Stand strong with the shield of faith

Text: Ephesians 6:16

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Genesis 15; Ephesians 6:10-20

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 84, ‘By Faith’, 508, PH427, 249, 106

Series: Spiritual warfare (#4)

Theme: The importance of taking up the shield of faith in spiritual warfare in order to be protected from the attacks of the Devil, your unseen enemy.

Proposition: Stand strong in the Lord by taking up the protective shield of faith in Christ.

**Introduction**

We are all familiar with safety equipment which serves to protect us – hard hats, steel capped boots, bicycle helmets, seat belts, etc. Today we focus on a piece of protective equipment in the spiritual armour which God provides so that we can be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might as we stand against the schemes of the Devil.

This sermon follows on from the previous three messages which have looked at:

Firstly, the **belt of truth.** Thetrue truth of God enables us to be ready to fight the spiritual battles we face with confidence in Christ who has already won the ultimate victory over the Devil (John 16:33; 1 Cor 15:57).

Secondly, the **breastplate of righteousness.** Thispiece of spiritual equipment protects our feelings, emotions, desires and will from the crafty trickery of the Devil.

Thirdly, **shoes for your feet.** They provide a firm foundation upon which to stand which is the gospel of peace, then we have a stable stance from which to stand against the schemes of the devil.

Today are attention is directed to the **shield of faith**, which we’ll consider under three headings:

1. Your attacker
2. His weapons
3. Your protection
4. **Your attacker**

The purpose of the spiritual armour which God provides is to enable the Christian soldier to ‘be able to stand against the schemes of the devil’ who is referred to in our text as ‘the evil one’. The word evil here refers to determined, aggressive evil which opposes what is good. Satan, the evil one, is not only bad in his character, but also in his actions. He is viciously evil and actively harmful. He is the ‘god of this age’ who seeks to corrupt people and lead them to their destruction.

The main focus of the Bible is on the glorious person and work of God in creation, restoration and the conquest of sin, death and the Devil. Satan receives relatively little direct attention in the pages of Scripture, but whenever he appears, his evil character and actions are always evident:

1. In the garden of Eden, in the form of a serpent, he schemed to undermine confidence in the truthfulness and sufficiency of God’s Word: “*Did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?*”, “*You will not surely die*” (Gen 3:1; 4).

His evil aim was to tempt Adam and Eve so that they would sin and then die.

1. Aware of the blameless, upright and God-fearing character of Job, Satan desired to attack him. With the Lord’s consent, he took Job’s property and his children (Job 1) and then his health (Job 2). The only reason why he did not take Job’s life was that the Lord’s protective command prevented him from doing so (Job 2:6). His aim was to destroy Job’s faith and to bring about his death.
2. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, he targeted the same areas as he had done with Old Testament Israel during their forty years of wandering between Egypt and the promised land: physical needs, pride, and the desire for possessions (cf. 1 John 2:16). Satan’s aim was for Jesus to fall and fail in His mission to rescue a people from the domain of darkness and transfer them into His kingdom (Col 1:13).

Our granddaughter loves animals and thoroughly enjoys her life growing up on a farm. The creature she is most fascinated with is not naturally found in New Zealand. So last month, when we took our grandchildren and their parents to Orana Wildlife Park on McLeans Island Road, she was thrilled to see lions close up. Before then she had only encountered them when watching the animated movie ‘Lion King’ and seeing these big cats on National Geographic nature documentaries. The lions at Orana Wildlife Park looked very docile, cute and almost cuddly as they lounged around waiting for the time when they would be fed by their keepers. For an extra fee, a small group of visitors were driven through their enclosure inside a steel cage upon which the lions climbed about.

These large felines were very interested in the humans, not as friendly companions though, but as an extra meal. Lions are predatory by nature, that is their character. They are large, powerful and no matter how cute and cuddly they look they are very dangerous animals who are always on the scout for their next feed. It has always been this way since the fall of Adam and Eve. It is not surprising then that the Apostle Peter uses the image of a lion to describe the nature of the Evil One. “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8).

Brothers and sisters, friends, the Devil is a ferocious attacker. He is the Evil one who uses destructive weapons in his attempts to bring about the fall of those who would stand against his schemes. It is to these spiritual weapons that we now turn.

1. **His weapons**

Arrows were used widely by many nations in Bible times. Israel had expert archers from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Chron 8:40; 2 Chron 17:17). Arrows were made of wooden shafts or reed with a metal tip and were guided by feathers, often from the eagle or vulture. The general design and concept of the arrow has not changed hugely over time. The arrow is a long-range weapon in warfare enabling the bowman to fire this weapon whilst out of sight. The military strategy of an attack with arrows is to weaken or kill an enemy without needing to engage in close hand-to-hand combat. In order to increase the destructive power of an arrow, they were sometimes coated in a flammable substance like pitch and set alight so that they could both pierce and burn an opponent.

For the untrained unseasoned soldier faced with an onslaught of these flaming arrows, the sight of these weapons coming towards them in ‘thick and fast’ could induce such fear that they were paralysed. The Apostle Paul uses the image of physical fiery arrows or darts to describe the spiritual weapons of Satan. What are some of these incoming ‘flaming darts’? I’d like to draw your attention to five different types:

1. Accusations
2. Temptations
3. Self-righteousness
4. Distractions
5. Doubts

The Evil One is the ‘accuser’ of God’s people (Rev 12:10). Some of his fiery arrows bring to our minds the remembrance of our past sins. Something like this perhaps: "*Surely it is not possible that such sins as yours can be blotted out. Think of the number of your transgressions: how you have sinned against light and knowledge; doing what you knew to be wrong and still enjoying the experience at the time. You have despised the grace of God; you have trampled upon the blood of Christ; how can there be forgiveness for you?*"; “*You have resisted the Holy Spirit, and seared your own conscience. You appear to many as an upright godly person, but inside you are like a whitewashed tomb. You have returned again and again to sin, like a dog to his own vomit, and there can be no hope for you*”.

The Evil One is also the ‘Tempter’ (Matt 4:3; 1 Thess 3:5). Some of his fiery arrows target our unholy passions, lusts and evil desires. “*You deserve to indulge yourself. You are missing out*”; “*You are feeling low, have some more … and you’ll feel better*”; “*You’ve done well, celebrate with ….*”

The Evil One is also proud (Isa 14:12-15). He always puts himself first. There are flaming darts which result in us thinking that we are always right, and that our own interests are the most important. We might become angry when others are inconsiderate or rude. Our reactions to the small inconveniences of life such as when someone cuts you off in traffic, is late for an appointment or forgets your birthday can show that a fiery arrow has aroused your self-righteousness and that pride is ruling your heart.

The Evil One is also schemer (Eph 6:11) who fights with subtle deception. His flaming arrows distract us from focusing on Christ. You might be in prayer and distractions flood into your mind resulting in evil thoughts, notions and ideas which disrupt your focus. You might find it strangely difficult to concentrate on reading the Bible, whereas you can be fully engaged in a novel, a movie or some online content. You may have energy for your own pleasures and pursuits, but can feel tired and unmotivated by acts of service for the Lord.

The Evil One is also a liar (John 8:44). His arrows sow doubt in the heart about the truth of God. Something like this perhaps: Is the whole Bible really true? So many scientists have ‘proven’ that evolution is the cause of life, haven’t they? The miracles in Scripture couldn’t have happened. Have you ever seen a dead person brought back to life? “Does God really love you?” “Is there really going to be a perfect New Heaven and New Earth in the future?” “You are not a real Christian, are you? you will never be one”

These spiritual fiery darts are real, and they can cause much pain and anguish in the human soul. The Apostle Peter warns all God’s people with these words “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you*” (1 Peter 4:12). The good news is that God has provided His people with protection against the weapons of the Evil One, which brings us to our final point:

1. **Your protection**

A shield is a defence against blows or missiles in warfare. There are two different sizes of shields mentioned in Scripture. The smaller round one was used with lighter weapons and covered about half the body. This was the preferred shield of the tribe of Benjamin (2 Chron 23:9), sometimes call a ‘buckler’. The larger shield was more rectangular in shape and sometimes so big that shield-bearer carried it for the warrior going into battle – as was the case when Goliath went out to meet David (1 Sam 17:41). The Greek word translated ‘shield’ in our text refers to the large rectangular shield and is derived from the word for an oblong stone used to close an entranceway by functioning as a solid door.

In Romans times, a foot soldier would have a large wooden-framed shield, covered in hide, and bound with iron top and bottom which was ordinarily carried on the left arm. When dipped in water before a battle it could extinguish flaming arrows which had been coated in pitch and set alight. This is the physical image which Paul uses to describe the spiritually protective effect of faith against the schemes of the devil. He writes, “*In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one*”. He is speaking about faith in the sure promises of God.

The writer to the Hebrews defines such faith this way: “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1). He then goes on to describe the faith of Abraham and others. Paul, in writing to the Romans, explains the faith of Abraham: “*In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead…. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness*" (Romans 4:18-22).

When the Lord spoke to Abram, as we heard in Genesis 15, He said “*Fear not, Abram I am your shield*”. It was the Lord’s righteousness which protected Abraham. As the Lord confirmed His covenant with this ‘father of faith’. He symbolically passed alone between the divided carcasses of the sacrificial animals who had been slain. He promised that He would fulfil the terms of the covenant of grace on behalf of Abraham and his descendants. Abraham believed the Lord’s promise and his faith was credited to him as righteousness.

It is in Christ that God has fulfilled the covenant on behalf of His people. Faith in the perfect obedience of Christ who was born ‘under the law’ (Gal 4:4) and faith in His sacrificial death in your place as a sinner is the faith which is credited to the believer as righteousness. This is the true faith which is described by the Heidelberg Catechism LD7 as being: “*not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true it is also a deep-rooted assurance created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation*”.

Faith is a defence against the weapons of the Evil One in ‘all circumstances’, for example:

1. When the Evil One accuses us, faith trusts in standard of God’s Word. Satan may scheme to induce guilt where we have not sinned. His accusation may be entirely false. Alternatively, as he brings to our mind past sins and repeated patterns of failure to live up to God’s Law, faith believes in the sure promises of God “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Faith resists accusations which deny the complete effectiveness of Christ’s work. Faith remembers that the Devil is the accuser of God’s people.
2. When the Evil One tempts us: Faith believes that “*He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world*” (1 John 4:4) and that “*we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (Rom 8:37). Faith looks for the way which God has promised to provide for us to be able to escape any particular temptation (1 Cor 10:13). Faith remembers that Satan is the Tempter.
3. When the Evil One fuels our sense of self-worth before God: Faith knows that the righteousness which is represented by the breastplate in the spiritual armour of God is not the believer’s own righteousness, but the imputed, credited, righteousness of Christ. Faith knows that whilst there is a partial righteousness which is the result of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, this righteousness is not complete in this life, nor is it the result of the believers work alone and is therefore no cause for boasting. Faith knows that self-righteousness is rooted in pride, and that the Devil invites us to identify with him as a fallen being who would not humble himself before God.
4. When the Evil One seeks to distract us from focusing on Christ: Faith knows that the Devil is a schemer who preys on our fallen tendency to become distracted and to take our eyes of our Lord. Faith strives to concentrate on the means of grace and on the majesty of the person and work of Christ.
5. When the Evil One lies to us in order to make us doubt: Faith trusts in the assuring Word of God for the believer. “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Rom 8:1).

When the Lord said to believing Abraham “*Fear not, … I am your shield*”, He shielded the ‘father of faith’ with the life of His dear Son. He does the same for all who are spiritual descendants of believing Abraham (Gal 3:29).

Brothers and sisters stand strong in the Lord by taking up the protective shield of faith in Christ.