



Faith in Real Time

Ephesians 6:16 NIV

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

A Shield of a Paper Barrier?

In our Bible passage for today, we are told that we are to take up the shield of faith as a way to keep Satan from hurting us. Captain America is my favorite of the Marvel characters and his shield is his most visible piece of equipment that he carries with him. He flings it about in battles like a giant metal frisbee and although it is intended to be his primary line of defense, it really is his greatest weapon. No Roman soldier who went to battle during the time this letter of Paul's was written would ever fire his shield at the enemy, it was too crucial to his own safety. The shields were big and bulky and frequently used as a wall of protection for the entire army as it advanced behind the thousands of shields they were holding in front of them, inching down upon their enemy. Sometimes they would coat their shields with a metal front to protect them from flaming darts fired at them. Our modern day defense systems are much more psychological in nature. We ignore a text. We walk away from a relationship to keep from being hurt. We self-medicate, we convince ourselves that we don't care what the other person thinks of us, take out our frustrations on those who love us the most, we give up rather than persevere because we are afraid of failing. Most of us are more concerned about protecting ourselves from emotional and psychological distress than we are about swords or clubs or even guns. What if though our real enemy, the one who causes us the most harm, is a spiritual force of evil who attacks us both psychologically as well as physically?

Once again, in the chapter from Ephesians that we have been studying, we are reminded that we are under attack from the devil and spiritual forces of evil. They fling flaming arrows at us. The Bible never implies that the wicked or evil one is a metaphor for the wrong in the world. There is never an indication that Satan is a symbolic representation of what is bad. The Evil One is a particular personality, a being with a well organized mind that strategizes and plots ruin. Consider the fascinating account of David who strangely decided that it would be a good idea to get a headcount of all the men in Israel who were the right age to fight in battle. Joab, the general of his army was given the responsibility of going throughout the country and tallying the total number of fighting men available to David. Joab hated the assignment and tried to talk David out of it, but the king insisted and so Joab gathered assistants and began the task. The Bible makes it clear that Satan put the thought in David's head to take the census. It was not from God and turned out to be disastrous for the country. **Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.** (1 Chronicles 21:1 NIV)

David probably saw the logic in the plan, most likely thought he came up with the idea all on his own. Needless to say, if he even had the hint of where it really originated, David would have immediately disavowed himself of the thought, but clearly he wasn't aware of the source of the inspiration behind taking

the census. Eventually, David repented of making Joab go about the country counting all the men and it seems clear he realized that it was Satan who planted the thought in his heart. We must consider the possibility that it is relatively easy for Satan to get in our heads, to turn us around and wreck our reasoning. In the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he urged the church to love and forgive someone he doesn't name. The warning is tied to the ability of Satan to outwit them. He noted that all of them knew that Satan plots against them. **For we are not unaware of his schemes.** (2 Corinthians 2: 11NIV) If they did not forgive the person Paul was speaking of, then Satan would be getting the best of them. Only evil could come out of that.

Because we are told that we need the "shield of faith" to protect ourselves against all the nasty things Satan does to us and his way of getting at us is in our head most of the time, we must have our faith in place. Probably the most insidious goal of Satan is to just get us not to believe God. He twists our thoughts so that we think we have come up with certain ideas and doubts on our own...that we have come to logical conclusions, but they are just the rhetoric Satan has poured in our heads. Jesus said that the devil **is a liar and the father of lies.** (John 8:44 NIV) That is no less true now than it was back in Jesus' time. He lies to you when you are eating lunch, when you are watching a YouTube video, while you are thinking about your kids, when you are at work, when you are texting and as you prepare to go to sleep. The devil tangles your thoughts with lies and you aren't even aware of it most of the time. David wasn't and neither are you. The devil is so good at it that he can easily convince you that you came up with an idea yourself. Faith is your defense, your way to protect yourself. But not faith in faith, not faith in your common sense or talents, not faith in yourself or your friends or what you have at your disposal. The only way to get the lies of Satan out of your head is by faith in God.

We see this again and again played out in the Bible where Satan is in the background, doing his filthy work behind the scenes in the minds of those he tries to trap. When God informed Abraham that he was going to be a father in his old age, he was a mere seventy-five years old. Just a kid! His wife Sarah was only sixty-five! The Lord told him directly that he would be made into a great nation. Several years later, he reminded Abraham of his promise and insisted that as many stars as he could see in the sky would be the number of his descendants. As part of this promise, the Lord said to Abraham, **"Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward."** (Genesis 15:1 NIV) It is no coincidence that the Lord told Abraham that he was his shield. He needed that shield as he got older because the devil was about to go after him and his wife's faith by sowing doubts in their thoughts. As the years passed, and the two of them remained childless, Sarah's faith wavered. Satan got in her head and convinced her that God didn't include her in his plan. Although she was Abraham's only wife, Sarah for some reason thought the Lord had someone else in mind to bear her husband's children...her slave Hagar. Where did that idea originate? We know it wasn't God!

Later, after Sarah's plan to have her husband Abraham father a child through Hagar didn't go so well after she did have a son with Abraham, God again came to give Abraham and her the good news that they would indeed have a son. Clearly, Sarah had no faith in God's promises because she laughed silently when the Lord told of His plan that in a year Abraham and Sarah would have a son together. We can of course spin this as merely a result of Sarah's old age and the simple knowledge of the biology of childbearing. A lie had been planted in Sarah's head that God could not and would not give her a child. Yet, the Lord had spoken directly of it. The lies of Satan are insidious. God won't help me with my grades. I won't ever have a happy marriage. There is no hope for my career. What do I have to offer someone...why would I be loved? God isn't interested in my depression. He doesn't care about my finances. The Lord has no plan for my life. There is no point in applying for that job. How can my kids ever turn around? I can never stop drinking. It is pointless reading the Bible. I never hear from God. Why would I start now? There are a thousand ways the devil puts our trust in God on hold by inserting just a thought or two and then when we nurture it, the thought grows into a mighty lie of unbelief and frustration.

When Peter was sent into prison not long after James, another apostle, was executed, things looked grim for him. Perhaps the rest of the church wondered if he would suffer the same fate. Later, Peter wrote of just how involved in our lives the devil is. **Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.** (1 Peter 5: 8 NIV) The devil was ready to devour Peter, just like he is after you too. During this rough time for Peter, the church was praying for him. Some had gathered in a home to call out for God's help. It was a terrible time for them because Peter was so important to everyone. Perhaps many had doubts Peter would come out of jail alive. There may have been some who chose not to meet and pray because it seemed hopeless. Perhaps it is like that for you. Praying to Christ for help seems like no use. It feels like there is no one looking out for you, no one helping you. Satan loves for you to think this way and almost always it is him who first put the idea in your head.

When an angel came and got Peter out of prison, the group praying was not prepared to actually find him showing up at the home. We aren't either when our prayers are answered, often because our shield of faith wasn't up, and we didn't have much hope in God answering our prayers. Just before Peter mentioned the enemy the devil prowling about devouring, he gives this simple instruction. It is how you fight off the devil and his attacks on your mind. It is how you can pray and find God answering your prayers. It is how you can have peace in times of trouble. **Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.** (1 Peter 5: 7 NIV) Put up that shield of faith and give Christ your worry. Give him your daughter or your son. Give him your finances or your marriage. Give him your struggle to stay sober. Give him your tough work environment. Give him your problems with your parent. Give him your cancer, your heart problems, your high stress. Satan will tell you that it can't be fixed, it can't be helped, it can't be solved. You throw that shield of faith up and tell him no. You are wrong! Christ is for me. Who can be against me? Just like God took Peter out of prison and just like He gave a son to Sarah, he will come to your rescue too. He will answer your prayers as joyfully as He did theirs.