

“The Lord’s extra-sharpest knife”

Hebrews 4:12-16 NIV

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

“(14) Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

“(15) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. (16) Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Today’s text intimates a truth that puzzles many Bible scholars.

To what riddle do I refer?

Jesus lived and taught non- violence.

He tutored and trained his followers to turn the other cheek:

“Pray for your enemies”;

“Bless those who revile you.”¹

Yet the New Testament often refers to warfare and weaponry.

In Ephesians 6, Paul used a Roman soldier’s equipment to symbolize Christian readiness. You know of “the sword of the Spirit,” “the shield of faith,” and the “full armor of God.”

Our Hebrews text says that the word of God is sharper than a double-edged sword.

Swords suggest carnage, don’t they?

Is the Bible inconsistent here?

In addition, scholars have, and perhaps you have noticed, this New Testament curiosity.

Commentators write on the subject and professors discuss it in seminaries.

¹ See Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7.

To many it seems odd that nearly all the Roman officers in the NT were good guys.

Matthew and Luke mention a centurion in Jesus’ adopted hometown, Capernaum.

One of this Roman officer’s best workers became deathly ill.

He requested some Jewish elders to ask Jesus to heal his employee.

The elders pleaded with Jesus: this centurion, “deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.”²

How often do you hear of a military officer building a house of worship?

The centurion further distinguished himself.

Because the officer totally believed in Jesus’ ability, the Lord said: “I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”

That likely jolted lots of religious bigwigs.

Imagine a gathering of American religious leaders and an officer of a hated foreign country happens to be present.

The Lord suddenly appears and says to the group: “The person present today with the most outstanding faith is this foreign captain.”

Note a few more examples of exceptional military officers, which the Bible features.

- **A centurion not only witnessed Jesus’ death, he acknowledged that Jesus was extraordinary “a son of God.”³**

- **The Book of Acts reads:**

“At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, ‘Cornelius!’

² Luke 7:1-5

³ Mark 15:33-39

“Cornelius stared at him in fear. ‘What is it, Lord?’ he asked. The angel answered, ‘Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.’”⁴

- Acts mentions other reasonable, kind, and sympathetic centurions.
- Acts includes the Philippian jailor, who was likely a retired Roman officer.⁵

The NT mentions as many as six different Roman officers and not one was a bad guy.

At least that half-dozen were apparently good, generous men.

Why would the NT writers look so favorably on these military people?

At times the Roman army personnel acted brutally and harshly.

If Jesus deplored the use of violence, why were these military officers mentioned and commended?

Some folks seem to overlook the following:

Jesus abided by the Law of Moses, the chief guidelines being the Ten Commandments.

These commandments were designed for only the nation of Israel and its residents.

The law guided the conduct of Israel’s kings, queens, prophets, common folks, and slaves.

- **It applied to their personal relationships, business conduct, and marriage contracts.**
- It directed civil, health statutes, and criminal statutes of towns, villages and big cities.

As God originally gave the Law to Moses, it was a superior law that applied equally to all.

No priest, prophet, king, rich person, or poor person in Israel was exempt.

The law favored no person or any group.

Note the equity in these laws:

“Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.

“Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with a crowd and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit...”

⁴ Acts 10:1-4 NIV

⁵ Acts 16.

Verse 6:”Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.

v. 13” Be careful to do everything I have said to you,” instructed the Lord.⁶

Fair-minded people appreciated these laws

Centurions were responsible for keeping the peace in Roman controlled areas.

To those officers, the Law of Moses probably seemed like an ideal set of regulations.

Consider a second reason the New Testament spoke kindly of these centurions.

The Jewish Scriptures (our OT), taught that one God created the heavens and the earth.

Pagans thought there were separate gods of the mountains, the valleys, the seas, etc.

January was named after an old Latin deity Janus, the god of the sun.

March gave tribute to Mars, the Roman god of war, and perhaps fields and vegetation, too.

The idea of separate gods, who control various activities, survives in the tradition

that saints in heaven can assist us in various compartments of our lives. So folks honor different saints and plead for their help.

Yet the New Testament consistently refers to saints as members of Christ’s church, all of whom were alive and sometimes behaving badly.

Paul and Timothy addressed the church in Philippi: **“To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:”**⁷

The New Testament usually described deceased Christians as: “asleep”.⁸

They remain asleep until the resurrection on the Last Day.

Let’s return to the fact that the Bible teaches the oneness of God.

Pagan religions taught that gods control various aspects of nature and the creation (those gods of war, fertility, mountains, oceans, even trees).

⁶ Exodus 23:1, 2, 6, 13 NIV

⁷ Philippians 1:1b NIV Later editions of the NIV use the terms: “God’s holy people.”

⁸ See Acts 6:7; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 15; 2 Peter 3:4

If your god is the god of the mountain and you are in a river valley, you are in deep yogurt

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.”

“What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way our God is near us when we pray to him?”⁹

You recall, of course that the belief in one God as opposed to many is called monotheism.

Many thoughtful Romans were drawn to Israel’s God because of their monotheism.

As we already noted, the fairness and equity of the Mosaic Law attracted many pagan worshipers.

After those same people heard about Jesus, his life, his teaching, and his resurrection they saw something else.

Those reasonable Roman officers saw splendid qualities in Christ’s people, in believers.

What good traits did they see in Christians?

⁹ Deuteronomy 6: 4, 4:7 NIV

In school you probably learned about the Pax Romana—the “Peace of Rome.”

As Paul wrote Christians in Philippi, faithful Christians find peace in their hearts:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! **5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **6** Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.**

“7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

Paul wrote the Corinthians: **“Everything should be done in a fitting, orderly way.”¹⁰**

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:40 NIV

Pagan’s witnessed peace and orderliness in God’s people.

Many Christians tend to forget these truths that Jesus accentuated: he wanted his followers to preach his good news, to confront folks with God’s rule, warning them to repent.

But Jesus never coerced people to accept him. **When folks accepted his Good News, he told them what they must do to change.** If folks refused to believe him or to repent, however, he went on to another area.

He didn’t waste his time when people refused to accept his word; he moved on to folks who would listen to him.

Jesus did not teach us to force belief on others.

Jesus’ followers never stirred up trouble or caused ruckuses over mistreatment.

They obeyed Jesus by loving others and continuing to preach Jesus and his resurrection.

God’s word was working on their hearts.

Many scholars think that the two-edged sword referred to in our text was a type of surgeon’s scalpel known as a machairan. Some knives had convex or rounded blades, which would have made them double-edged (see accompanying photo).



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¹¹ From “Bulletin of the American College of Surgeons”, 2-1-2018 by Jason B. Brill, MD, et.al.

The following paragraph is from an article “based on a poster presented at the History of Surgery Poster Session at the American College of Surgeons (ACS) Clinical Congress 2017 in San Diego, CA. The session is sponsored each year by the Surgical History Group. “Metal blades replaced sharpened stone: first it was copper (3500 BC), followed by bronze and then iron (1400 BC). But it wasn’t until 400 BC that the concept of a surgical knife was first described by Hippocrates. He used the term ‘macairion,’ a smaller version of a Lacedaemonian sword called a ‘machaira,’ to describe the surgical tool. The machaira was a broad-cutting blade with a single edge and sharp point, containing the same essential features of the modern scalpel as defined by *Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*: “A pointed knife with a convex edge.” In Rome, Galen and Celsus used an instrument with this shape—a small, sharp blade for specialized used for incision and drainage, tendon repairs, and vivisections.”

The following illustrates how God’s word acts as a two-edged sword (knife):

I grew up thinking that a preacher’s job was to establish the correctness of a church’s position and to prove others wrong.

Most preachers then spoke on short texts or on subjects such as faith, love, baptism, etc.

To be sure, some of my preaching still reflects that.

After I began reading the Bible all the way through every year, it became evident that in my desire to attain doctrinal perfection, I had neglected huge portions of the word.

While recently reading Philippians, a verse I had ignored (2:14) jumped out at me.

God’s word began to slash and burn my heart:

“Do everything without complaining or arguing.”

The word “**complain**” jerked me to attention.

It is an onomatopoeic term:

a word that sounds like what it describes.

Bob’s note: The term in Hebrews 4:12 is macairan (μάχαιραν), likely the convex edged knife, later used by Galen and Celsus.

Buzz and hiss are onomatopoeic in English; in Greek complain is gongudzo.

**It sounds disgusting, doesn’t it?
What is the bottom line of today’s lesson?**

One day Paul and Silas preached in a Macedonian city called Philippi.

Without a trial or hearing, the two were falsely accused, beaten, and imprisoned.

They were in stocks; could not move their arms or legs and were in a sitting position. It was dark; the air probably acrid with odors of urine and feces, the confined area thick with sounds of cursing and anger.

Do you recall what Paul and Silas did in those dreadful circumstances?

The certainly did not complain.

They sang and they prayed.

That night the Lord caused an earthquake that loosened the chains that bound the prisoners, yet none tried to escape.

Even before the quake, the officer-warden in Philippi saw something in Paul and Silas.

Though they were confined in a foul, filthy environment, they rejoiced, and were at peace with God.

God’s two-edged knife worked on Paul and Silas.

Then it cut into the heart of the jailor and his family

He brought the innocent missionaries out, and washed their wounds.

Next, Paul and Silas taught everyone in the jailor’s house about Jesus.

- All were baptized.
- Finally they had the happiest meal that family had ever enjoyed.¹²

**Is the Word of God working on you?
Do others see its effects in you?**

Only you and the Lord know the answers and how you should follow-up on this info.

- We cannot change the world.
 - We cannot change others.
- We do not even know how to change ourselves.

Only by letting God’s Word have its way with us will we ever reach our full potential.

*Christ in us is the hope of glory.
God bless you!*

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¹² See Acts 16 for the full story of Paul, Silas, the jailor and his family,