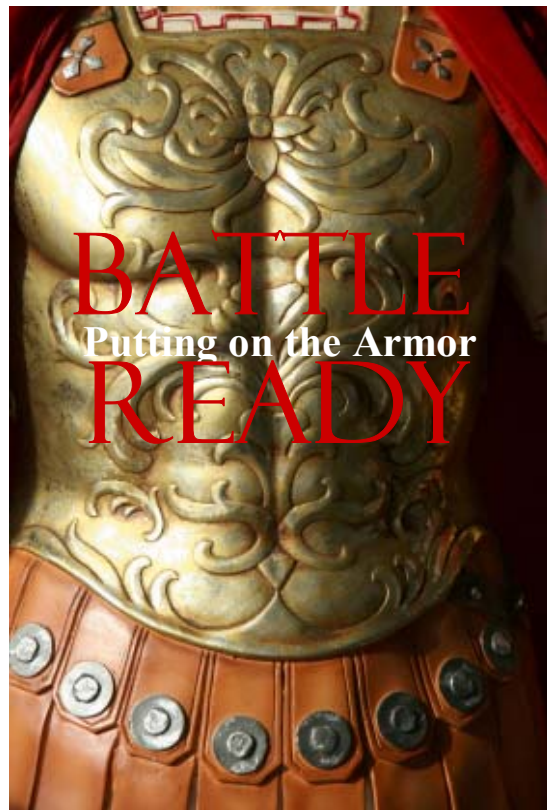


The Covenant Pulpit



"Not Seeing is Believing"
Picking Up the Shield of Faith

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Introduction

Pickett's Charge remains one of the most infamous blunders in the American Civil War, and quite possibly all military history. It has been called "the high-water mark of the Confederacy," for the South never recovered from its military and psychological effects. On the morning of July 3, 1863, General Robert E. Lee, frustrated in his inability to flank the Union under Gen. George Meade, ordered a full frontal assault on the Union troops positioned on Cemetery Ridge. The effects of the charge were devastating. Of the 12,500 Confederate soldiers who advanced, over half were killed. The rest were either injured or taken prisoner. It marked the end of the battle of Gettysburg, the conclusion of Lee's northern campaign into Pennsylvania, and the unraveling of the Confederate cause. When asked years later why the charge failed, Gen. George Pickett said: "I've always thought the Yankees had something to do with it."

The truth is Pickett's charge is a prime example of fighting today's battles with yesterday's tactics. Robert E. Lee, as effective of a general as he was, was trained in Napoleonic warfare tactics. His understanding of the best strategy was to march large masses of men against your enemy's position until you engage them in hand-to-hand combat. The only problem is that in Napoleon's time, and even at the beginning of the Civil War, guns and artillery had a very limited and inaccurate range. What Lee failed to take into account was the fact that Meade's men now had rifles and cannons with improved accuracy and range. The men who crossed the open field in Pickett's charge never had a chance. Meade unleashed a hellish barrage of bullets and projectiles. Of the 12,500 Confederate soldiers who marched that day, nearly half were killed. The rest were wounded or captured. Meade's men barely had to brandish their swords or bayonets. Lee's tactics did not match his opponent's capabilities.

The best way to lose a fight is to be ill-equipped for the fight and an unequal match for your opponent. The surest way to seal your defeat is to bring a knife to a gunfight. I remember

wasting time in a bookstore (which I have been known to do on occasion) and stumbling on a book of famous last words. As I flipped through its pages, one quotation in particular caught my eye. It was the dying words of a Civil War cavalryman: "Come on, boys, they can't reach us from here!" Not knowing your opponent or being unprepared to face him can be disastrous. This is equally true in spiritual warfare.

As Christians we must not fight spiritual battles with flesh and blood tactics. We have an unseen, spiritual Enemy whose tactics are real and dangerous. Yet our Savior, though invisible, is no less real. Better yet, Christ is greater by far than our Enemy. He has provided all the resources for our defense and victory in spiritual warfare. The passage before us prepares us to fight in spiritual realms by providing us with this truth:

*Our Enemy is unseen, but so is our Defender.
So take up the shield of faith!*

In his ancient classic, *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu begins his treatment of warfare with this sobering introduction: "War is a grave affair of state; it is a place of life and death, a road to survival and extinction, and matter to be pondered carefully." What is true of war on earth is true of spiritual warfare: it is a "grave state of affairs." This is all the more reason for us to be well equipped for the fight. Otherwise, we will never be able to "be strong in the Lord" or to "stand against the schemes of the devil." So how can we do this? In Ephesians 6:16, however, the Lord furthers equips us with armor for the fight: "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." Today in our study of the armor of God, we come to one of the most important pieces: the shield of faith. But before we look at the shield in depth, we must consider something about our enemy which is so basic and yet often overlooked. Then we will see why the shield of faith is so desperately needed. **Satan's attacks are real and dangerous.** If we were under any illusion before that our Enemy is not real or that his schemes are not destructive, we are not anymore. The Apostle Paul in a vivid and terrifying image

depicts our Enemy as standing at a distance with us in his sights, ready to fire “flaming arrows” at us. The devil is not a little, mischievous character in a red suit who carries a pitchfork. Although we should not give him too much credit, we must never forget Satan is a real, personal, and powerful foe. And we must never forget that he is intent on waging war against us so that he can weaken our faith and slow our growth in righteousness. The Christian life is a struggle. Satan knows that our souls are lost forever to him, so he does what he can to hurt us. Here Satan is not presented as the deceiver who appeals to us with his attractiveness. He is the unmistakable enemy of our souls, intent on destruction. Let’s notice several things about his “flaming arrows.”

Bows and arrows are no longer a part of the modern world’s standard military arsenal. In the ancient world, however, before the invention of guns and rockets, the arrow was a deadly weapon. It gave a great advantage to the army who had it. It could be shot long distances quickly and with fairly good accuracy. This weapon was taken up another notch when armies started dipping the arrows in pitch or tar and setting them on fire before shooting them. It was a doubly dangerous weapon. So what does this tell us about Satan and his attacks?

First, his “flaming arrows” come quickly and without warning. Satan will not usually announce his coming. He comes out of nowhere. You are going about your daily life, and then wham!, he hits you. You are caught unaware and unprepared. When he strikes first, he has the advantage. As William Still has noted, “It is the suddenness and unexpectedness of the attacks which are alarming, as also the imperious demand that the spirit is to be obeyed instantly without questions and without reason. How then are we to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of Satan? We know, of course, that God can give his servants swift guidance, but he never ‘blitzes’ them.”¹ You will know that Satan is attacking you when the thoughts or desires that surprise you are neither grounded in your logical thought patterns, nor prompted by your circumstances.

¹ –William Still, *Towards Spiritual Wisdom*, p. 47

The last thing a person hears when they are struck by an arrow is the brief whistling of air. However, as Still points out, God never blitzes his people like that. Like a bloodthirsty linebacker, Satan breaks through without warning and bowls you over.

Second, his "flaming arrows" come from any and every direction. The problem with archers is that they can hide and they can hit you from any direction, or several directions—all the more reason why we need to be on guard, and to have a shield. Throughout your day, Satan may come against you from any number of directions. He has endless tools and opportunities at his disposal.

Third, His "flaming arrows" come from a distance. The thing about arrows, missiles, and bullets, is that you can strike your opponent without them being able to hit you. The Enemy does not even have to endanger himself by attacking you. He is beyond reach, but you are not. One of the most deadly and terrifying weapons in the United States' arsenal is the cruise missile. It can be launched from a Destroyer safely offshore and put precisely through a three foot wide window to hit its target. Satan's attacks are similar. He can strike at a moment's notice, from a distance, without warning, and with devastating impact.

Finally, Satan's "flaming arrows" come to both wound you and inflame you. The flaming arrow is a doubly dangerous weapon. Not only does it wound you, but it sets you on fire. When the devil attacks he is intent on both. He intends to wound your heart and your conscience, but also to inflame your sinful nature with evil desires and thoughts. While you are busy putting out the fire and nursing your wounds, you are taken out of the fight, and he is free to continue his rampage.

Sobering, isn't it. Well, the point is not to be overwhelmed with fear. It is simply to know our enemy and to see the need for the shield of faith. As C.S. Lewis has famously said, *"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally*

pleased by both errors."² Our God and King has given us the shield of faith to defend against such flaming arrows. Without it we are vulnerable. With it we are invincible. Let him launch his "flaming arrows." We have the shield of faith!

Only faith can provide total defense against spiritual attack. Notice that little phrase at the beginning of verse 16, "In addition to all this..." It could be translated "In every circumstance" or "above all." The point is this: the shield of faith is the most comprehensive defensive weapon we have.

A shield covered every part of the body. In Paul's day, the first century A.D., the Romans carried a shield called the *scutum*. The *scutum* is of course the one Paul was referencing when he compared faith to a shield. As he was imprisoned by the Romans when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians, it is quite possible that he had a Roman guard standing over him while he wrote, outfitted with the whole armor of Rome. Perhaps the *scutum* shield was propped against the wall of his cell.

The *scutum* is described in detail for us by the Greek historian Polybius and other sources. It was a large shield, approximately four feet long by two-and-a-half feet wide. In fact, the word used here in the New Testament literally means, "door." It consisted of two layers of wood glued together and covered with linen and then animal hide. It was all bound together with iron above and below and had an iron boss affixed to the middle of its front.

The Roman shield is an apt metaphor for faith because it covers the whole body. It gives a comprehensive protection. It even protects the other pieces of armor. That is why the Apostle urges us to take up faith in every circumstance. If you can only have one piece of defensive armor, take the shield of faith. The Apostle highlights its power when he attributes to it the ability to "*extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.*" The shield of faith is the only piece of armor of which he explains its effect.

It is only faith that is praised in the lives of the eminent saints listed in Hebrews 11. Of all their virtues, faith is placed at

² *The Screwtape Letters*, preface, p. ix.

the top. It is primarily faith for which Abraham is commended and all the other saints of old are commended. It is only faith that saves us (John 3:16; Roman 5:1). It is only faith that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4-5). It is only faith that “extinguishes the flaming arrows of the evil one.” So take up faith.

Satan will attack you at the point of belief. The first place Satan will want to do battle is on the field of belief. If he can shake your faith, or get you to believe a lie, he can turn you any which way he wants. What we often forget, but he doesn't, is that all sin arises from unbelief, and all righteousness arises from faith. Just as Paul explained in Galatians, the only thing that matters in the Christian life is “faith working itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). Faith is the fountain of all righteousness and virtue. It is also the root of our salvation. But on the flip side, the root of sin is unbelief. This is where Satan will want to wound you first, in your heart where faith arises. So take up the shield of faith.

Believing the invisible makes you invincible. Just as the Roman legionnaire was invincible from the threat of flying arrows, so the Christian when he raises the shield of faith is invincible to the invisible attacks of the Enemy. Just because the spiritual world is invisible, does not mean that it is not real or true. Faith by its very nature is a certainty of things unseen. As Hebrews puts it, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith cannot depend on what the eyes see or the hands touch or the nose smells. It deals with things invisible, yet certainly real. Only faith can defeat an invisible opponent and find refuge in an invisible Savior. With the shield of faith raised high we do not need to fear, because with it the main strategies of our Enemy are defeated.

First, faith blocks doubt. Satan's first tactic is to bring doubt. He will try to make you doubt your salvation, God' existence, God's goodness, God's power, the truth of God's Word, your own eternal security, etc. He is by nature a deceiver. It was through doubt that he first opened up Adam and Eve to the temptation of disobedience. “Maybe he's right,” they thought, “maybe God doesn't know what he is doing. Maybe his rules are not right and good.” You know the rest of the story. If he can cause us to doubt,

he can remove our confidence. If we lack confidence, we will be less than fervent and diligent in living for him. Don't doubt the Word of God. Doubt the lies that come in like a shooting arrow out of nowhere. Take up the shield of faith.

Second, *faith blocks fear*. Fear is another common tactic of the Enemy. He comes to intimidate, to spook, and try to make us flinch. He plants anxieties, worry, and irrational apprehensions. You know that this is not from God, for "*God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and of self-control*" (2 Timothy 1:7). Do you ever have fearful thoughts that break into your mind or heart out of nowhere? Fears for yourself, your future, your loved ones, your church, your nation, etc. These are the flaming arrows of the evil one and are extinguished by the shield of faith. It allows us to say with David, "But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head" (Psalm 3:3).

Finally, *faith blocks sin*. If Satan cannot deceive you, or move you from your confidence in Christ, then he cannot tempt you to sin. We think sometimes that it is by our energy, strength, intelligence, or plans that we can defeat temptation. Not so! Only faith will overcome temptation. Just as Jesus repelled the temptations of Satan with faith in the Word of God, how much more must we stand in faith when we are tempted.

We have seen how the Enemy attacks us and how faith is the only shield against it. Now let's answer the question of what type of faith makes the best shield. Not all faith is the same.

Saving faith makes the best and only shield against spiritual attack. In this passage Paul is referring to the personal, saving faith of the believer, which takes God at his Word and receives Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. It is the faith that receives with open hands the promises God offers in the gospel. It is a complete commitment of the whole person to God. But there are other, lesser types of faith which are common; but these are powerless against the Enemy. They make poor shields.

First, *foxhole faith* makes a terrible shield. It has been said that there are no atheists in a foxhole. When people get in danger and find themselves in a "tight spot," they tend to turn to God to get them out. As soon as they are delivered, however, they forget

God. The quirky pop-star, Regina Spektor, describes this type of phenomenon in her song "Laughing With": "No one laughs at God in a hospital. No one laughs at God in a war. No one's laughing at God when they're starving or freezing or so very poor." The problem is that foxhole faith only wants God for what God can give to me at the present moment. It lacks relationship, commitment, and sincerity. It is good that people search for God in hardship, but foxhole faith won't find him or hold on to him.

The other problem faith is *shallow faith*. Jesus himself warned of this type of faith in the Parable of the Sower.

"As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21).

Shallow faith doesn't have root. It only has the appearance of true saving faith. Now this doesn't mean that someone who is truly saved can lose their salvation. The Bible nowhere teaches that. What it means is that sometimes people adopt the tenets and behaviors associated with Christianity, but they are not truly changed by them. It is a counterfeit faith. It looks real, but it's not.

Yet another problem faith is *intellectual faith*. James 2:19 makes this terrifying statement: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!" Demons believe! Yikes! Apparently there is a way to have faith and yet fall far short. Intellectual faith holds to the doctrines of the Christian faith but does not commit itself to them; or more importantly, it does not submit itself to the God of truth. We can recite the Apostle's Creed or the Westminster Confession until we are blue in the face, and it will not save us. It takes more than giving mental agreement to a list of statements to save us and defend us, even if they are statements about God.

The type of faith that the Apostle is speaking of here is *saving faith*. Only it has the power to save us and to defend us from the attacks of the Enemy. Paul uses the word "faith" here in the same way that he uses it throughout the Letter to the Ephesians. It seals us with the Holy Spirit (1:14-15). It connects us

to the immeasurable power of God (1:19). It is the means through which we are saved by the grace of God (2:8-10). It gives us confidence before God and access into his presence (3:12). Saving faith, therefore, is the personal belief in Christ that involves the whole person: the mind, the will, and the emotions. As William Gurnall has noted, it “takes in all the powers of the soul.” This is why we are told in Romans 10:10 that we must believe in our hearts. Faith must go that deep. Only this type of faith can save us and defend us when the evil one attacks. It is faith that centers on Christ and receives him as the crucified and risen Savior. It also stands immovable upon the invisible, though real, promises of God’s Word.

Take up the shield of faith and never put it down. The verb the Apostle uses here does not call us to a repeated action. It commands a once for all, decisive action to be taken. Take up the shield of faith once and for all! It is not meant to be put down. It cannot be put down. Otherwise we become vulnerable to the Enemy’s attack. A story is told of a mother long ago who sent her son off to war with these words: “My son, either come home with your shield or be brought home on it.” God has given us the great gift of faith with which to shield ourselves. We must take it up and never put it down. When you do, the invisible Savior will make you invincible.