

The Sword of the Lord

*“The three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.”
—Judges 7:20*

THE SWORD IS ONE OF the most ancient weapons used by mankind, and it continued to be one of the chief instruments of warfare until the invention of gunpowder. So important was its place in the battles of ancient nations that the term sword became practically synonymous with war. In the symbology of the Scriptures this fact is recognized, and it is in many

instances employed in the prophecies of evil that would come upon nations through wars to be waged against them. Thus for example, in the expression, “by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence,” “by the sword” refers to capture or destruction in war.—Jer. 14:12

The sword is an instrument of destruction, and by analogy, in the hands of a nation’s army, it symbolized their strength. A nation with a large army,

wielding many swords, was considered capable of subduing its enemies, thus maintaining its position of superiority and power. This, in a general way, is the background of thought associated with the Bible's symbolic use of the term sword. The scriptural phrases "sword of the Lord" and the "sword of the Spirit" do not refer to literal weapons of steel, but rather to the power of God which he employs to destroy those things which are out of harmony with his will—the enemies of righteousness.

The first time the word sword appears in the Bible it is used to symbolize a provision made by the Lord to prevent fallen man from returning to the Garden of Eden. (Gen. 3:24) This was before man himself had invented the sword, and we might wonder why it was used thus as a symbol before its later, more common meaning was attached to it. In this instance it represents a preventive measure, rather than destruction. It is translated from the Hebrew word *chereb* which, in addition to the common meaning of a cutting instrument, can also be defined as a "drought" or "desolation."

Although this Hebrew word *chereb* is used in the Old Testament more than four-hundred times, one of the very few instances when it could be translated "drought" without doing violence to the context, is in Genesis 3:24, where it is first used. Here it is spoken of as a "flaming sword," and it is used to describe God's arrangement to keep man from returning to the Garden of Eden. It could, in this one case, be given the meaning—"drought." Perhaps the Lord prevented fallen man from receiving the benefits of the garden simply by withholding moisture from that section of the country by use of

a “flaming sword [drought, resulting in desolation] which turned every way.” This might well explain the apparent disappearance of the garden paradise in so short a time.

This original meaning of *chereb* also gives significance to the picture of desolation and blight that is often presented in the Scriptures when reference is made to the effect of the sword. A land, or country, that suffers the ravages of the sword is often described as being utterly wasted. Thus are the enemies of God and of righteousness represented under the withering power of the symbolic “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”—Eph. 6:17

“THE SWORD OF THE LORD, AND OF GIDEON”

One of the early instances in the Scriptures where the Lord is associated with the symbolic use of the sword is in the account of Gideon and his small company of three hundred who defeated a vast army of Midianites. Here it is referred to as “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.” (Judg. 7:18,20) This is clearly a symbolic use of the term, for neither Gideon nor any of his little group of men carried swords in their attack against the host of Midian.

In this remarkable account we are given an insight into some of the important ways in which God’s “sword” is used in the destruction of his enemies, and the fact that he makes it possible for his people to join in the battle with him. This latter thought is suggested by the Apostle Paul when he tells Timothy to endure as a “good soldier of Jesus Christ,” and urges him to “war a good warfare.” (II Tim. 2:3,4; I Tim. 1:18) Paul knew, and every faithful follower of the Master has learned, that in

order to be a “good soldier” it is necessary to “endure hardness,” and not become encumbered with the affairs of this world.

In considering the experiences of Gideon in connection with the defeat of the Midianites, one of the first lessons we observe is that the Lord does not depend upon the power of numbers in order to accomplish his purposes. To impress this point upon Gideon, he caused him to reduce his army from thirty-two thousand to the insignificant number of three hundred. (Judg. 7:2-7) Gideon sensed that God was thereby letting him know that only by his wisdom and power would it be possible to defeat the mighty host of Midianites.

After that victory had been gained, and Israel was freed from the aggressors, the people wanted Gideon to rule over them, but he replied, “I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you.” (Judg. 8:23) Gideon realized that the people’s desire to have him as their ruler was based on the false assumption that he had defeated the Midianites. He wanted them to know that the real conqueror was Jehovah, and so he said to them, “the LORD shall rule over you.”

Gideon learned well the lesson that only by divine strength can victories be won by his people over the Lord’s enemies and their enemies. Have we learned that lesson? The foes of spiritual Israel are not people, nor literal armies equipped with weapons of carnal warfare, but they are, nevertheless, real and formidable. (Eph. 6:12) How important it is that no matter how strong we might feel to fight these enemies of the New Creature, we should look to the Heavenly Father for guidance in

the struggle and lean upon his sustaining arm of strength to keep us from falling.

One of our principal enemies is our own fallen flesh. Allied with our flesh is the world, and the prince of this “present evil world,” the devil. (Rom. 7:18; Eph. 2:2; Gal. 1:4; I Pet. 5:8) It would be impossible for even the strongest Christian to fight victoriously against these unrighteous allies without the wisdom and strength furnished by the Lord. No wonder we tremble when we think of self. However, when we look away from self and to the Lord we are “strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.” (Eph. 6:10) How else could Gideon have defeated the Midianites except God had helped him, and how can we hope to be conquerors, except it be through divine power and assistance?

THE LORD GOES BEFORE US

Before the battle against the Midianites began, Jehovah instructed Gideon to go down into their camp and listen to their conversation. He did this, and heard one of them telling a dream. This dream was interpreted by the Midianites to mean that they would be defeated by Gideon. They said, “This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host.” This was enough to reassure Gideon. Returning to his own little company of soldiers he said, “Arise; for the LORD hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian.” —Judg. 7:9-15

How often in our experiences as New Creatures do the providences of God enable us to “arise” with courage to press forward in the good fight of faith!

This is not because we suddenly discover strength of our own. Rather, it is due to the fact that the Lord gives us an experience by which we are reminded anew that his grace is sufficient for us, that his strength is made perfect in our weakness, and that he will overcome our enemies for us if we but keep close to him by obeying his instructions.—II Cor. 12:9,10

Sometimes the Lord fights for his people in ways unknown to them, preparing victory in advance; while they, by trying to cross those proverbial “bridges” before they come to them, perhaps tremble with fear over the outcome of that which the Lord has already made a certain victory for them. God favored Gideon by letting him know that the enemy had been weakened by fear, and with their morale so low, they were in no fit shape to resist, even though the attacking army was small. Gideon was thus assured that the battle was the Lord’s and that victory was sure. The Lord does not always thus favor his people by letting them know the manner in which he is fighting for them. However, we can be sure that he is doing so, and “faith can firmly trust him, come what may.”

In the interpretation of the dream which Gideon overheard, reference was made to his sword—“the sword of Gideon.” The Midianites were also made aware of the fact that they would be delivered into the hand of Gideon by the God of Israel. This gave an indication to Gideon as to at least part of the strategy he should use against the enemy, for he arranged that at a certain time, and upon a signal from him, his little army was to shout, “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.” This was in keeping

with what the Midianites were expecting; and being convinced of defeat, they became panicky and began fighting one another.—Judg. 7:19-22

Here we have an important lesson. Gideon and his little army did not use literal swords in this attack. Hence the term is used symbolically to describe the manner in which the wisdom and power of God operated to defeat the enemies of his people. The only “weapons” they used in this particular strategy were trumpets, torches, and earthen pitchers. (vs. 16) Through this strange combination of articles the power of the Lord—his sword—operated to rout the Midianites.

THE TRUMPET AND TORCH

Fundamentally, the great battle in which spiritual Israelites are engaged is one between darkness and light, error and truth. Jesus, prefigured by Gideon, is the “light of the world,” and he commissioned his followers that, as his representatives, they also were to be the “light of the world.” (John 8:12; Matt. 5:14) However, the darkness “hateth the light,” and Satan, the prince of darkness, musters all the hosts of sin in battle array against the Lord’s “little flock” of footstep followers.—John 3:19,20; Acts 26:18; Luke 12:32

We are provided with an “armor of light” to protect us against the “wiles of the devil,” and one of the pieces of that armor is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 6:11,17) In the picture furnished us in the account of Gideon, this symbolic sword is represented by the twofold illustration of trumpet and torch. In the illustration we are reminded that it is only as

the trumpet gives forth a certain sound, and the torch is displayed, that the forces of darkness and evil are defeated. This suggests that the Truth only becomes powerful as we trumpet it forth and let it shine by being “an example of the believers.” (I Tim. 4:12) Truth merely shut up within us will not overcome our enemies, nor make us conquerors in the good fight of faith.

BROKEN VESSELS

The third item Gideon provided for his little band of warriors was the earthen pitcher, and this played its important role only by being broken. The vessel was used to conceal the light of the torch until Gideon gave the signal for the attack. The three hundred soldiers were divided into three groups of one hundred each, and deployed on different parts of the hill overlooking the valley where the Midianites were camped. Gideon took his place with one of the groups, and his instructions were that all the men were to do as he did, the plan being that he would blow his trumpet and at the same time break the earthen vessel that covered the torch. The men with him would do the same, and when the other two groups heard the trumpets and saw the lights, they also were to blow their trumpets and uncover their torches. Finally, they were all to shout, “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.”—Judg. 7:16-18

The strategy was most effective. Only captains in ancient armies, it is said, blew trumpets and carried torches. Thus it would have appeared to the Midianites that Gideon commanded a tremendous host, one large enough to require hundreds of captains. This, together with the information in the dream

that Gideon and his God would defeat them, caused consternation in the ranks of the enemy, and they began fighting one another and thus fell an easy prey to the little company of attackers.

One never tires of recounting this intriguing narrative of how God enabled so few to defeat so many. However, the important thing to us is not the account itself, but the lessons it conveys to us as spiritual Israelites, followers of Christ Jesus. Perhaps one of the most important of these is that of breaking the earthen vessels to permit the light of the torches to be seen by the enemy. This might well represent self-sacrifice needed in order that the light can shine out. The symbolic sword of the Lord is effective against our enemies only in proportion as our self-sacrifice causes the light of truth to shine forth in a dark world.

The trumpet of the Gospel message must also be sounded. The shout of Gideon and his three hundred, “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon,” was merely an interpretation of the significance of the trumpets and the torches. In our case, it is the sword of God’s Word, the Bible, that is made effective in our good fight of faith as we proclaim it and cause it to shine forth. In order to do this, our earthen vessels must be broken and emptied of self, made of use to our Lord and Master, Christ Jesus.

All the various parts of the Christian’s armor, as outlined by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:10-17, represent the weapons of our spiritual warfare from one standpoint or another. Most of these are for defensive purposes, to protect us against the attacks of our enemies, but the “sword of the Spirit” is for offensive use. It is the sword, God’s

Word, that we use to fight against the forces of evil, both “within” ourselves and “without,” referring to external oppositions, which seek to defeat us in our walk with God.—II Cor. 7:5

Jesus, the Captain of our salvation, and his “little flock” of footstep followers, are prophetically represented as saying of the Heavenly Father, “He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me.” (Isa. 49:2) Here we have the assurance of divine protection as we use the sword of truth by showing forth, both by word and by example, the message which our God has given to us and with which he expects us to overcome our enemies—the spirit of the world, our fallen flesh, and our great adversary, Satan.

A “TWO-EDGED” SWORD

The Apostle Paul speaks of the Word of God as being “quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Heb. 4:12) We are given a similar thought in II Corinthians 10:4,5, where we read, “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”

Thus we are reminded that one of the New Creature’s enemies is our fallen flesh, and that we are expected to turn the sword of the Spirit inward, symbolically speaking, in order to subdue and to

bring into captivity those earthly propensities which war against us as spiritual Israelites. For this purpose the sword is very suitable when properly used. Self seeks to be recognized and to have its way in almost every experience of life. Its reasoning is most subtle, and only by applying the principles of righteousness to every situation will we be able to keep our flesh under control. It is with self that the Christian's warfare begins. "He that ruleth his spirit," the Scriptures state, is better "than he that taketh a city."—Prov. 16:32

The Christian warfare, however, does not end with self. The flesh may try to make us believe that it does, and thereby cause us to avoid letting our light shine. This false notion is one of the "high things that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God," one of the "reasonings," as rendered by *Young's Literal Translation*, the purpose of which is to circumvent the will of God that we should lay down our lives in the service of the Lord, the Truth, and the brethren.

One of the ways in which the enemy of our fallen flesh can be slain is, as represented in the Gideon picture, through breaking our earthen vessels to let the light shine out. As this is done, we will also be assisting ourselves in the battle against our other enemies, the spirit of the world and Satan. By being engaged in letting our light shine, our victory over the world and the Adversary will be in preventing them from diverting our attention, or from beating down our courage to fight the good fight of faith. In the overall picture, however, every member of the church, beginning with Jesus, our Head, has been engaged in a battle which ultimately

will result in the destruction of the “present evil world” and of Satan, its prince, and establishing in the earth the divine rule of righteousness.—Gal. 1:4; Rev. 20:1-3,10,14; II Pet. 3:10-13

This is one reason our battle is called a “good fight of faith.” (I Tim. 6:12; II Tim. 4:7) We cannot now see these formidable enemies falling down before us. Seemingly evil continues to triumph. However, by faith in God’s plan we know that when we enlisted in the army of the Lord we took our stand on the side in which, ultimately, truth and righteousness will triumph everywhere. We as individuals will not know the tremendous power that is being exerted against the bulwarks of Satan until we gain, through faith, our own victory and have been given an abundant entrance into “the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”—I John 5:4; I Cor. 15:57; II Pet. 1:11

THE HIGH PRAISES OF GOD

Psalms 149:5-9 depicts the “little flock” army of the Lord, particularly in this end of the Gospel Age, making effective use of the sword of the Spirit, here spoken of as a “twoedged sword,” and speaking the “high praises of God.” No matter from what standpoint we view the divine purposes, they certainly reflect the praises of our God. The Apostle Peter speaks of showing forth “the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.” (I Pet. 2:9) To do this, we need to break our earthen vessels in order that the light which has shined into our hearts may be seen by others. Thus, the trumpet tones of truth, sounding the praises of God, become the sword of the Lord.

Jesus said to his disciples, and to us, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) We might think of the "kings," the "people," and the "nobles" mentioned in Psalm 149:7,8 as representing the various sinful elements of the world under the rule of Satan, and that we are victorious when we "overcome the world," as Jesus did. We think, however, that more than this is implied in the psalmist's prophecy, for it is clearly one that applies to the end of the present age, and the preparations being made for God's kingdom of righteousness, which will replace the "present evil world."

The church at this end of the Gospel Age is commissioned to wait upon the Lord, and to declare that all the kingdoms of this world are being brought down, and all present human rulership will soon come to an end. How thankful we are, however, to have the additional privilege of proclaiming God's kingdom of peace, joy, health and life, which will supplant the old sinful order, and be under the righteous reign of Christ and his church.—Zeph. 3:8,9; Rev. 20:6; 21:1-5

Thus, as the consecrated people of God, our part in this final struggle of the ages is simply that of proclaiming the great plan of God, the "gospel of the kingdom," for the emancipation of the world from the slavery of sin and death. (Matt. 24:14) By doing this faithfully, we are blowing the trumpet of truth, we are holding high the torchlight of the kingdom message, and we are shouting, "The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon."

How blessed is the peace of mind and heart which is ours to enjoy in the knowledge of the Lord's certain

victory! The battle is his, not ours. He has outlined every strategic move we are to make. He has provided us with an armor of protection against our foes, and has put his twoedged sword of the Scriptures into our hands. If we use this faithfully, following the example of the “captain” of our salvation, our share in the victory of the Lord will be certain. (Heb. 2:10) In order to participate in this victory, however, we must press on in the battle. Our part in the struggle will not be complete until our earthen vessel, broken to let the light shine out, is completely consumed—until we have been “faithful unto death,” that we may then receive “a crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10 ■