

## The Shield of Faith

Message #5 in the series "Finding Victory in a No-Win World"

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
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Good morning and welcome to St. Paul's Church. We are blessed you have joined us for worship this morning. We are in the midst of a message series called "Finding Victory in a No-win World." Together we've examined what the Apostle Paul describes as the armor of God in his letter to the Ephesians. This armor is meant to be worn so that we are equipped and protected in spiritual *warfare*. We may not know that we are at war, but as the Apostle Paul shares in his letter, we are equipped to stand in peace, truth, love and faith in the midst of a spiritual war that unfolds around us.

This week, we are going to focus on the shield of faith. Together, let's examine how a shield of faith fits into the "full armor of God" and how it equips us and emboldens us to *stand* against the wages of war in the spiritual and natural world. Let us hear, once again, the word of God from Ephesians 6:10 – 20.

***Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.***

***And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. [Ephesians 6:10-20 NIV].***

Throughout this series, as I have heard so many different readings of this text, in the many different translations and versions we've used to explore Paul's powerful advice to the Ephesian church, I have to admit one singular image has come to my mind every single time. That image... Ice hockey.

Ice hockey is a remarkably intense game—one where emotions can vacillate between joy and rage and back again within a matter of mere moments. It is fast-moving, board-to-board action that requires quick thinking, improvisation, grit, speed, finesse... and a lot of equipment. The hard ice, sharp ice skates, hockey sticks and a small, hard, black puck flying at high speeds, all of these potential hazards requires nearly every inch of the front of a hockey player to be covered in padding when he or she suits up for a game. Every single inch. While that may seem like overkill, let me tell you that when you have some hoser from the next town over ripping biscuits at your melon, you want to make double sure your chin strap is snapped, you know what I'm saying?

I can remember when I started playing hockey in middle school. The first day I had my new equipment I spread it all out on the front room floor and the first challenge was trying to figure out how to put it all on. Thankfully, there is no video of this experience, but I think it might have taken me over an hour to figure out how to put on each piece of equipment. It took several tries thereafter to develop my own routine in order to equip myself quickly because I knew they didn't give us unlimited time in the locker rooms before practices and games.

I also remember not trusting my equipment right away. Early in my ice hockey experience I would turn to the side when whenever a puck was shot toward me, hoping it would miss me. Or, if it hit me, it would hit a smaller segment of my body. Very quickly one of my coaches caught me doing this and gave me some very compelling advice. "Don't be afraid of the puck." He said, "If you turn your body square to it, it is going to hit padding. Your padding will protect you. If you turn your padding away from the puck, it will hit a part of you that isn't protected and that will hurt."

Today's message is entitled "The Shield of Faith." It is another piece of the armor of God, and it is, as we will see today, a very important piece of armor that we have with us in the larger spiritual warfare that we face. And, as we will reveal, faith has a lot to do with trust.

In previous messages, Pastor David has led us in a conversation on how the armor of God, as explained in great detail in Ephesians 6, is the very example and illustration of our identity in Christ. We are clothed with the armor of God not because we purchased it off the shelf at a retail store or had it delivered with free two-day shipping. We put on the armor of God because it is who we are. Being belted with truth and held upright with righteousness as a breastplate, the most vital parts are thereby covered. Paul then explains we are to put on shoes that prepare us to share the gospel of peace. And then we come to the verse that is the focus of today's message, verse 16, it says, once again, "In addition to all of this," that is the belt of the truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and the shoes of peace, (as if to say, "Now that you have put on the very important pieces of protective armor,") "take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

Now as I see it there are two very important object lessons we can pull from this very important segment of scripture. In just one verse, Paul identifies two key elements to this spiritual war that he is equipping the people of Ephesus and, nearly two thousand years later under slightly different circumstances, us to be ready for. Those two object

lessons that stand right out to me are, of course, **the shield of faith and the flaming arrows of the evil one.**

Seven verses into this section on the armor of God we get a glimpse at what we might be up against in this spiritual battle. The ammunition, if you will, of the fighting enemy is described by Paul as flaming arrows. And fire, as it turns out, is an impressive weapon of warfare. You've probably seen the movies or shows in which archers light the heads of their arrows on fire. I think for a time in my youth I thought this was nothing more than a dramatic effect put on by the directors and screenplay writers to provide a visual effect of a battle on the screen.



Arrows in the hands of a skilled archer are deadly enough as it is, I would think. Is there any real tactical value in lighting them on fire as they are launched into an invading army?

As it turns out, flaming arrows were typically used when an army was besieging a city or village. Shooting flaming arrows was a way to spread fire and therefore chaos quickly in a city or town that was being attacked. Before we had efficient means to put out fires, a quickly spreading flame could render large sections of a besieged town

defenseless. A series of flaming arrows would be a very efficient way to spread chaos and harm when wielded by an expert marksman.

Make no mistake, Satan is an expert marksman. In a previous message, Pastor David explored the ways in which Satan will attack. He attacks when we are overwhelmed by our weaknesses—knowing full well that when we are at our weakest, we are also most vulnerable. He attacks our strengths. By turning up the volume internally and externally of the praise we hear when our strengths are in top form.

Our insecurities, trauma, anxiety, loss of control and weakness, like dry tinder, can be caught ablaze with a single flaming arrow. Within the blink of an eye, that arrow can start a fire that will soon catch ablaze and burn largely out of control. And look around. In our present context, our greatest fears of losing control have played out time and again. As if our culture was a small village under siege, the houses of faith we built on **absolute certainty, absolute health, absolute security** were hit with a small flaming arrow, and chaos ensued.

In early adulthood I'd arrived at this amazing place in life. I was newly married to Rebekah our careers were taking shape, my family, inclusive of my parents and most of my siblings, were connected to a church after decades of not going to church; it was a good place. We worshipped together on Sunday mornings and prayed together through all of the ups and downs of our lives, and everything seemed right, until it wasn't any more. This "perfect" place was disrupted and everything that I thought was certain about who I was and what my faith was about was put into question.

I was confused. I was angry. I had been doing what I thought faithful people do, and I felt this sense of betrayal, as if my faithfulness had been for nothing. A flaming arrow had struck this perfect house that I thought I had built, and it was burning.

What I ultimately realized is that **our faith is rooted in God's faithfulness, not our faithfulness.**

When we have faith, it isn't based on what we can do because of what God has done for us. Faith, true faith, is based on what God does because of who God is. And in the grand scheme of life, when the battle is blowing up all around us and we are called to stand, we stand not because our standing defeats evil but because God's faithfulness does. In our very human world, the things we love and the things we love to control will one day drift apart or change. Relationships will fade and break apart and the consistency that we rely on will deteriorate. And when they do, it is God's faithfulness that we can rely on.

Let's take a look once again at Roman soldier diagram that we've seen in previous weeks...

The Shield of Faith is yet another concrete object that Paul would have observed as his captivity among Roman soldiers continued. The shield a Roman soldier carried would have been formed by wood or metal and covered in thick hides or leather. And as pictured here, it was very large in order to cover the vital areas of a soldier's body. Some shields carried by Roman soldiers would have been as big as a door and much larger than this one pictured. As a defensive weapon, it served as a cover from oncoming swords and spears. But if you notice, in the text, Paul doesn't mention these as the kinds of weapons used by the enemy. He doesn't say take up the shield of faith so that you can defend yourself



Figure 1 - Armor of God

against the spears and swords of the enemy. Shields, were, after all, good at blocking these kinds of attacks. Rather, he says to take up this shield of faith so that it will *extinguish*, that is put out, the flaming arrows (arrows that are on fire) of the evil one. In this way, the shield **of Faith is defensive in that it can protect us from the flaming arrows piercing our skin. However, as it extinguishes the arrows flame, it is also an offensive weapon in so much as the fire of the devil cannot spread.**

How does a shield extinguish a flaming arrow? How does faith put out the fires of the devil?

When we trust in God's faithfulness, we are trusting in his all-encompassing power. We are submitting our lives to him. The epistles of the New Testament have a great deal to say about faith. A significant segment of scripture that defines faith can be found in

Hebrews 11. This chapter of scripture reads like a faith's greatest hits of the Bible. It is a record of how the faithfulness of God has played out in the lives of so many recognizable people in the Biblical story who have lived their lives submitting to God's sovereignty. To set this up, the author of Hebrews says in verse 1 **"Faith is the confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."** Confidence. Assurance. Think for a moment with me about where in our culture today we can find both confidence and assurance. Yeah, it's in short supply these days. What, if anything beyond God, can we really be confident or assured of? What the writer of Hebrews is saying is when all of it seems too crazy to understand we have faith—the confidence of what we hope for and the assurance of what we do not yet see.

And to a Hebrew audience, a culture that has a significant history in seeing the radical faithfulness of God, **confidence** and **assurance** in God's deliverance would be relatively accessible to reference. If you have never read through Hebrews 11, or it has been a while since you last read through this beautiful record and retelling of the faithful deliverance of God, I recommend you take some time this week and revisit it. The opening thesis was read earlier in our worship service, and here are just a few excerpts to also consider.

28 By faith he (Moses, while the Hebrews were still held captive in Egypt) kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

Story after story, record after record of the great deliverance God brought to his people would have resonated loudly with the Hebrew audience and those who would later read this epistle. Our great God who moved the sea and brought massive fortifications down is the same God who calmed a raging sea and fed thousands of people on just a few provisions. This same God calms the storms inside your heart and provides for you where the world sees no provisions. Faith is committing to the very idea that God does all of this and more not because of what we can do but because of who he is. And what a remarkable shield this faith would be in our no-win world, amen?

**These massive shields** that Paul would have seen Roman soldiers carry, some as large as doors, covered in hides or heavy leathers, would have been massively heavy. You might wonder, how did these massive shields extinguish flaming arrows? I wondered that too. I found in the Interpreter's Bible that before going into battle a soldier would submerge his shield completely in water. One can only imagine how much heavier that shield would have been. However, as the shield was submerged in water it could extinguish any flaming arrow or burning spear that pierced it.

Don't overlook for a moment this detail. One of the sacraments of our faith is baptism. And while one of the ways we experience the outward symbol of baptism is to submerge

ourselves in water, it is the internal transformation, the submission to God's faithfulness, that is truly important. The vows we say before submitting to baptism include proclaiming with our lips and believing in our hearts that Jesus Christ is the son of God, he died for our sins, and only through him are we redeemed for eternity. If we truly believe what we say we believe, then we are saying we trust the God who calls us "child." And when we hold the shield of faith, we are trusting God's faithfulness; That God is true to his word.

**What in your life needs to be submerged?** Where have you lost trust in the God who calls to you? Maybe it is a situation in your family or a lingering issue at work. Perhaps it is that conversation you've needed to have for years, and you've put it off. Maybe it's that thing you've been anxious about forever. Yeah, you've prayed about it, but your prayers go something like this, "God, I trust you do this very specific thing I want you to do..." What, in your life needs to be submerged?

Friends, when you take up the shield, we do so not with our confidence, but we do so with confidence that God will deliver. So, as you are equipped to stand, stand with the shield of faith. Face the arrows that may come with the assurance that God's got this. His faithfulness will extinguish all the flaming arrows that come your way.

As we examine the pure nature of faith you might be feeling a call to baptism, to experience the outward sign of an inward transformation that is happening in your life with Christ. If God is calling you to baptism, or if you have been baptized, God may be calling you to remember your baptism. In the coming weeks we will be opening our services for a time of baptism and baptism renewal. If feel God calling you to baptism, he is starting a deeply important conversation with you. And I, along with David and John, would love to partner with you in that conversation. Let's talk about where God might take you when you submit your life to him.