

Our Spiritual Warfare (6) - The Shield of Faith

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 0 0] at verse 16 working your way our way as you know through this short passage dealing with the armor of god and we've noticed in general terms how the passage is introduced and then we began looking at some of the components of the armor through to verse 15 and now we've reached verse 16.

So we'll read there at verse 14, stand therefore having fastened on the belt of truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness and as shoes for your feet having on the readiness having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace and then verse 16 in all circumstances take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. Well this obviously deals with what we know of as the shield that the Roman soldier in those days used to carry and use against whatever enemies they were facing and the Roman shield was itself actually a weapon and it was a very widely used weapon in different ways it had such a build to it that it was solid enough to actually be able to use against an enemy so if a soldier had a sword broken or taken away the shield would still prove a very effective weapon. But the Roman shield was also often covered with hide, the hide of an animal, the skin of an animal and the hide would be attached to the shield and the reason for that was that just as

Paul has noticed of course and used in the spiritual teaching of the passage, very often the Roman army would be facing an enemy that would fire arrows at them but the arrows would have been dipped in some material other that could be set on fire. And so when the arrows came towards the Roman soldiers, flaming arrows, it's it's fiery darts it says here, the flaming darts of the evil one, literally the Roman army would often face an enemy that used fiery arrows to try and cause maximum damage and of course more intimidation too as you saw a whole a whole army against you firing flaming arrows toward you. It added to the sense of fear but the shields of the Roman army were actually designed with the hide was then soaked with water so that when the arrow came through it very often could be extinguished just by hitting the hide and the depth of the skin and the soaking up of the water would actually quite effectively deal with the flames on the arrow as it came through. And so that's really what Paul has in mind as an illustration of what he calls the shield of faith. Now we've already pictured the Roman soldier with the other parts of the army and you notice he's saying here in all circumstances take up the shield of faith. And I think there's a distinction there between the shield and the other parts of the armor that have been meant of the armor that have been mentioned so far because the other parts of the armor you put them on and you kept them on. The Roman soldier obviously very often had to sleep with some of that armor still worn apart from the heavier bits but the shield of course would be laid aside when you came to rest for the night you would lay it beside you somewhere where you could reach it very quickly and effectively and so you took it up. So every time you actually needed it to be used it will stay ready for you to take up. Whereas the other parts of the armor that I mentioned there before the belt of truth the breastplate of righteousness very often these were kept on especially in the morning when you got up and you actually had your armor put on if you weren't already waiting parts of it you put it on in the morning and you kept it on. But it's only when you needed to use the shield when you really went out to face the enemy actually then you could take the shield along with the armor you're already wearing and there you are effectively facing the enemy with that shield in place. And that's really as we'll see also significant when it comes to thinking about faith as well because the faith that's mentioned is a faith that we take up. It's certainly faith that's already in place because faith is the trust that we have in the Lord. But as we'll see the faith here and the use of faith is what's really important to notice.

So first of all what he's saying here is about the fiery darts in all circumstances and that too is important. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. And he's mentioning this deliberately in all circumstances. Take the shield of faith. The circumstances in which you're actually engaging with the enemy and in a spiritual sense of course that is on an ongoing basis. There's no moment of the day when we're not vulnerable to the attacks of the devil of the evil one of these spiritual forces that he's mentioned here as the chief enemy. What are these fiery darts that Satan fires at us or uses agents to fire at us? What nature, what sort of nature are they off? What kind of thing are they? How do you actually see them in actual experience?

What are they comprised of? Those fiery darts, these flaming darts of the evil one. Well of course first of all you could say they come from personal hatred. The source of them is always the evil one. Whatever agents he may use, the evil one is the source of all the flaming arrows that he fires towards you as a Christian, as a believer in Christ. And that personal hatred of the enemy and the very definitions of evil itself are means that he uses, that he gets access to us through. As you know yourself there are very many different definitions of what is right and wrong in our society. And while most of the most people would probably not really believe in a personal devil, one of the ways that the devil actually skillfully uses his untruth in people's minds and experiences to persuade them that it's not, he's not really a real being at all. It's just something that has grown in human imagination or even the teachings of the church in older times. But of course Paul knows very differently.

[7 : 07] And as he knows very differently so he's emphasizing for the Ephesians that they must never think about this as other than a very personal attack from this very real being, this very personal being that has such animosity towards them. The wiles, the craftiness, these things that he's mentioned previously, that you may be able to stand against all the schemes of the devil. And one of his schemes is a scheme that presents the lie as if it were the truth. As he presents to us things which are very persuasive, very persuasive, so people actually take that up as being the truth and reject the gospel.

And you will attack yourself and myself like that as well. There are times you may be different to myself, I suspect not in this regard, but as preachers of the gospel, some of us, most of us, maybe certainly myself, will very often have to wrestle with ideas that come into your mind, especially with passages of the word that are maybe not as clear, or passages that the world will say are just impossibilities, miracles, or the likes of the opening chapters of Genesis, and will very forcibly try and get me to believe these are not actually factually true. They're just made-up stories, they're made-up inventions, in order to try and explain some of the things that are found in actual human experience in the world. And you have to wrestle with that, and you have to go to God with that, and you have to ask God again to persuade you, Lord, persuade me once again, though I know your word, this Bible is true, convince my heart one more time that this word is reliable, that this word is accurate, that this word is true. So that's one of the ways of many by which the craft of the evil one will try and get you to believe things about this Bible that are not true, things about other events in the world that are not true. He will try and persuade you, even in these critical times with this pandemic and with the varieties, variations in this COVID virus that have broken out over the past couple of years, he will persuade many people, this has nothing to do with God.

God, it's absolutely detached from God. If there is such a thing or such a being as God, he has nothing to do with this. This is just simply on the human level. Well, even if you don't go as far as to say that God has sent this directly on account of our disobedience to him, and I wouldn't rule that out, it's undoubtedly the case that every act of providence has a direct relation to God in some way or other. And therefore this as well is used by God to bring to our notice that there are things in this world that we need him for, and we cannot manage our lives on our own, that we need to depend upon him. And as Paul has it here, in all circumstances, take up the shield of faith.

So your enemy from personal hatred will cast flaming arrows at you. But some of them will use your own inward thoughts, because the devil will approach us by attacking the working of our minds. I'm not talking here about those who have mental health problems, but all of our minds, as the devil will use certain aspects of our mind, for example, your memory. He will have access to your mind as you memorize, as you remember certain things. He will try and cause havoc by getting you to persuade, by getting you to be persuaded that actually you should have done something that you didn't do, and that had critical consequences, or you've left something undone that you could have done, and maybe things would have turned out differently had you done so. And the devil can play on all of these kinds of memories, what you did, what you didn't do, what you've left undone, what affected other people. Your memory will take account of your doubts, doubts that are very much part of the

Christian experience. If you go by the Bible, have you ever met a believer that didn't have doubts? Well, I have met some believers that claimed at least that they never had doubts. I was happy to say, well, I'll leave that with you, but that's not how I've been, and that's not how most Christians I've met have been. So the devil can have access to your doubts and can exacerbate your doubts, and can actually fill out your doubts. When you, for example, find circumstances in life similar to, let's say, the example of the psalmist in some cases, or of Job in the book that he's left us, where questions come to your mind, is this fair? Can this really be of God? Is God not really being unkind or untrue to himself? Is this really of benefit to me? Why has God brought this upon me when I don't find this sort of thing in anybody else's life at the moment? Whole range of your thoughts and of your doubts, and indeed from your imagination as well. This is one area I think that we really have to be very much aware of, and I'm not going to say at all that this is confined to the minds of young people or of children, but I'm mentioning it because it's very much to do with their situation as young people as well. That the imagination, the workings of our imagination can very much lead us into the ways of sin. And remember, sin is sin even in your imagination and in your mind without it ever breaking out into action that's seen by other people.

[13 : 20] And from reading books, from looking at films, from the internet especially, you have access to our imagination on the part of the devil and his agents that can actually lead you astray away from the truth of God altogether. And you know yourselves how vulnerable our young people are, how incredibly important Christian parenting is in our day, how important that our Christian teachers are also supported in what they're trying to do, even if they're not Christian teachers, most of the teachers that I know will actually be concerned to put before the children something that they know has integrity as far as that being moral teaching is concerned.

But especially Christian teachers who need our prayers and who hopefully have our prayers. But what a difficult day they live in when they're meeting with children whose minds are polluted by access to all sorts of things on the internet and who themselves will quite openly acknowledge.

I just heard last week of a young girl who was boasting, I suppose, of the fact that she had access to pornography and was using really shocking terms and talking about this to her fellow children in school and whose parents were obviously allowing access to that sort of thing.

That's the world we live in. That's the world we live in. And that's all from this dark power, from everything that is malevolent against the gospel, so that he has access to the workings of minds, the workings of your mind as well. And you know very well that it can come even during the time when you're worshipping, that you can have your mind taken off your worship, your praying, so that thoughts come into your mind that distract you, or even put thoughts in your mind during your worship that you really know don't belong there.

That's the kind of access that he has. That's why we need this shield of faith so as to quench, extinguish those flaming darts from personal hatred from him and his agents, from inward thoughts that come upon us that sometimes creep up or sometimes just jump out in the workings of your mind.

[15 : 55] And sometimes you may be quite horrified as just how suddenly and abruptly your mind is on something that you know has disturbed your worship and your thoughts about God.

And thirdly, the fiery darts can very often come from outward trials as well. Now, we very rightly think of outward trials that God uses towards the sanctifying of his people, towards making them holy, towards giving them a greater dependence on himself.

And that's how we, of course, should use our trials that happen to us in this world, but that's not how it always happens. Because sometimes the devil will try and persuade us, like he tried to persuade Job, that the hardships that he was facing in his life were due to the fact that he had been disobedient or dishonoring to God.

And it can really trouble a person's mind if they allow these sort of ideas to develop when there's no proper grounds for them. And it's very common in those who follow Christ that these outward troubles are used as fiery darts against them so that the devil will say, well, if you go further with that development of your Christian life, you know, you're going to lose trials, you're going to lose friends through these trials, you might lose your position in society or in your career, and also you might have much more persecution.

And so he persuades you that persecution, although, of course, we know it's not a nice thing, nevertheless, sometimes it's in God's purpose for his people.

[17 : 41] As we read in Hebrews chapter 11, that whole list of faith, people who took up the shield of faith. But you'll have noticed the passage we read tonight, how much it was full of references to the sufferings, to the afflictions, to the trials, to the sore, difficult, challenging providences that these people went through in the purpose of God.

And nevertheless, they exercised that shield of faith. In fact, the writer there is really saying pretty much that he has many others that he could have mentioned, but he just didn't have time to do so.

The whole Christian church from beginning right through to our own day has been very much aware of persecutions from time to time.

And of course, in the days of the apostles themselves, and in the immediate aftermath of the days of the apostles, some of the Roman emperors exercised extreme cruelty towards those who professed to be Christians.

And that was part of what the apostles had to write about themselves. And if you go to the Psalms, one of the most wonderful things about the Psalms is how they really captured every experience, I think, that you could actually meet with in your own personal experience in life.

[19 : 02] The ups and downs, however high and however low they may be. And you will always find the psalmist addressing something that fits into that category, these categories.

And you often find the psalmist using these words, how long, Lord? Like, for example, the first line of Psalm 13, how long, Lord, will you forget me?

Will it be forever? Now, there's the psalmist expressing sorrow, expressing that sense of grief and pain over the trial that he's facing.

Yet at the same time, just remember that if he didn't have faith, he wouldn't be saying that at all. He is still exercising the shield of faith because he's turned to the Lord with his trial.

He's turned to the Lord for help. He's always expressing it in the sense of how long, Lord? Perhaps a sense of frustration or of anguish at how long this has been going on.

[20 : 02] And you'll find that elsewhere in believers in the Bible as well. So if you find yourself with those sort of sentiments rising up in your soul, you're in good company. That doesn't mean that we actually have to leave them unattended or just let them spread or that it's right for us to have them in the first place.

But there in the psalmist, you find, Lord, how long? Please hear me. Please lift me out of this. Please bring this to an end.

And isn't that really what we're saying with this terrible pandemic that seems to be just going on and on? We know that it'll come to an end. We know that it will either that or it'll just peter out so as to be less significant or of a danger to people's lives and health.

But aren't we actually coming before God, looking at all the restrictions that have been in place, that are being put in place again, and the difficulties people face in thoughts of being together, even in church, we appreciate that, we understand that, what we do with it, we surely bring it to the Lord and say, Lord, how long?

How long will this go on? Will you not? Please, Lord, intervene. Come with your own power. Come with your might. And like the wind is able to sweep away the leaves on the ground, come with your might, O Lord.

[21 : 23] Intervene. Come to our help because it's affecting your cause. And so come to our aid. These are the expressions of the psalmist there that fit into the fiery darts of the evil one.

I've just picked out a few. You'll be able to add to those yourself. But these are the main avenues of teachings that are within this reference, the fiery darts of the evil one, from this personal animosity against the church, from the inward thoughts of our minds, and our imagination, and our doubts, and our memories that he has access to, and from our outward circumstances sometimes too, especially when they come to be really difficult and trying for us.

So how do we then use faith as our shield? What does he mean when we've seen something about the fiery darts? Take up the shield of faith.

Well, it's not here an emphasis so much on what we believe. Faith, of course, is about what we believe. But the emphasis seems more on how we use the faith that God has given us.

Remember, the Roman soldier's shield is the illustration that he's using. And the Roman soldier's shield was there for him to use, but he didn't use it the same day in the same manner.

[22 : 46] It depended what he was facing. The shield was the same from day to day. The shield didn't change, but he had to change sometimes how he used it. Sometimes he might use it just to put it up so that it would protect him from whatever was coming toward him.

Sometimes you would use it in attack. And so this is really saying to us, your faith has different ways in which you apply it.

And as you apply your faith in different ways, it's not so much about what you believe, but how you use your faith in dealing with whatever circumstances comes your way.

The confession of faith has a wonderful definition, as it has on most things, has a wonderful definition on faith as well in the chapter on faith.

And faith, it says something like, moves in a different way, even to the elements of truth that you find in the Bible.

[23 : 48] It rejoices at the promises and trembles at the threatenings. And they are just the same faith. That's just an example of how faith is exercised in different ways.

You tremble in awe, not in terror, but in awe and respect and in honor when God brings, especially those things in his word, to your notice, where his own judgment is set forth.

And even if you know that it's not going to touch you because you're in Christ, nevertheless, when you read these great wonders of the Bible, these wonderful descriptions of God in his greatness as the judge of all the earth, you cannot but tremble in a believing way before that.

And also the promises of God, the wonderful promises that open up for us such great vistas of beauty and of rejoicing, particularly so as you think of the world to come.

And faith rejoices at the promises as it trembles at the threatenings. And faith is a wonderful thing in this sense too, that because it's the faith that God has given us, you actually use it in a way that, if you like, matches up with the circumstances you've got.

[25 : 10] Sometimes you'll be rejoicing in the providence of God, the company of believers in worship like tonight. Or other times, you might have, as we said, the other side of the issue, more of the trembling, more of the fear of God and the awe inducing your faith in that way.

And the use of faith is itself a very crucial thing. Of course, faith, we know, is really the grace that joins us to Christ or joins us to him for our justification for his righteousness.

We are justified by faith. That's not of ourselves. It is the gift of God, Ephesians 2. And we actually then don't depend or rejoice in faith itself because it's the gift of God and it's the Christ to whom our faith unites us that really is the basis of our confidence.

As you go through that great chapter, Hebrews 11 again, you'll find that that's what it says. It's not just what they believed and how they used it, but actually the outcome of that in the practicalities of life in all of these instances.

For example, Noah, he believed the promise of God that a flood was coming. A threat, of course, was a threat as well. And as he believed that, he set to work. By faith, he built an ark.

[26 : 37] Why did he build an ark? Because he believed what God was saying to him, what God was saying was going to come upon the world. And so, the faith led to that practical outcome of his building the ark, the practical aspect of his life.

And so it is with our justification as well and other aspects of our relationship with God. Now, the devil will, of course, come and attack you on that basis as well because, for one thing, he will say to you, well, you're just too bad a person to think that God would actually have his favor given to you.

You don't deserve anything of what you claim to have as a Christian through faith. you say to him, well, you're right.

I don't. I don't deserve it. I am unworthy of it. I am bad at heart, naturally. That's how I was born.

That's what I'm like as a sinner. But that's not the basis on which I'm looking towards eternity. That's not the basis on which I'm looking at my relationship with God.

[27 : 57] That is my Lord. That is his righteousness. And I am justified with his righteousness. And the devil can tell me that this is true about me and that is true about me, but I'll return that to him and I'll say, yes, but this is true about me too.

That the Lord approves of me in Christ. That the Lord has given me the righteousness that will never be dented, that will never grow old, that will never be outdated, that will last not only through time but into eternity itself.

The righteousness that I'll be wearing in heaven just as I'm wearing it now as the breastplate that God has given me. And so the shield of faith, you see, is connected with these other aspects of the armor as well.

And they're not, as we've seen already, speculations. They're not the invention of human minds. They're not things which the church has seen appropriate to invent or to just put together for the benefit of its members down through the years.

They're facts. They're wonderful, spiritual, glorious facts. Therefore, he says, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts, of the evil one.

[29 : 24] One of the great hymns that you know of is, abide with me. And one of these verses is always a verse that I personally find very comforting and very encouraging.

and in line with our study this evening, we can close with these words. I need thy presence every passing hour. What but thy grace can foil the tempter's power?

Who, like thyself, my guide and stay can be through cloud and sunshine? Lord, abide with me.

May the Lord indeed abide with us and bless to us. Thank you. Thank you.