

PROTECTED AND PERSUADED



FOCUS VERSE

Ephesians 6:16

Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

LESSON TEXT

Luke 22:31–32

31 And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat:

32 But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.

James 2:17–26

17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?

22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.



FOCUS THOUGHT

God gives faith to provide protection for the whole person and give flexibility to deflect all the enemy's attacks.



CULTURE CONNECTION

The Path of Faith

Professor John C. Lennox of Oxford University has written numerous books including a series in opposition to New Atheism. According to Lennox, new atheists incorrectly define *faith* as believing where there is no evidence. Lennox wrote, “Indeed, faith is a response to evidence, not a rejoicing in the absence of evidence.” God has revealed Himself through His Word and His creation. He expects us to study, seek to understand, and use the evidence within these two as the firm foundation for our faith. To do otherwise is magical thinking, not faith.

Unfortunately, even many Christians have accepted the assertion that belief in God is only irrational and wholly mystical. They see faith as emotion rather than a way of thinking, ignoring the fact that our emotions are easily

swayed by body chemistry, and “the heart is deceitful above all things” (Jeremiah 17:9). The Christian who dismisses rationality as unnecessary to faith is ignorant of what fully constitutes Christian faith.

This is not to say that reasoning will assure true doctrine. Human reasoning is flawed and the human heart will deceive us into world-views and biblical interpretations based on what we desire God’s revelation to be or what tradition says it should be. However, the answer to incorrect doctrine is not to put aside the Bible or reject rationality. Rather one finds the answer in embracing both the Bible and reasoning, humbly seeking God’s Spirit to assist in the quest for truth. The path of reasoning is a significant part of the path of faith.

OUTLINE

I. PERSUASION PROTECTS

II. FIGHT THE FIGHT OF FAITH

- A. Faith Supersedes Feelings
- B. Faith Works
- C. Faith Moves God

III. GUARD YOUR FAITH

IV. EXPAND YOUR FAITH

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

There are matters about which we are never quite sure. Which checkout lane will be the quickest? Should I get the car washed today given the current weather forecast? Do I stop and buy gas tonight, or will it still be the same price in the morning?

Uncertainty abounds in many such day-to-day decisions, and most of those have very few long-range consequences. By next year, or even next week, we won’t lose sleep over an extra ten minutes waiting in a checkout line, a few rain spots on the otherwise clean car, or an extra few cents per gallon or liter of gas. Life will go on, and we will be dealing with a whole different set of unknowns.

But certain decisions are weightier. They have greater and more significant effects. Health decisions. Financial planning choices. Career options. These decisions, and others like them, demand that we ponder more carefully, thoroughly evaluate the options, and reach a reasoned and mature decision. But even after doing so, there is still a measure of uncertainty. We cannot know what the stock market will do. Our future health is not a given. The job that looks enticing at present may not pan out as expected. So even these more serious decisions cannot be made with complete confidence.

But when it comes to matters affecting our souls, it is vital to have a deep-seated assurance that our choices are sure. We must know, not merely suspect, we have made the appropriate decisions regarding our spiritual standing and eternal destiny. Uncertainty in these most crucial matters would lead to destructive decisions when facing difficult seasons. If people are not fully persuaded their foundation is solid, the Word of God is true, and their direction is right, then their souls will be in jeopardy as they consistently second-guess matters that should be already

settled. When it comes to a heart to serve Christ, persuasion equals protection.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. PERSUASION PROTECTS

Ephesians 6 contains the various elements of armor we are to put on in order to be properly protected in our conflict with the enemy. Obviously each piece is important, else God would not have included it in His divine Word. These lessons deal with several of these imperative items. Each piece was designed to protect a different portion of the spiritual man, and as such is critical for our survival.

We would be misguided to attempt to rank them in order of importance. How can we consider the helmet of salvation to be of lesser importance than the gospel of peace for our feet? Is either of these more significant than the truth that girds us? Is that of greater value than righteousness, which covers our hearts? It is a fool's errand even to attempt such a ranking. Each piece of the armor does its job, but only in concert with the others are we completely protected.

So while we may not rank them, the Bible seems to elevate one item above the others. Preceding the mention of the shield of faith are these two words: "Above all" (Ephesians 6:16). Paul emphasized the essentiality of carrying this shield with us at all times. This element of armor affords a measure of protection to the others. From a natural perspective, the shield a warrior carried in battle quite often absorbed the enemy's blow so other portions of his armor were spared. From that perspective, the shield is of paramount importance.

The writer of Hebrews echoed the importance of faith: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). The writer did not state pleasing God would be difficult or challenging without faith. He stated unequivocally that pleasing God would be impossible without faith.

Faith, the basis of our relationship with God, allows us to enter spiritual conflict with calm confidence. It affords us the assurance we are His children, His Word is our foundation, and God will always be with us. The shield of faith,

when carried before us, turns aside every attack (fiery dart) the enemy would launch at us. It is vital for our walk with God.

This shield of faith is more than merely a simple belief in God. That, according to the previously referenced verse, is how we first come to God. Instead, in order to be strong enough to withstand "fiery darts," this shield must be made of sterner stuff. It is comprised not of causal preference, but of concrete persuasion that cannot be changed by circumstances or events of life—a persuasion so deeply rooted in our souls that nothing of this world can disrupt it. We are protected only when the faith that guards us is unshakeable and unbreakable.

When we possess such a persuasion, a gut-level belief in God and His plans for us, nothing leveled against us by Hell can destroy us. When Satan questions God's Word, our persuasion of His truth turns that fiery dart aside. When Satan declares God unjust and attempts to smite us with bitterness and disappointment, our persuasion of God's goodness turns that dart aside. When the enemy tries to turn us from the path of righteousness, our persuasion of God's holiness turns that dart aside. A firm persuasion in God brings the prophecy of Isaiah to fruition in our lives: "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper" (Isaiah 54:17). Weapons may indeed be formed against us, but they cannot prosper beyond our shield of persuaded faith, which protects us.

II. FIGHT THE FIGHT OF FAITH

In that faith is likened to a piece of armament, one should note faith is not a passive concept. Rather it is presented in the setting of combat. Faith is framed in this context militarily. It is meant to be our constant defense against attack, whether that attack comes unexpectedly or in response to our assault on the kingdom of darkness. Faith is both something strong enough to fight with and something valuable enough to fight for.

Faith is meant to be used in spiritual warfare, and that is exactly the situation in which God's children are consistently engaged. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world,

against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12). And it is precisely this fact that necessitates our use of the armor.

One can understand this not only by simple logical thought but also by the surrounding verses. For verses 11 and 13 of this same chapter specifically command us to wear the armor of God. “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. . . . Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Ephesians 6:11, 13). God commands us to utilize His armor in general, and specifically the shield of faith, for the express reason that we face the devil in an evil day. The shield of faith is necessary for our protection from the enemy.

In that this shield is so important to our spiritual victory and survival, it should not be surprising the enemy of our souls would like to destroy it. Faith, whether viewed as the general Apostolic message (the faith) or as personal trust in God (your faith), is a prime target for the enemy.

The Scriptures indicate that as the days of this existence draw to a close, some will release their hold on the shield of faith. “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils” (1 Timothy 4:1). Abandoning the grip on that shield by any of God’s children is directly linked to the work of the enemy, for it is attributed to spirits and devils. As the last days advance, we must purpose to fight fervently to hold onto the faith. Without it, the enemy’s fiery darts will find their mark, and we will know the sad truth of Paul’s words to Timothy: “They have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10).

But we must also understand this shield in the light of the second context—our personal trust and faith in God. The devil would delight to shake our confidence in Jesus and His plans. He would be thrilled to make us question the validity of God’s Word and its role in our lives. If He can succeed in that quest, we once again become vulnerable to his future attacks.

One can gain insight into this tactic of Hell in the words of Jesus to Simon Peter on the

night before Jesus’ crucifixion. Knowing what would transpire that night, Jesus cautioned Peter that the enemy had his sights set on him. But then Jesus encouraged Peter by informing him that Jesus Himself had prayed for him. What is of particular note is what that prayer was. “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not” (Luke 22:31–32).

Jesus’ prayer for Peter demonstrates that the security of our faith is the secret to thwarting the devil’s plans. If our faith does not fail, then Satan’s plans will. If our faith fails, then Satan’s plans will not. It is really just that simple. If we maintain a firm grip on our trust in God, then Satan’s desires toward us will never come to fruition. The shield of our faith will protect us from him. That victory is worth fighting for!

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A. Faith Supersedes Feelings

We are blessed with five senses to enable us to navigate through the world around us. The gifts of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling allow us to perceive the realities of our surroundings. Challenges can arise when our senses fail us, and what we perceive to be true, in actuality is not. This leads to mistakes, falls, and failures.

It would be useless to try to use one sense to perceive a different stimulus. That is to say our sense of smell cannot perceive light. Our sense of taste cannot respond to vibrations in the air. Our sense of hearing cannot decide if something tastes good or bad. In the same fashion, these natural senses cannot be utilized to determine spiritual things. They are not created to perceive the things of the spiritual world. “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are

foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

But God has equipped us with a “sense” that interacts with the things of the spirit realm—our faith. Faith is what allows us to perceive that God is at work when our natural senses cannot locate Him. Faith is what allows us to understand that the Lord has our best interests at heart when our natural minds cannot make sense of His ways. Faith is what allows us to obey God’s Word when human reasoning screams it is not sensible to do so. Our feelings may say one thing, but the persuasion of our faith supersedes that voice. Augustine said, “Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.”

B. Faith Works

It was heralded from a bumper sticker, but the words are true. “Faith is an action!” The type of faith that protects us from spiritual assault is not found in mental assent but in active demonstration. Faith is not independent from actions; it is shown by them.

During the terrible days of the Blitz, the sustained bombing of Great Britain by the Nazis during World War II, a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a shell hole. Seeking shelter as quickly as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified, yet hearing his father’s voice telling him to jump, the boy replied, “I can’t see you!” The father, looking up against the sky tinted red by the burning buildings, called to the silhouette of his son, “But I can see you. Jump!” How would that young boy demonstrate his faith? By hearing his father’s voice? By recognizing it? By understanding what he was being asked to do? No. His faith was demonstrated by his action when he jumped.

The principle that faith is only alive when it initiates action is precisely what James taught in his epistle: “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. . . . For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:17–18, 26).

If our shield of faith is merely housed behind glass like a trophy or a prize, it is worthless. The shield that is functioning according to its purpose will be tested and battle-scarred from its use in daily living for Christ.

William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, explained it this way in his Founder’s Message to Soldiers: “Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again—until they can scarcely distinguish which is the one and which is the other” (*Christianity Today*, October 5, 1992).

C. Faith Moves God

Not only does faith please God but it moves Him. We should note at the outset of this portion of the lesson that faith does not force God’s hand. It is a fallacy to believe if our faith were just strong enough, God would be compelled to do one thing or the other. In fact, true faith never approaches God in that manner. Oswald Chambers, in *Run Today’s Race*, wrote, “Faith for my deliverance is not faith in God. Faith means, whether I am visibly delivered or not, I will stick to my belief that God is love.” Faith is not found in demanding what God will do, but in presenting the need to Him, knowing He will do what is best!

With that understanding, however, one cannot take a serious look at the Gospels without realizing our Lord is moved when faith is demonstrated. Consider the following:

- “When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy . . .” (Mark 2:5).

- “When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel” (Luke 7:9).

- “Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt” (Matthew 15:28).

- “But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole” (Matthew 9:22).

These and a host of other verses of Scripture show us that our faith can move God to action on our behalf. He is not moved by volume, nor is He moved by our select use

of “religious” words. But when a desperate need drives us to put our faith into action, Jesus responds. Because we will have moments when we need God’s intervention, we must determine never to let this shield fall from our grasp. “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)” (Hebrews 10:23). With this shield we can call on God with the assurance the answer He knows is best is on the way!

III. GUARD YOUR FAITH

Because faith is essential for us to please God and live a victorious life, we should certainly ascribe a high value to it. Such a gift from God is not to be taken lightly. This is not a common commodity.

God has given “to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). But that measure is the margin of faith needed to bring an individual to the point of salvation. Every man, by the grace of God, has the faith necessary to be saved if he will use it in obedience to God’s Word.

But the faith we develop that allows us to grow in Christ and in our relationship with Him is a grand treasure. It is listed among such jewels as virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity. (See II Peter 1:5–7.) In fact, faith is of such inestimable worth that the Scriptures instruct us to cling to it. “Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck” (I Timothy 1:19). “Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience” (I Timothy 3:9). Just as a man in battle clings desperately to his shield knowing his very survival depends on it, so should we for exactly the same reason.

We should take practical steps to guard our faith. We must carefully manage influences in our lives. It is a truism that “if you show me your friends, I’ll show you your future.” We become like those with whom we open our spirits in fellowship. We cannot say we truly value our faith and then consistently expose our spirits to the influence of those who do not share that value. Our grip on the shield of faith will become increasingly weakened if we surround ourselves with those who have let go of theirs. If faith is important to us, then we will desire to be with those to whom it is important as well.

We guard our faith when we faithfully attend God’s house for worship and the Word. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). The shield of faith and our love for it are strengthened when the Word of God is engrafted into our spirits by hearing and responding to preaching.

We guard our faith by limiting exposure to carnal and worldly influences. Certainly this shield is more than strong enough to weather anything Hell can throw at it. But the value systems of this world are so contrary to the kingdom of God that their constant barrage through the media and from society in general can weaken our grip on that shield. We need to be inundated with voices and influences affirming godly decisions that applaud righteous principles and acknowledge biblical ways. Doing so helps ensure that our grip on the shield will remain firm.

The faith we carry as a shield should progressively grow in order to provide an ever-increasing measure of protection.

IV. EXPAND YOUR FAITH

Just as faith is not stationary in its operation, neither is it static in its development. The faith we carry as a shield should progressively grow in order to provide an ever-increasing measure of protection. Though the faith we exhibited at our salvation was a wonderful thing, that same measure of faith is woefully inadequate as we continue to walk with God. Our trust in Him should be greater today than it was last year, and next year it should be greater still!

Paul took great joy in precisely this development in the church in Thessalonica. “We are bound to thank God always for you,

brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly” (II Thessalonians 1:3). The faith of these New Testament believers did not grow just a little; it grew exceedingly. This should be our goal as well.

One of the keys to the expansion of our faith is exercise. Faith is much like a spiritual muscle. Left inactive it atrophies. It withers. It becomes increasingly less capable of being put into operation. But when we use it regularly, our faith strengthens and grows. When we step outside our comfort zone and obey God, the shield that defends us enlarges. When we ignore our flesh and the natural world and, based on our firm persuasion, pursue the things of God passionately, we may well become a larger target for Satan. But the good news is that we also become increasingly able to withstand every fiery dart he may launch—not because we are wise enough or strong enough, but because the shield of faith grows with us.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Faith is not abstract; it is concrete. It is not meant simply to be fodder for theoretical or academic discussion. Faith is gritty. It is tenacious. It is the fuel for daily application of

biblical principles in real-life situations. It is meant to affect the way we live and to shape every decision we make.

Faith is a gift from God for which we are responsible. It should draw us to His feet regularly, and it will equip us to see His enemies destroyed. If faith is simply a badge worn on our sleeves, it is not fulfilling its purpose. If it is merely a one-day-per-week item on our schedule, it is not protecting as it could.

In a world populated with spiritual danger and snares, no child of God should venture forth without a vibrant and growing faith. We should make every effort to nurture and develop our faith. Daily devotions, faithful church attendance, and godly fellowship must fuel the ongoing quest for greater faith. Absent that, we are vulnerable. With it, we are invincible.

Just as a soldier would feel terribly helpless and ill-equipped for battle without his shield, so must we. We cannot become comfortable in its absence. If it has been some time since you knew the weight and the protection of the shield of faith, for your own spiritual well-being please be persuaded and heed the words of Paul once again. “Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked” (Ephesians 6:16). ■

REFLECTIONS

- On a scale of one to ten, how persuaded do you feel you are regarding the basic tenets of the Apostolic faith? What practical steps can you take to increase that number in the next weeks and months?
- If a man loses one of his natural senses, he will learn to rely more heavily on others. When faith is absent, on what do Christians attempt to rely? Why is this insufficient? Discuss.
- Reflect on a time when God came through for you in response to a significant need. How was your faith actively demonstrated in that situation? How did your faith grow as a result?
- What steps do you take to protect something of value in this world? What lessons can you draw from those steps in terms of guarding your faith? Discuss.
- Do you feel your faith is growing, or is it stagnant? What practical steps can you take this week to begin to expand your faith or to accelerate that expansion?