

**The Disciplines of Studying and Reading**  
**Ezra 7:8-14, Acts 18:24-28**

Friends, I have to confess that I find sword fighting and swordsmanship very appealing, I really like it. In fact, if I'm trying to decide which movie I'd rather watch, I'll go for the one that has sword fighting in it.

So I'm a big fan of the Lord of the Rings movies, Pirates of the Caribbean movies, even Stars Wars with the Jedi Knights and their light sabers, and especially The Princess Bride! *(If you've never seen that movie – you should... its inconceivable!)*

And after I watch any of these films I'm usually all inspired to take up sword fighting with whatever I can get my hands on – a broom handle, a piece of wood, a pool noodle...

But, the truth is I don't know the first thing about sword fighting - I'm just swinging and poking that piece of wood or pool noodle around hoping that it looks as impressive and cool as it does in the movies.

If I really wanted to become a swordsman – a good one who can handle a sword like the warriors and knights that you see in the movies, I would have to train and study and eventually I would learn how to properly use a real sword – like this one!

And friends a sword is a symbol of strength and power, a weapon, a tool, which in the right hands can be used to fight for justice, protect the weak, to attack and defeat evil.

And someone who used a sword in this manner was a Knight - in service to the King, or a Samurai Warrior - in the service to the Emperor.

They had trained and learned how to use a sword, to fight for what was noble and right and to defend their country against those who would attack it.

But it's important to understand that being a Knight or a Samurai wasn't simply about being able to use a sword. It was first and foremost about a heart of loyalty, courage, honor and noble service - sword fighting and other martial

arts were the means by which this heart was lived out and expressed.

And friends, all through September we were learning about the heart of discipleship in the Five Solas – By Grace alone, By Faith alone, By Christ alone, and By Scripture alone, to God’s glory alone!

And now – in October - we’ve been focusing on how the discipleship disciplines help us to express and live out that heart of being a disciple and why it is necessary to pass on these disciplines to those we are disciplining.

And just as a Knight or a Samurai was trained and disciplined so they knew when to use their sword and how to use their sword to express and live out their ideals – so to, we as disciples, must be trained, and we must train others, to take up and use what Paul calls “*the Sword of the Spirit – which is the Word of God*” (Eph 6:17)

And friends the best way to train ourselves, and others, to be able to use the Sword of the Spirit... is through the discipline of reading and studying the scriptures.

And I say reading **and** studying because the manner in which many people read – once we have finished our schooling, and perhaps even while we were in school – is mostly for informative purposes or entertainment or inspiration.

Once we are out of school much of our reading consists of reports, newspapers, magazines, brochures, flyers, web-sites, novels – most of which are written to pass on information in a straightforward direct manner, or to grab and maintain our interest and keep us entertained.

And we are used to simply picking up the material and reading it. If we have to go back and reread it again to better understand it, well - we conclude that it wasn’t written very well.

We expect to be able to understand something correctly the first time we read it, especially if it's important.

And if something is going to keep our interest - so that we keep on reading it, we expect that it will be written in an interesting and engaging style.

If it is not – then we won't stay motivated to continue reading it. We'll just put it down and move on to something that keeps our interest.

So friends, it's safe to say that very few of us would object to doing some more reading... but if that reading is going to actually train us to use the Sword of the Spirit it needs to include studying so that we're learning how to get the most out of what we're reading – especially when we are reading the scriptures.

Because the scriptures were not written in our day and age, they were not written in our language, they do not make use of our figures of speech, nor did the writers of the bible have

copy editors or proofreaders - who might have advised them to rephrase a sentence so that its more grammatically correct, or to use a different word to convey their thoughts better.

Instead they had their own literary structures and devices which they used to communicate what they had to say, they had their own nuances and unique ways of using certain words to communicate the concepts and truths they were writing about.

Friends – the truth is that while we confess that a simple reading of the scripture is sufficient for the Holy Spirit to convict us of our sin and enable us to turn to Jesus for forgiveness – the scriptures are not the kind of easy reading that we are accustomed to.

So we must learn to practice the discipline of reading **and** studying so that our interaction with scripture is more involved than just perfunctory reading – because it's the bible...

So that we aren't just reading whatever sections which we find interesting or inspiring – like Psalms - and so that we don't skip over the chapters which just don't make sense to us – the genealogy lists in Numbers – and so that we stop avoiding the parts which challenge us or make us uncomfortable.

Friends disciplining ourselves to read and study will make us masters of the Sword of the Spirit, we will become proficient in handling the Word of God – and that is what we are encourage to do – Paul says in 2 Tim 2:15 *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”*

But friends I have to warn you – the bible is not easy reading and studying it will take discipline.

You will not understand things right away when you read them - you will have to go back and re-read things.. twice,

three times, four times even. You will have to make notes, you are going to have to you go and look things up.

You will need to ponder about what you've read, meditate on it, do some historical background research about the author and discover the reason why he was writing, maybe even learn a thing or two about the original languages.

And at first - you are not going to feel inspired, you won't enjoy it, you will probably feel confused, I can guarantee that it's not going to feel very spiritual or uplifting at all.

I would be just like if you went and started to learn how to handle a sword you would be put through all sorts of practice drills and your arm would ache and you would feel clumsy and you would look a bit awkward.

But you need to know that reading and studying is going to make you feel this way because I've seen too many people begin this discipline and then give up on it because it feels too

hard, and I want you to know what you'll be up against – no surprises...

So that you can press through this and keep going, because if you just keep working at it little by little, if you learn to live with the discomfort, the confusion, and you make yourself put up with the mental challenge, the tediousness of it all...

Then gradually, over time you will start to notice you are gaining skill with the scripture – you are becoming proficient in handling the Sword of the Spirit.

Friends – do you know what I'm talking about with this? Maybe you've experienced this dynamic in some other area of your life before?

Perhaps it was in your university or college studies; maybe it was training to learn how to use a new tool or machine, learning to speak another language, or training for a sports team you played with – but you know what I'm talking about when I say that it takes discipline to make yourself do the hard

work and stick with it and you've experienced the kind of success that comes from that.

Friends, being a disciple of Jesus is no different – and when you are tempted to give up and pass by the hard work of reading and studying – remind yourself of how you experienced the benefit and the gain in that other area of life so that you don't give up, so that you keep on working at it.

So – what is it exactly that you will gain friends? Why push through all the hard work and unpleasantness?

Because the scriptures will become useful to you – for all sorts of things.

Paul says in the 2 Tim 3:16 -17 that scripture *“is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

Friends – teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness – that’s what we are doing when we are working to fulfill the mission which Jesus gave us – Go and make disciples of all nations...

And the two scripture passages that we read this morning give us examples of people who had done the hard work of reading and studying and were skilled in using the scriptures in these ways and they were equipped to help and serve others in this way.

In the Old Testament we read about Ezra, who had *“had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”* (Ezra 7:10)

Now if we apply a bit of historical research and background learning to this scripture passage – you will learn that Ezra had lived through the Babylonian exile, and that the nation of Israel had been defeated and exiled to Babylon because – in

spite of repeated warnings – they continued in their unfaithfulness and disobedience to God’s covenant Law.

And a bit of historical study will also reveal that the Babylonians kept peace in their Empire and prevented people from rebelling by encouraging them to observe and worship their local gods.

And so, in the book of Ezra we see King Artaxerxes recruiting and commissioning Ezra – because of his study and training in the Law of God – to go back to the land of Israel and make sure that the people who lived there were being obedient to God and His laws.

And some further reading shows that Ezra had to rebuke and correct the Israelites who had been left in the land because they had married non-Israelite women for financial gain and both of these things were going against God’s Law.

With his knowledge and skill of the scriptures Ezra was able to challenge the people to turn away from their disobedience –

and they did. They disciplined themselves and returned to God.

It wasn't easy to be obedient to God – put it was necessary and worth it because God was giving them another chance to live in the promised land and be faithful - and they didn't want to face being exiled yet again.

And then we read about Apollos in the New Testament. *“He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.” ( Acts 18:24)*

Apollos was born in Egypt in the city of Alexandria, and again – with a little bit of historical study you will not be surprised that Apollos had a thorough knowledge of the scriptures – because the city in which he was born was known for having the greatest library in the ancient world and it was a gathering place for world renowned scholars.

In fact it was in Alexandria that seventy-two scholars gathered, and translated the entire Old Testament from

Hebrew into Greek – a work known as the Septuagint, which is still referenced today when people are studying scripture.

Now – Apollos had travelled to Ephesus for some reason, which was providential because in Ephesus he meets Aquila and Priscilla – two devout Christians who can tell that Apollos knows about the Messiah and about Jesus from scripture and he is not afraid to share that.

However they can tell that He needs to be taught about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and so they have him over for lunch and explain that to him, and Apollos – like a true scholar of the scriptures – is always open to learning more.

And eventually, Apollos decides for some reason to go to Achaia - a city over in Greece – and again its providential because he ends up being a great help to the Christians there as he *“vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.” (Acts 18:28)*

So in both cases – God used these men who were thoroughly disciplined in reading and studying the scriptures to accomplish good work – teaching, rebuking, correcting and training others in righteousness.

And as we hear about it this morning, I’m praying that it has the same effect on you that watching a movie about sword fighting does on me.

That you’ll be inspired to want to be able to do the same and that you’ll take steps to not just read the bible – but start to discipline yourself to study it.

And a very good way to begin doing that is to get yourself a Study Bible – and it has notes and comments and all sorts of other information, right in there with all the verses.

So, as you are reading, you can reference the notes – and study what you’ve just read – and use it as a reference point to go and do further study with more scholarly and academic resources.

But friends – a final caveat about the discipline of reading and studying – If we truly want to master the Word of God in the scriptures, we must first be mastered by it.

This is distinguishing characteristic between a Christian scholar and a scholar of Christianity.

Remember Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees in John 5:39. He says *“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”*

Friends, the end goal of disciplining ourselves to read and study the scriptures is not to accumulate facts, or find answers to difficult questions, or to impress others with our insight and wisdom, or to go around correcting everyone, or worse yet using the scriptures to justify our own agenda.



Instead our goal through reading and study is to seek out the Word of God and allowing the scriptures to reveal the truth about the Word to us.

And as you begin to recognize the truth of the Word in the scriptures – you will also begin to recognize the truth of the Word in Creation – in other books you might read and study.

So, again I have to confess that not only do I like movies about sword fighting – I also like to read books which have sword fighting in them as well – fantasy novels.

And one of my favorites is a book called The Sword of Shannara - it's probably kind of obvious why I picked this book right?

And the Sword of Shannara looks like an ordinary sword but it was created to defeat evil by exposing it to the power of the truth – it's a sword of truth.

But before the hero can use the sword effectively against the evil which threatens the land – he must face what the sword will reveal about himself.

So let me read for you what happens when the hero in this story picks up the sword and faces the truth about himself.

*"In the vortex of emotion and basic self that comprised the centermost region of his being, the bearer of the Sword of Shannara came face to face with himself... Pictures and impressions loomed up before him. Thrust suddenly before his eyes, the world that was his birthplace and life source, from past to present, lay open and revealed to him, stripped bare of his carefully nurtured illusions, and he saw the reality of existence in all its starkness.*

*No soft dreams colored its view of life, no wishful fantasies clothed the harshness of its self-shaped choices, no self-conceived visions of hope softened the rawness of its judgments. Amid its sprawling vastness, he saw himself displayed for the pitiful, insignificant spark of momentary life that he represented.*

*The images cleared with a frightening sharpness and abruptly he saw another side to himself, a side he had never been able to recognize – or perhaps had simply refused to accept.*

*Here was an accounting of every hurt he had caused in other, every petty jealousy he had felt, his deep-seated prejudices, his deliberate half-truths, his self-pity, his fears, all that was dark and hidden within himself.*

*He could not sensibly deny this other side of his character; like the limited image of the person he had always believe himself to be, this was only a part of [his real self] – but it was indeed a part, however difficult he found it to accept. But he had to accept it. It was the truth." (The Sword of Shannara, Random House Publishing Group, 1977 pg. 690-692)*

Friends, would you not agree that this essentially describes what happens when a person encounters the Word of Truth in the scripture.

That this is what Hebrews 4:12 is speaking about when it says *“For the word of God is alive 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.”*

So friends through the discipline of reading and study we do not come to truly master the Sword of the Spirit – the Word of God... instead the Word of God masters us.

This is what is most important friends - that our study of the scriptures leads us to an encounter with the Word of God, the Word of Truth, the Word become Flesh, and it reveals to us who we truly are and so our eyes are opened and we are made ready to receive the Word of Life – our Lord Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.

So friends - reading and study of the scriptures is not an abstract academic exercise, far removed from the everyday practicalities of life – like sword fighting actually is.

Rather it is a discipleship discipline which positions us to encounter God Himself who gives us, and those we are discipling, The Truth in His love.

Amen.