

## **“Soul Surgery by the Book”**

### **Psalm 40**

*Series: SWORD*

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Some years ago I received a very strange text from Joe Piscadlo. While he was cleaning and vacuuming the offices he noticed a strange package outside my office door. In these days of heightened security I worried it might be something dangerous. It was! Wrapped in brown paper was a large, oddly-shaped object. I tore it open and discovered the last thing I expected: a sword. A real, wood-handled, bronze-hilt, stainless steel blade sword – the kind your mother said would poke your eye out, the kind you’d see in a King Arthur, Lord of the Rings or Monty Python movie. Inscribed on the blade in old English font are the words: “Trust in God, Fear nothing.” So beware Woodside – your pastor is now armed and dangerous – mostly to himself.

Who gave it to me? A member of Woodside. He wanted to thank me for the sermon I gave about the Bible. Giving your pastor a weapon sounds like a funny way to show appreciation. “Great sermon today pastor. Here’s a grenade.” What does a sword have to do with the Bible? Well this guy knows his Bible and he remembers the Bible 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. (Hebrews 4:12)

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Ephesians 6:17

In two places the Bible describes itself as a sword. God’s Word is not dead, dull and out-of-date like some old dusty book you read in English class. It is alive and active. The Bible speaks today, it speaks to our day, it speaks to you about your day. Hebrews says it is sharp – sharper than a double-edged sword. A sword can pierce a body. The Word of God penetrates deeper. It can slice into your soul and spirit, it can touch those areas that are out of joint, it reaches down to the very marrow of your bones. And what does the Word of God do when it gets in there? As a surgeon uses a scalpel to cut away disease from the body, so the Bible does spiritual surgery. It judges, challenges, corrects and heals the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. You wouldn’t want your doctor to perform surgery on your body by looking at a text book. But the only way to do soul surgery is by this Book.

The Bible is the inspired Word of God that guides our beliefs and actions. Yet some still find it hard to understand Scripture. This leads to several myth-conceptions about the Bible.

**You need a seminary education to understand the complexity of Scripture.** Seminary and education are helpful for understanding the background, the language, the structure of the Bible. Yet there are many seminaries and professors with multiple opinions about the Bible. This is why those who enter seminary often come out with more questions than answers. Nothing wrong with having questions. I only say this to dispel the myth there are secret answers hidden in

the ivy halls and ivory towers of seminaries. The Word of God is the bread of life available for everyone. Moses and Jesus say,

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.  
Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4

You can be nourished by a meal without knowing all the ingredients in the recipe or all the fats, proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals.

**You need a famous Bible teacher to unlock the power of Scripture.** People say to me, “We’re doing a powerful study by Max Lucado, Rick Warren, Francis Chan or Beth Moore.” Then I hear other people say, “We’re tired of Max Lucado, Rick Warren, Francis Chan and Beth Moore.” This is nothing new. The first Christians in Corinth lined up behind powerful teachers.

My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas (Peter)”; still another, “I follow Christ.” 1 Corinthians 1:11-12

Paul quickly confronted this faulty allegiance to Bible teachers.

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 1 Corinthians 3:5

Jesus also cautions us from elevating certain teachers.

But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.  
Matthew 23:8

Maybe you think I’m saying this because I want you to only listen to me. That’s the next myth.

**You need a gifted pastor to unveil the application of Scripture.** This week I received an email from someone in the congregation who is writing a blog. The person asked if they could quote something I said in my sermon. I started to feel my ego growing. “Someone wants to quote me on the internet? Wow!” When the person told me what they wanted to quote I realized it was in Martha’s sermon. Truth is: you don’t need a pastor to explain the Bible. Here’s a secret you may not know: the Apostle Paul was not a good preacher. This is the feedback he received.

For some say, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” 2 Corinthians 10:10

I’m sure Paul didn’t like hearing that little piece of destructive criticism. Yet he accepted this lesson in humility because it reminded him where the real power comes from – the Spirit.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power. I Corinthians 2:4-5

You don't need a seminary diploma, a famous Bible teacher or a gifted pastor to understand and apply God's Word. All you need is what everyone already has, the Word and the Spirit. The Holy Spirit will teach you God's Word.

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. I Corinthians 2:13

The Holy Spirit is the doctor who uses this book to perform soul surgery on us. The Spirit cleans out the disease of sin and transforms us into the people God created us to be. Now don't get me wrong – I believe great seminaries, Bible teachers and pastors are essential for the church – after all, I'd like to keep my job. What I want to smash is the myth that you can't study, understand and apply the Bible yourself. Everyone can feed on the Word of God. My goal is not to make you dependent on me. My goal is to teach you to feed yourself and to feed others. I successfully taught my children to feed themselves and now they are feeding others. I want to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. This is exactly what Paul trains Timothy to do.

What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. 2 Timothy 2:2 (NRSV)

Do you see the five generations in this one verse? What Paul learned from many witnesses, he teaches Timothy who teaches faithful people who teach others as well. This is the way the Word of God spreads. If it has to rely on a few educated, famous, gifted preachers it's never going to multiply. Everyone can feed themselves the Word of God. You don't need a seminary degree. What you need is a knife and fork.

Or maybe a SWORD. I came across this simple Bible study method that can be used by any person on any passage of Scripture. Today, and for the next two weeks, we will not only teach you this method, we will give you the time to try it – during worship, in your quiet time and in your growth group. Please pull out the insert in your bulletin. SWORD stands for Scripture, Wait, Observe, Request and Dedicate. I will walk you through each part.

**Scripture:** Take 1-2 minutes to select and write in the space below a verse or group of verses that stood out to you. Even if you read a whole chapter of Scripture, you only choose and focus on 1 or 2 verses. This will prevent you from being overwhelmed by everything packed into a chapter.

**Wait:** Take 3 minutes now to wait on the Holy Spirit. Put aside any thoughts and worries of the day. Meditate on the Scripture. Reread to yourself the verses you selected slowly and attentively. Then pause to let the Holy Spirit speak to you. This is probably the most difficult task because our minds get distracted or we start to analyze and interpret the passage. Wait means just that – wait to hear what the Holy Spirit says to you.

**Observe:** What did you notice about the verse(s) you selected? Was there something the Holy Spirit spoke to you? Write below your observations and questions. Now is the time to play detective. Ask questions. Make observations. Jot down insights. Record new ideas.

**Request:** Ask God to show you where and how the Scripture and observations apply to your life. Write the application below. Make a request to God – ask the Lord to show you how this passage applies to you. Try to be as specific as possible. Vague applications like – “Sin is bad. Try not to sin” are not helpful as “Avoid complaining and gossiping.”

**Dedicate Yourself:** Looking at how the Scripture applies to you, what is one thing that needs to change? Perhaps the change is in the way you think or feel, the way you see yourself or others, something you need to do or stop doing. The purpose of Bible study is not information but transformation. What does God want you to change? Again, be as specific as possible. “Every time I feel like complaining I will think of a reason to give thanks to God.”

Today we’ll try the SWORD method on a Psalm. Next week we’ll look at a letter and the following week a story. Read Psalm 40 with me.

**Scripture.** Now take 1-2 minutes to select and write down 1 or 2 verses which stood out to you on the space in your insert. Next I will give you three minutes to **Wait** on the Lord. Three minutes is not very long. When you do this at home you can take as long as you like. Try to clear your mind and listen for what the Spirit is saying to your spirit. Third, write your **Observations** and questions. Try not to interpret. Just observe as many things as you can. Here are some observations and questions I wrote about the whole psalm:

1. In verses 1-4 it’s I and He speaking of the Lord in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. Verses 5-10 switch to I and You – the writer talks to the Lord. Verses 11-15 are I, You and They – the writer tells the Lord all the problems and people attacking him. Verses 16-17 are a final blessing and a request for help.
2. I zeroed in on the first four verses. The person is in a slimy pit, stuck deep in the mud and mire. He is sinking in quicksand, unable to get out on his own, powerless to save himself. If he tries to get out on his own he will sink deeper. He has to wait patiently and cry to the Lord for help. The Lord hears his cry and turns to lift him out. Why does the Lord have to turn to him? Did He turn away from him? What caused the Lord to turn away? Maybe his sins caused the Lord to turn away. He may have trusted in proud people or false idols instead of the Lord.
3. As the psalm goes on we hear how troubles surround him, how his sins overwhelm him, how people want to shame him and take his life. Sounds like a very slimy pit of despair.
4. Yet in the center of the psalm, we hear why it is essential to trust in the Lord alone. The Lord is the only one who has the power to save us. He performs so many wonders it would take a lifetime to list them all. The Lord is loving and faithful. He is the one who can save. He is the one who does save. So what does the Lord ask of us? This is when the psalmist says something shocking.

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire – but my ears you have opened – burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, “Here I am, I have come – it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart. Psalm 40:6-8

The whole Law, the Temple, the Old Testament are built on a system of sacrifices and offerings. This was true even in Jesus’ day. Yet hundreds of years before Jesus this psalm says God does not want dead animal sacrifices on an altar. He wants the living sacrifice of our lives. He wants us to love Him, trust Him and obey Him from the heart. I can summarize this psalm using the words inscribed on the blade of my sword: Trust God. Fear Nothing.

You don’t need to make all these observations. I just want to show you there is a lot to observe in a few verses. Even if you come away with questions that’s okay. We learn by asking questions as well as making observations.

Now take a few minutes and make a **Request**. Ask God to show where and how your observations about these verses apply to your life. Write down the application. The application I received is:

Life is full of mud and mire – some caused by me, some by others. I am powerless to stop it. The more I try, the deeper I get. To avoid getting stuck in it, I must pause, receive God’s peace and ask Him to pull me out.

Finally, how will you **Dedicate Yourself** to accomplish this application? What change will you make in the way you think or feel, the way you see yourself or others, what you need to do or stop doing? Here’s what I will change this week based on what I’ve learned:

When I feel stressed and overwhelmed, I will pause, relax, pray and ask God to pull me out of the situation. Instead of obsessing about problems or people I will praise God for all the good things He has done for me.

Probably the most deeply distressed place on the planet is the nation of Haiti. Circumstances are so dangerous there last year the United States issued a travel ban which prevented a Woodside team from traveling to offer help. The travel ban was lifted and last weekend the Haiti team returned from a fruitful week of service. They worked and taught at the vocational school, delivered food to hungry families in a mountain village, provided a VBS for orphans and donated musical instruments at another school. They heard tales of God’s love and faithfulness in the midst of great poverty and despair. They witnessed how the Lord is lifting people out of the mud and mire and setting their feet on the Rock of Jesus Christ. Our team brought more than financial support and physical labor. They encouraged the people with God’s Word, the Sword of the Spirit. Several years ago they brought down Bibles to the school. God’s Word is still giving hope. Helen Hughes writes,

It was very moving to see how so many of the students were so thankful and grateful for our gift. Having a Bible here at home is something we all take for granted. It made such an impression on me when a man in one of the classes made a point to stand up and thank us for the Bible he received. He said that many groups come and give them money, which is

important and very much needed, but he was so thankful that we gave him a Bible, which he considered so much more important because it gives them the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit does soul surgery by this Book. This week, let the healing begin.