the word of God that exposes the world’s lies. So what can you anticipate? Do you imagine that the prince of the power of the air is delighted to have the truth told? Of course not!

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” That, of course, is Hebrews 4:12. It alerts us to the crucially important reality that the first place where we encounter the spiritual warfare, the first place where we actually encounter the deceiver of our souls, is in our own hearts and our minds. This is where the battle rages; the first place where you encounter the deceit of the deceiver is in your own mind and own heart. There is a beautiful Proverb, Proverb 4:23, which says, *“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from*

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your heart flow the springs of life.” If there was ever a verse that ought to alert any one of us to the wisdom of beginning our day with God, of taking our heart out, as it were, and laying it before Him and saying, “Please, dear God, may the anointing of your Spirit rest upon my heart that my tongue and my mind might be the servants of your purpose through all of this day.” This verse ought to help us to understand the wisdom of doing that. For all that we are, all that we will do, the whole of our personal testimony will flow from the condition of our heart, so the first thing we will want to do is be sure that our heart is at peace with God, and in agreement with God.

The deceiver attacks and we defend. But, imagine this for a moment: imagine that I am a virile, handsome – ok! – imagine me a Roman soldier. I’ve got sandals on my feet, I have got a breastplate, a helmet, I’ve got the shield and there I am. Now the enemy comes. What can I do? All I can do is run. No sword! Without the sword, all of this defensive equipment is useless. I can run for a while: I am impressed with my sister Sweetman’s son. He is in Afghanistan, a Cavalry Scout. They wear a ninety pound pack. How many of us have ever run very far with a cement sack on our back? So with us! We may get all the garb, all the truth, but if we don’t have the sword of the Spirit, how long can we outrun the deceiver? Not very long! We need the sword or he’ll get us and he will knock us out of the game. Perhaps this is a silly picture, but I don’t think any of us miss the point. Roman armor was not designed and Roman soldiers were not trained to run away. They were trained for moving forward, for occupying the enemies ground. It is the same with the gospel of our salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.

An excellent example is the Lord Jesus Christ when He confronts the temptations of Satan after He has been baptized and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. You can look it up in Luke chapter 4, you can look it up in Matthew chapter 4. They are basically the same; they slightly rearrange the order of the temptations. But just listen to Jesus’ response when Satan comes making suggestions as to what Jesus might do at this particular crisis moment for Him. Jesus has been fasting for forty days and nights. He is hungry. Satan says, “Use your power to make some bread.” Jesus says, “No. It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which comes from the mouth of God.’” I will not attend to my needs before I have listened to God’s counsel and instruction to Me. In the Luke account, Satan says, “You know Jesus, there is an easier way to make yourself the dominant power in the world. All you have to do is worship me a little bit, and I will give you everything you want. Jesus says, “No, it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only will you serve.’” The last thing in the Luke account is, “Jesus, if you want to establish yourself in the eyes of the people you need to capture their imagination and their attention. I have just the plan for you. Instead of taking all kinds of time and walking around and grubbing it out with the dirty people of the crowd, why don’t we do something dramatic? We’ll get you up to the pinnacle of the Temple, and you will jump off, and the angels of God will keep you from hurting yourself; that is the promise of God’s word.” Jesus says, “No, it is said ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ I will pursue obedience and not try God’s love for me.” What is significant is that each of those three answers refocuses the mind of the person being tempted on their relationship with God. Who is my God? Whom do I trust? Where is my trust? My trust is in God. We are to heed every one of God’s words. We are to worship and serve only God. We are to have implicit trust in God, being submissive to His will, which is the opposite of putting God to the test. We trust Him. His answers emphasize that we don’t stand alone against Satan, but we stand under the authority and the power and the love of our God. The question arises: when you and I face temptation, when you and I hear suggestions, when you and I feel tugs, first off, do we weigh those suggestions and tugs against the whole counsel of God’s word? Do we ask ourselves, “Are we being seduced to pursue self-gratification over obedience? And is it somehow or other that the suggestions being made to me, the advice that is being given to me, the insinuations that are being slipped into my mind, are these focusing me on God, or are they pulling me away from God, so that God and His purposes become less and less important to me?”

I read the following this past week. It is perhaps the best argument for the sufficiency of God’s Word that I have ever encountered. I had never thought about it this way before. I am going to ask you to turn in your Bibles, if you

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would please, to Luke 16:19-31. This is one of the parables. I suspect that most of us will recognize this parable. It is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus says,

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple [very expensive in that day] and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

Almost always I have heard this parable referred to for teaching on the nature of hell, the permanence of judgment and the explanation of the failure of the Jews to believe in Jesus, and these are all true. But the real lesson of this parable has to do with the word of God. This is what the man wrote:

“This rich man, then, grew up in the synagogue – [they were good Jews], memorizing the Scripture, hearing it week by week. But he never obeyed it, nor did he love it, finding it boring. He never dreamed for a moment that he would end up in hell. He never thought that one day there would be a great chasm fixed between himself and Abraham. There are many like him who hear the Word of God preached with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven. Judas heard it; Ananias heard it; Sapphira heard it [he is referring to the couple whose story is told in Acts 5 who pretended to be something they weren’t to impress and be admired by others]; Demas heard it [this was a man who turned away from the faith because he loved the things of the world]; the Judaisers heard it – but all were lost. Now, you see what the rich man is saying from hell [is basically this] – ‘If the Scriptures are the only thing that you are going to give my brothers, well... I had them, and what good did they do to me? They did not change me.’ In fact, he is saying in hell, deep within his heart: ‘It is perfectly understandable that I didn’t believe and that they don’t believe – all we had was the Bible. I know my brothers; I am aware of how they live; I know where they are going. The Bible is not going to touch them – those kinds of men need something more.’ In effect, he is saying: ‘It is excusable; if only I had seen a miracle that thrilled me, I would have believed. If a man had been raised from the dead and spoken to me, then I would have paid attention. If I could have gone to a meeting where amazing things happened, it would have been different. But all I had was the Bible. The Bible!’”

The man who I was reading goes on to apply the lesson in this particular way: is God’s word sufficient?

“That is what many people still say. ‘You don’t expect the world to be attracted by the Bible, by preaching the Scriptures, by texts outside chapels, and verses on railway stations, and tracts with Scriptures on them, and memorizing the Bible, and lessons from the Bible to children in Sunday School, and camps where young people are taught the Bible, and conferences where the Bible is proclaimed. You don’t expect people to be attracted by that? We need concerts! We need drama! We need costumes! We need bands! We need choreography! Bring in the drums and synthesizers. Send for the clowns! Then the people will come. We need superstars and celebrities to give us their testimonies – not just the Bible alone!’ But, you see, Abraham was unyielding. ‘The Bible is sufficient,’ he said.”

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“For the word of God is living and active. . .” (Hebrews 4:12) The point is not that there should be no concerts, no dramas, no drums, no testimonies from well-known people who have converted to the faith – although I think the author I was reading would probably draw the line at clowns. I don’t think he would ever want clowns! Personally I found what the flag team did today inspiring, delightful, worshipful. But we must remember, none of those things is ever going to lead anyone to Jesus Christ. It is only the word of God, only, that can ever convict anyone of sin. It is only the word of God that is able to convert the heart. It is only the word of God that is able to transform and to renew the mind. Indeed, there is something a bit more serious that we have to be very thoughtful about: if we in our personal lives, or we in our corporate life, begin to rely more and more fully upon forms of entertainment there is a serious possibility that entertainment will distract from the word of God and in fact deflect its force, so that the contented heart that has been amused is now satisfied and silences the Spirit.

The scriptures are absolutely crystal clear: if a person will not hear the word of God, there is nothing else available. That, you see, is the point of Romans 10. Verse 17 is the particular verse: *“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”* But the larger context reads like this: *“But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching. And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ . . . So, faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”*

We defend ourselves against and oppose the challenge of unbelief with belief. We counter the godless with God. Last week I made this comment: “The credibility of the Christian faith is not found in worldly success; it is found instead in godly character, and in the supernaturally grounded love, joy and peace which are ours in Christ.” Those things are only ours as we remain in the word of God.

Paul makes this stunning assertion. If you would turn to I Corinthians 2:16, Paul makes this amazing statement. What I would like you to do is I would like for you to imagine affirming this inside yourself when you walk out of your door tomorrow morning. When you begin your day I would like for you to imagine being able to say this to yourself. I will personalize this: Paul there says, *“We have the mind of Christ.”* What I would like you to do tomorrow morning is I would like for you to be able to walk out your front door and say, “I have the mind of Christ. That’s how I am going to meet my day. I am going to meet my day with the mind of Christ.” In order to understand that properly we need to get the full context. We pick up the context from verse 12. This is what Paul said. *“We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritual discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”* (I Corinthians 1:12-16) There is an immense amount to gain from that passage; I shall indicate only a small slice. Paul’s reference here to “words taught by the Spirit” is best understood to be a reference to the scriptures. Those are the words taught by the Spirit. That text of the scriptures of the word of God reveals to us the mind of Christ. It is the Spirit Himself who enables us, Paul tells us here, to discern or rightly and believably understand what we have read. This is what it takes to wield the sword. This is what it means to wield the Sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, to take up the Word in complete personal reliance upon the Holy Spirit, to trust God to accomplish His purpose.

In the portion we read from I Corinthians Paul actually cites a verse from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:13). *“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”* The fortieth chapter of Isaiah is a grand exposition of the incomparable greatness of God, it is the beginning of Isaiah’s counter of every form of idolatry. After he makes this immense defense of the supremacy of God over all other things, refuting every form of idolatry,

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he goes into the Servant Songs of the Messiah who ultimately dies for the sins of God’s people. Then, after that, he speaks very differently of the incomparable wisdom and power of God in Isaiah chapter 55. That is what we read for the call to worship today. What is that power? Think of this: who is God? He is the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things. What is the most glorious representation of the power of God? Is it spinning suns, galaxies? O no. The most wondrous demonstration of the power of God is sitting in front of me right now. Why do I say this? Because suns will burn out and die; galaxies will disintegrate to dust, but every person in this room is eternal. Some will be in an eternal hell. Some will be in eternal glory. *“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.”* Now I want you to think for just a moment. You and I are privileged to be able to speak that word, you and I. We are called to be servants of the Living God. When we take up the word of God it is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword and it will accomplish the purpose for which God has sent it. So whether I speak it, or you speak it, it is the word of God, and it does not fail of its purpose. With the word of God, we will not only hold our ground, we will prevail against the enemy of our souls. That is the sword of the Spirit.

Let us pray: our gracious heavenly Father, I heard a man just the other day who said he is convinced that practically every single home in American has a Bible in it, and I know there are lots of homes that have many. Yet Father, I wonder how often those Bibles are opened, how deeply they are loved, how carefully they are read and how readily the truth within these pages, Father, not only fills up our hearts and minds, but controls our tongues and guides our lips that we ourselves by your grace would be those who speak the living word. Forgive us for our neglect. Strengthen us that in our repentance we would change our ways, and fill us up with Your wisdom, illuminating our minds that we would have a true understanding and accomplish all of Your purpose in the world through Your word. Father, it is in Jesus’ name that we pray. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. What has (or would) help you the most for effectively using the word of God as a part of your daily life?

2. What do you think makes people uninterested or reluctant to hear or read the word of God?

3. What portions of scripture have you found to be most helpful?

4. Does reading the Bible help you to center your thoughts on God? Why is it important to have our thoughts centered on God rather than simply on various “truths” from the Bible?

5. Did you find the interpretation and application of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16:19-31 both accurate and helpful? What stands out to you in the parable?

6. In what ways do innovations in worship services helpfully serve the purpose of worship, and at what point do such things begin to hinder or obstruct that purpose? In each case, why is this so?

7. Why is the Bible more effective for the conversion of sinners than the testimony of those who have been saved? What is the risk in relying on such testimonies?

8. If preaching is so necessary, why are so many Christian people reluctant and even opposed to preaching?

9. What do you find is most helpful and what is most unhelpful in preaching?

10. What are your favorite portions of God’s Word?