

The Shield

1 John 5: 1 – 5; Ephesians 6: 16ⁱ

Having and Taking

Continuing his exhortation to “put on the whole armor of God” that we “may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil,” The Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 16:

¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one... Ephesians 6:16 (ESV)

This is the fourth of six individual pieces identified by Paul as parts of the whole—the panoply—of God’s armor, and, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes:

The difference between the three portions that are to come and the three portions already mentioned is the difference between ‘having’ and ‘taking’.ⁱⁱ

By this we mean that in the case of the first three, there is a sense in which having put them on, they simply remain on. Even during a lull in the battle when a soldier in the field might put down his shield, helmet and sword, he would never take off his belt, his breastplate, or his sandals, so that as soon as an alarm was given that an attack or an advance was taking place, he would be ready to take again his helmet, sword, and shield and to enter the conflict.

In this sense, we are to stand (and even to rest), having armored ourselves—having clothed ourselves—with the truth, the righteousness, and the peace of Christ Himself, and these things are the possession of every Christian. We don’t need to go looking for them. They’re not locked away in an armory somewhere waiting for us to find the key. They’re not a secret treasure for which we need to seek. In Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in Him...ⁱⁱⁱ If we have come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, then the truth has already set us free—it’s simply a fact—His righteousness has already been credited to our account, and, having been justified by faith, as Paul wrote in Romans chapter 5:

¹ ...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 (ESV)

This triad of truth, righteousness and peace represents the very essence of what the Apostle meant when he wrote in Romans chapter 13 that we are to “cast off the works of darkness” and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”^{iv} But then, having clothed ourselves—having put on the Lord Jesus Christ—we are now told that “in all circumstances” we are to take up “the shield of faith.” In all circumstances, we are to be on high alert. The trumpet has sounded, the battle has been engaged, the evil day has come, the enemy is on the attack and it is time to

¹⁶ ...take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one... Ephesians 6:16 (ESV)

The Shield of Faith

The word used signifies the large oblong shield of the heavy Roman infantry, which was at least 2 ½ by 4 feet in size—sometimes larger. Lloyd-Jones wrote:

The original idea was of a door which you held in front of you, and behind which you could hide. Later it was altered into an oblong shape; but it was still meant to cover most of the body.^v

In other words, they were designed to be tall enough to protect an individual soldier from fiery darts and arrows, and any sort of missile that the enemy might attempt to hurl against him, but also wide enough that when standing in phalanx formation, the legion could interlock them and present a solid and nearly impenetrable wall of shields to the enemy. The front line would hold their shields forward, and subsequent lines could lift their shields overhead, offering protection against arrows and missiles from above as well. You may have seen these tactics portrayed in movies, like *Gladiator*, where the Roman legions are seen advancing against a rag tag line of barbarians with lethal results.

This is the sort of security that the Apostle had in mind when writing of the shield of faith. The sort of security promised by God in numerous Old Covenant passages in which He Himself promises to be a shield to His people, as He did to Abraham in Genesis 15, verse 1, when He came to him in a vision and said,

¹ ...“Fear not, Abram, **I am your shield**; your reward shall be very great.” Genesis 15:1 (ESV)

The Psalmist also notes of the Lord, our God:

³⁰ This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; **he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.** Psalm 18:30 (ESV)

So, Paul wrote of the shield of faith because our faith is in the God who is a shield for all those who take refuge in Him. “The word of the Lord proves true,” This is the promise of God Himself, and this is the way in which we take up the shield of faith. We take it up when we embrace that

²⁰ ...all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]... 2 Corinthians 1:20 (ESV)

and then we advance into the conflict, “confident that he will protect us in the midst of the battle.”^{vi} As one author put it:

Faith here means the ability to apply quickly what we believe so as to repel everything the devil does or attempts to do to us.^{vii}

Faith means to accept that word with which I so often close our services:

⁵ ...For [God] Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” ⁶ So we may boldly say: “The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” Hebrews 13:5–6 (NKJV)

Because the kind of faith that we’re talking about here always outward focused—it looks to it’s object and not to itself—and it is not faith in ourselves, or faith in others, and certainly not faith in faith itself which will always—always—fail. It is faith—it is confidence—in the Living God

who said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” It is faith in the God who promises to be a shield for all those who take refuge in Him. Even when we advance into this spiritual battle against the fiery darts of the wicked one,

It is knowing that when God says that he is able to keep us from falling and present us before his presence with exceeding joy, he means exactly that and will do it.^{viii}

The Fiery Darts of the Wicked One

And what are these darts? John Stott wrote:

The devil’s darts no doubt include his mischievous accusations which inflame our conscience with what (if we are sheltering in Christ) can only be called false guilt. Other darts are unsought thoughts of doubt and disobedience, rebellion, lust, malice or fear.^{ix}

Sam Storms, writing in more graphic language put it like this:

What are the “missiles/darts/arrows” of the Evil one? O’Brien believes they depict “in highly metaphorical language, every kind of attack launched by the devil and his hosts against the people of God” (480). I believe Paul’s focus is more narrow:

- the sudden and unexpected eruption in our mind of vile images and thoughts that shock and surprise us (such that are obviously and undeniably contrary to our most basic desires);
- words and pictures that disgust you and violate your God-given sense of propriety/morality leap into your mind; **[that is,]** blasphemous thoughts about Jesus; revolting images of sexual perversity; suicidal urges; compulsive thoughts of doing horribly violent things to family/friends; unaccountable impulses to rebel against God, against one’s family, against one’s church; subtle insinuations against God’s character/goodness; false feelings of guilt.^x

In short, anything that disrupts our fellowship with God and turns our heart, soul, mind, or behavior away from the paths of righteousness in which He leads us for His own name’s sake. Last fall we went through a series on our ancient foe, considering the many ways in which Satan casts his fiery darts at the church and at the people of God, some of them quite direct and disturbing—think of Jesus confronting that demoniac, Legion, on a lonely Galilean beach, or of the slave girl with a spirit of divination who followed Paul and his companions for many days crying out after them. Most of the time, they’re as simple as something glimpsed in the corner of our eye—a sidebar add on a perfectly acceptable website that tempts us down a rabbit hole of covetousness, or lust, or idolatry.

The list is long and includes, according to the Apostle John, all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—**these things are not from the Father**, John wrote, but are from the world,^{xi} still, many times they come to us packaged as perfectly normal, natural (some would say, “acceptable”) human desires. In the wilderness, Jesus was hungry, and justifiably so—He had been fasting for 40 days. But Satan took that very natural, very human desire for nourishment and turned it into a fiery dart.

³ ...the tempter came and said...“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” Matthew 4:3 (ESV)

which was not God’s will and therefore would have been sin, so Jesus would not. And we have many normal, natural human desires—the desire to eat and drink; the desire to receive affirmation; the desire for success; the desire for companionship; the desire for sex—the list could go on and on and on. All of these things are natural and normal and even good when sought within the context which God decreed for their use, but Satan will use every single one of them as often as possible as a fiery dart in his long war against the people of God.

So, we need this shield of faith. We need to stand in the promises and in the power of God, to say with our Savior,

⁴ ...“It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”” Matthew 4:4 (ESV)

I was once speaking with a young, single man who was struggling with the kind of temptation that young single men and women struggle with when they find themselves alone together in compromising situations. My first word of counsel was pretty simple, two words really. Stop it! Stop putting yourself into those compromising situations. Instead, Romans 13, verse 14:

¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Romans 13:14 (ESV)

But knowing something of the way of a man with a maid (to appropriate a line from Solomon who evidently had more than his share of such indiscretions), I suggested, “If you do find yourself in that place again, try this. Just before you give in to the temptation—just before the fiery dart of the wicked one sinks into your flesh—stop and ask your girlfriend to pray with you.”

He laughed out loud, and said, “What would we pray?”

I probably should have anticipated the question but I didn’t, so I retreated to the first thing that came to mind and said, “How about the Lord’s Prayer? What if, sitting there in the glow of the dashboard lights you prayed, together and out loud, the whole prayer, of course, but especially that bit that says, ‘And do not lead us into temptations, but deliver us from the evil one,’ what effect might that have on ‘the mood’?” I don’t know if they ever tried it. I hope they never had to. I hope they followed the earlier counsel about making no provision for the flesh; and if this is the particular fiery dart of anyone who is listening today, I hope you do the same. Still, one way of lifting up the mighty shield of faith is the simple recognition that we do not live by the satisfaction of our desires, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And every time we stand and profess this commitment to obedience (which is exactly what that statement is), we can hear the hiss of the steam as another fiery dart of the wicked one is extinguished and drops harmlessly to the ground. By the way (and this is probably pushing the analogy a bit), when those darts fall to the ground they are still sharp—the are still darts—but if our feet are shod with the preparation of the gospel we will tread on them and we will

crush them and we will never feel their bite. Paul may have had something like this in mind when he wrote:

²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. Romans 16:20 (ESV)

Overcoming the World

And once again, this is the point. When we speak of spiritual warfare—even the sudden, direct, fear inducing attacks of the forces of darkness and evil, it's not to induce fear, but to encourage us to put on the whole armor of God and to stand fast. To take up the shield of faith and with it to extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. And we can—we truly can, through the faith that is in Christ Jesus. For:

¹⁹ ...the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. 1 John 5:19 (ESV)

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Ephesians 6:13 (ESV)

And:

¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one... Ephesians 6:16 (ESV)

For:

⁴ ...everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. 1 John 5:1–4 (ESV)

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise specified, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier: An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10–20* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 297..
 - iii Cf. Colossians 2: 9 – 10.
 - iv Cf. Romans 13: 12 – 14.
 - v Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier*, 298.
 - vi Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 479–480.
 - vii Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier*, 305.
 - viii James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 248.
 - ix John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 281.
 - x Sam Storms, *Biblical Studies: Ephesians* (Edmond, OK: Sam Storms, 2016), Eph 6:16.
 - xi Cf. 1 John 2: 16.