

The Christian Life (28): Sanctification (Part 13)

Having girded his loins with the belt of truth, put on his breastplate of righteousness, and shod his feet with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, the Christian soldier must then take up the shield of faith.

I. The Armor of God: The Shield of Faith

1. *The priority of faith?* The importance of faith is seen in the phrase "above all." "Above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one" (Eph.5:16). Literally the phrase is "in all" or "in all circumstances." The Greek word for "shield" refers to a large slab of wood which stood four feet high from top to bottom. Its purpose was to protect the whole man from arrows called "fiery darts." It was covered with a thick piece of leather that was treated to be fire resistant. "Roman shields in Paul's day were about four feet long by two feet wide, large enough to cover most of the body. They had fireproof coverings, which was important to minimize the effect of flaming arrows. With this shield, a soldier could not only stop fiery darts and flaming arrows, but also extinguish them" (Beeke).¹ There's a sense in which faith is armor for our armor as it's designed to protect all else. "For You, O LORD, will bless the righteous; with favor You will surround him as with a shield" (Ps.5:12).

Of all graces faith is the chief, and is chiefly to be labored for. There is a pre-eminence peculiar to this above all other. It is among graces as the sun is among the planets. The apostle indeed gives the pre-eminence to love, and sets faith on the lower hand. 'Now abides faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (1Cor.13:13). Yet, you may observe, that this favoring of it before faith has a particular respect to the saints' blissful state in heaven, where love remains and faith ceases. In that regard love indeed is the greater, because it is the end of our faith. We apprehend by faith that we may enjoy by love. But, if we consider the Christian's present state, while militant on earth, in this respect love must give place to faith. It is true, love is the grace that shall triumph in heaven. But it is faith, not love, which is the conquering grace on earth. This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith (1Jn.5:4).²

By faith is meant belief in God as He's made Himself known in Scripture, and especially in the gospel of Christ. "Faith is made up of three things—*knowledge*, *belief*, and *trust*. *Knowledge* comes first. 'How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard' (Rom.10:14)? The mind goes on to *believe* that these things are true, and thus *trusts* or *commits* itself to the merciful God and rests its hope on the gracious gospel" (Spurgeon).³ And so, while the general object of faith is the whole word of God, and the specific object of faith is Christ as revealed in the gospel, the ultimate object of faith is God the Father reconciled to us through and in Christ. "God in Christ, as a God of mercy, grace, and love, and as reconciling sinners to Himself, is the ultimate personal object of saving faith. All the truths revealed in Scripture are the truths of God, so that when we assent to them, we believe Him" (Colquhoun).⁴ Thus, in the technical sense God as reconciled in Christ is our shield and not faith. Faith is but the hands whereby we embrace Christ and a reconciled God in and through Him. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield,

¹ Joel Beeke, *Striving Against Satan*, 48-49

² William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:11-12

³ Charles Spurgeon, *All of Grace*, 31-32

⁴ John Colquhoun, *Saving Faith*, 66

your exceedingly great reward" (Gen.15:1). "But you, O LORD, are a shield for me" (Ps.3:3). "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him" (Prov.30:5; Ps.84:11).

Faith never points to itself; it points to God. We are told about the great heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, that 'out of weakness they were made strong.' Always by faith! Not faith in faith, but faith in God! They were men who believed God, they accounted Him able to do that which He had promised. That was their secret. Faith never turns in upon itself, So you should not be looking at yourself and trying to cultivate faith in yourself. Faith always points to God, to the character of God. He is One on whom we can rely. Faith points to His promises – and the Bible is full of them. Get to know them, and then you will be able to hold up the shield of faith.⁵

2. *The need for faith?* The shield of faith is necessary to "quench (extinguish) all the fiery darts (arrows) of the wicked (evil) one." By "wicked one" is meant Satan. "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy" (Jn.10:10). "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1Pet.5:8). By "fiery darts" is meant short arrows with pointed tips dipped in tar. These would be launched with the hope of hitting a man directly or else catching his surroundings on fire. "What are these fiery darts of the evil one? In essence, they are the well-aimed, powerful, often sudden and unexpected temptations and accusations of the devil. The aim of these fiery darts is to confuse and, if possible, disable the child of God" (Hamilton).⁶ "The burning arrows depict, in highly metaphorical language, every kind of attack launched by the devil and his hosts against the people of God. They are as wide-ranging as the 'schemes' (v11) that promote them, and include not only every kind of temptation to ungodly behavior, doubt, and despair, but also external assaults, such as persecution or false teaching" (O'Brien).⁷ "As burning arrows not only pierce but set on fire what they pierce, they are doubly dangerous. Thus, they serve here, therefore, as the symbol of the fierce onsets of Satan" (Hodge).⁸

Satan's temptations are the darts he uses against the souls of men and women. They may fitly be so called in a threefold respect. (1) Darts or arrows *are swift*. Lightning is called God's arrow, because it flies swiftly. 'He sent out His arrows and scattered them, He shot out lightnings and discomfited them' (Ps.18:14), that is, lightning like arrows. (2) Darts or arrows *fly secretly*. A man may be wounded with a dart and not see who shot it. The wicked are said to shoot their arrows 'in secret at the righteous,' and then 'they say, Who shall see them?'" (Ps.64:4). (3) Darts *have a wounding killing nature*, especially when well headed and shot out of a strong bow by one that is able to draw it. Such are Satan's temptations—headed with desperate malice, and drawn by a strength no less than angelical; and this against so poor a weak creature as man, that it were impossible, had not God provided good armor for our soul, to outstand Satan's power and get safe to heaven.

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(1) Evil suggestions. By this is meant, evil and blasphemous thoughts about God, Scripture, and true morality. "We wake up in the morning to find that before we have had time to do any thinking, thoughts

⁵ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:306

⁶ Ian Hamilton, *Ephesians*, 276

⁷ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 480

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, 285

⁹ William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:74-76

come to us, evil thoughts, perhaps even blasphemous thoughts? You were not thinking, you were doing nothing, you had just awakened; but suddenly the darts reach you" (MLJ).¹⁰ "Satan's suggestions in religious duties are usually more violent and hasty, more dreadful and wicked, than those which are of our own breeding; called therefore darts, and fiery darts of that wicked one. Though he lay these suggestions of his at your door, yet they will be counted in the number of his sins and of your afflictions" (Steele).¹¹ "Satan showers arrows of fire on the soul of the believer, who, if unprotected by the shield of faith, would soon perish. It is a common experience of the people of God, that at times horrible thoughts, unholy, blasphemous, disbelieving, evil, crowd upon the mind, which cannot be accounted for on any ordinary law of mental action, and which cannot be dislodged. They stick like burning arrows, and fill the soul with agony" (Hodge).¹² These evil suggestions can be illustrated in his attack against our first parents: "Has God indeed said" (Gen.3:1)? This ever remains the evil whisperings of our enemy.

(2) Evil temptations. "Stop depriving one another...lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1Cor.7:5). "I sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor should be in vain" (1Thess.3:5). "Evil and wicked thoughts are not the only kind of fiery darts, nor are they the most dangerous. There are others which kindle passion, inflame ambition, excite greed, pride, discontent, or vanity – producing a flame which our deceitful heart is not so prompt to extinguish, and which is often allowed to burn until it produces great injury and even destruction. Against these most dangerous weapons of the evil one, the only protection is faith" (Hodge).¹³ "Satan labors to storm the castle of the heart; he stirs up passion, lust, and revenge. These are called fiery darts because they often set the soul on fire" (Watson).¹⁴

(3) Evil distractions. Here I specifically refer to distractions in ordinances (prayer, Bible reading, and public worship). "And this I say for your own profit...that you may worship the Lord without distraction" (1Cor.7:35). Because Satan knows the good that comes from ordinances, he makes these a chief priority. "If Satan cannot withhold us from holy duties, he will do his utmost to disturb us in them" (Steele).¹⁵ Thus, we must remain vigilant and alert in religious exercises. "Continue earnestly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving" (Col.4:2). We must watch for fiery darts and hold up the shield of faith.

When Satan casts in his suggestions lift up your petitions to God. When you sense his hellish breathings then breathe forth some heavenly petitions. 'Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity, and quicken me in Thy way.' 'Forsake me not, O God, my strength.' 'Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.' 'Awake, O north wind, and come Thou south, blow upon my garden.' These darting desires sent up with faith will weaken the habits of corruption, and affright Satan from his suggestions. This resisting the devil will make him flee from you: as the golden spikes were set on the temple to keep the fowls from thence, so will these, being carefully used, keep off vain thoughts from lodging upon your sacrifices.¹⁶

¹⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:306

¹¹ Richard Steele, *A Remedy for Wandering Thoughts in Worship*, 9-10

¹² Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, 285

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, 285

¹⁴ Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken By Storm*, 40

¹⁵ Richard Steele, *A Remedy for Wandering Thoughts in Worship*, 9

¹⁶ Richard Steele, *A Remedy for Wandering Thoughts in Worship*, 192-193

3. *The work of faith?* "Above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench the fiery darts of the wicked one" (Eph.6:16). "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (1Jn.5:4-5). Thus, our faith must be genuine, strong, and growing. "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other" (2Thess.1:3). For faith to grow three things are necessary: prayer, the word, and affliction. First, prayer, "And the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith'" (Lk.17:5); second, the word, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom.10:17); third, affliction, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (Jas.1:2-3).

(1) Faith unites the soul to Christ in whom is strength. As mentioned before, strictly speaking, God in Christ and not faith, is our shield. "The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold" (Ps.18:2). "The LORD is my strength and my shield" (Ps.28:7). "You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in Your word" (Ps.119:114). Thus, faith hides us in God our Savior. It takes refuge in His mighty name. "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for my soul trusts in You; And in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge, until these calamities have passed by" (Ps.57:1). Faith is a humbling grace that produces self-distrust in the soul. It makes little of itself and much of God in Christ. "Faith is a humble, self-denying grace; it makes the Christian nothing in himself and all in God" (Leighton).¹⁷

The weakest persons who are within a strong place, women and children, though they were not able to resist the enemy if they were alone, yet so long as the place wherein they are is of sufficient strength, and well manned, and every way accommodate to hold out, they are in safety; thus the weakest believer is safe, because by believing he is within the strongest of all defenses. Faith is the victory, and Christ sets His strength against Satan's" and when the Christian is hard beset with some temptation, too strong for himself, then he looks up to Him who is the great conqueror of the powers of darkness, and calls to Him, 'Now, Lord, assist thy servant in this encounter, and put to thy strength, that the glory may be thine.' Thus, faith is such an engine as draws in the power of God and His Son Jesus into the works and conflicts poor and weak Christians face. *This is our victory, even our faith* (1Jn.5:4).¹⁸

(2) Faith gives the word a present power in the soul. Without faith the word will never benefit the soul. "For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in the those who heard it" (Heb.4:2). "To take the shield of faith is to appropriate the promises of God on our behalf, confident that he will protect us in the midst of the battle. According to 1 Peter 5:8-9, firm faith, described as 'a flint-like resolution, is called for in resisting the devil'" (O'Brien).¹⁹ "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world" (1Pet.5:8-9). "Faith and the word of God are one, because the word is the object of faith, and cannot be applied to our use but by faith; as faith again is nothing, and can do nothing, without the word" (Calvin).²⁰ "Faith holds the promise in one hand and Christ

¹⁷ Robert Leighton, *Commentary on First Peter*, 39-40

¹⁸ Robert Leighton, *Commentary on First Peter*, 40

¹⁹ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 479-480

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries*, 21:339

in the other" (Watson).²¹ "The word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one" (1Jn.2:14).

Our faith is in "the faith" (scripture). "*The faith* is something that is actually believed by believers; if it were not embraced by believers it could not be called *the faith*" (Lenski).²² When the fiery darts of the enemy fall upon us, we must lift up "the faith." "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar" (Prov.30:5-6). "The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure; one little word shall fell him."²³ It's the faith of Holy Scripture that ultimately quenches the fiery darts of the evil one. This can be perfectly illustrated in our Savior. "Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread'" (Matt.4:3). Having been tempted by Satan three times, our Savior responded with the word of God: "It is written...it is written...it is written" (v4, v7, v10). This is how faith serves as a shield. It holds up "the faith."

Hold up to the devil, not merely your believing or subjective faith, but the Word, the doctrine, the pertinent Scripture passage, the objective content of faith, of course, also with your whole heart believing, relying on its truth and power. You may believe with all your might, but that will not be a quenching shield; Satan will easily pierce that, and you will be set on fire. Everything depends on what you believe. Hold up 'the faith' (objective); this extinguishes every tempting lie of the wicked one.²⁴

(3) Faith provides a spiritual sight to the soul. Faith is likened to the eyes of the soul whereby we are enabled to see spiritual things. "Faith is the eye of the believer's soul" (Spurgeon).²⁵ "Now faith is...the evidence of things not seen" (Heb.11:1). By "things not seen" are meant present spiritual realities. God's providence, Christ's intercession, and the Spirit's presence. "Faith presents spiritual things to the soul with clearness and certainty" (Manton).²⁶ It allows us to look beyond the physical to the spiritual. It permits the soul to behold the fleeting nature of sinful and worldly things and the superior nature of spiritual things. "Faith gives us right thoughts of things present. It shows us the nothingness of worldly greatness and the greatness of present spiritual privileges: (Manton).²⁷ "We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen" (2Cor.4:18). "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (Heb.11:24-25). By faith Moses was enabled to choose to suffer affliction as a child of God than to enjoy the entire world as an enemy of God. "By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb.11:27). It was by the eyes of faith that he was able to see God as far more powerful than Pharaoh. So too, when Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife, it was faith that allowed him to say, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God" (Gen.39:9)? He saw God by faith.

Faith rectifies our judgments about things spiritual. Carnal men cannot value these things, because they have no spiritual discerning, neither of the truth, nor of the worth of these things: 'For the natural man perceives not the things of the Spirit of God, for they

²¹ Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken By Storm*, 42

²² R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 670

²³ Hymn 81

²⁴ R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 670-671

²⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, 6:390

²⁶ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 13:324

²⁷ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 14:436

are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned' (1Cor.2:14). Mark, the world cannot well be understood without faith, nor spiritual things without faith. They which constantly attend upon God, and depend upon Him, have much more a sweeter life than those that wait upon princes with great observance and expectation: 'It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes' (Ps.118:9). A servant of the Lord is better provided for than the greatest favorites and minions of princes.²⁸

(4) Faith brings distant realities near to the soul. "Now faith is the substance of things hope for" (Heb.11:1). "As the matters of belief are yet to come, faith gives them a substance, a being, as they are hidden from the eyes of sense and carnal reason" (Manton).²⁹ "And in this sense it is the substance of things hoped for; it gives them a being, while it beholds them in their original fountain, which is the word of promise; and while it unites and joins the soul to them by earnest hope, which is as it were an anticipation of our blessedness, and a pre-occupation of the joys of the world to come, faith causes such an existence and certain presence of the things hoped for in the mind of a believer, as that he concludes not only that they may be, or shall be, but that they already are."³⁰ "Faith is like a perspective (telescope), that greatens things at a distance, and lessens things near at hand; so faith greatens heavenly things, and lessens worldly things; so that riches and honors, and all worldly things, seem vile and base so far as they divert us from better things" (Manton).³¹ "Present things are comfortable to our sense, but they are nothing to what faith propounds; and therefore we must look upon these things through the spectacles of faith. Earthly treasures, compared with the treasures of heaven, will appear no more than trash and dung, if we had but this enlightened mind to apprehend the worth and certainty of these heavenly things" (Manton).³²

To defeat the temptation faith strongly fixes the heart of a believer upon things to come, that in some sort it does preunite their souls and their happiness together, and by giving them heaven upon earth confirms the soul in a belief of better things than the devil or the world can propose. Thus you see that to defeat the temptation there needs faith, that is may strongly fix the heart of a believer upon things to come and put him within the company of the blessed; that in some sort he may have heaven upon earth, and such a certain persuasion of better things, that he may look upon all that the devil, the world and the flesh do oppose to him as a weak and worthless thing.³³

²⁸ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 14:436

²⁹ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 13:323-325

³⁰ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 13:324-325

³¹ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 14:471

³² Thomas Manton, *Works*, 14:467

³³ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 13:333