

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Faith		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Ephesians 6:16		
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What is Faith?

The word “faith” may indeed be the most important word in the Bible. It is certainly one of the most crucial. Hebrews 11 stands out in the New Testament as the “faith” chapter. Why was it that these Old Testament men lived such effective lives for God? Because they were men of faith – they did not have the bare minimum of faith whereby they could receive the grace of God, but they were, as we are told in the case of Abraham *strong* in faith. The faith to which Paul refers here is not the body of Christian beliefs (for which the term is used in 4:13), but basic trust in God – the faith in Christ that appropriates salvation and continues to bring blessing and strength as it trusts Him for daily provision and help. The substance of Christianity is believing that God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6); putting total trust in His Son as the crucified, buried, risen, and ascended Savior, obeying Scripture as His infallible and authoritative Word; and looking forward to the Lord’s coming again. Habakkuk’s great declaration that “the righteous will live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4) is quoted and reaffirmed twice by Paul (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11) and once by the writer of Hebrews (10:38).¹

In our passage, as my good friend Scott Clark points out, “Paul uses a military metaphor, in which he invokes a series of images, to describe the Christian life, the struggle with sin – mortification (putting to death the old man) and vivification (the making alive of the new man). Truth is a battle belt. On top of the belt used to hold up one’s trousers is a heavier belt to carry equipment. In the ancient world a soldier would have carried his sword there. Today a soldier carries a great deal of equipment, including his sidearm, on his belt. It is essential. He dare not leave the camp without it. The breastplate was the ancient equivalent of body armor. For the purposes of this discussion it doesn’t really matter whether the righteousness in view is intrinsic (sanctification) or extrinsic (Christ’s righteousness imputed) – although the latter seems more likely – there is no mention of good works yet. The Good News of peace with God (accomplished for us by Christ), which strengthens the likelihood that the righteousness mentioned above is justification, is what prepares us for battle. Again, our good works are not mentioned. The shield is faith, i.e., knowledge, assent, and trust in Christ, his finished work for us, and his promises.”²

I. THE NATURE OF THE METAPHORS

In this verse we have two metaphors. One dealing with the Christian’s armor, the other with the devil’s weapons.

1. What does the shield of faith mean? In keeping with Paul’s Old Testament references, the language bears striking resemblance to texts like Proverbs 30:5 where God “is a shield to those who take refuge in him”; Psalm 3:3, “But you are a shield around me, O LORD”; Psalm 7:10, “My shield is God Most High”; Genesis 15:1, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield”; and Psalm 84:9, where Christ is the shield, “Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one.” “These Old Testament utterances make it unlikely that only man’s faith is meant in a text as drenched in Old Testament thought pattern as is Ephesians 6.”³ Clearly Paul is not speaking of “faith in faith” – the strength of faith is not in itself, but in its object. Faith presupposes knowledge concerning the One trusted. It is the content of faith that gives

the victory in the battle (I John 5:4, 5). The charismatic cult known as the health and wealth Gospel (also referred to as the prosperity ‘word of faith’, and their churches are called *Rhema* churches) teach a faith formula that has more in common with New Age Gnosticism than with Biblical Christianity.⁴ The following book titles reflect a recent trend linking the Gospel to personal affluence: Kenneth and Gloria Copeland’s *The Law of Prosperity* (1974); Kenneth Hagin’s *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God* (1979) and *You Can Have What You Say* (1979); Joe Magliato’s *The Wall Street Gospel* (1979); Kenneth Hagin, Jr.’s *How God Taught Me About Prosperity* (1980); Elbert Willis’ *God’s Plan for Financial Prosperity* (1982); and Jerry Savelle’s *Living in Divine Prosperity* (1987). Others teaching this heresy on TBN include Jesse Duplantis, Marilyn Hickey, John Avanzini, and Benny Hinn. Gloria Copeland has written confidently that “the Word of God simply reveals that lack and poverty are not in line with God’s will for the obedient... Allow the Holy Spirit to minister the truth to your spirit until you know beyond doubt that *God’s Will is Prosperity.*” (She means the kind of prosperity that can be converted into hard cash – as in diamond rings, luxury cars, and big houses.) The chief business of her God is to ensure material prosperity.⁵ This group makes much to do over this particular verse in Ephesians 6, but they distort the Biblical understanding of faith by twisting the Scriptures to construct a mechanical notion of faith as primarily a positive attitude that can be used as a formula to make God your servant.

2. To what do the “flaming arrows” of the devil refer? The imagery is that of darts or arrows that were dipped in tar, pitch, or some other combustible substance and then set on fire and thrown or shot. “The devil’s darts no doubt include his mischievous accusations which inflame our conscience with what (if we are sheltering in Christ) can only be called false guilt. Other darts are unsought thoughts of doubt and disobedience, rebellion, lust, malice or fear.”⁶ The devil’s darts are described as “flaming” or “fiery” because they are intended to consume or burn when they strike. “He will labor to make us distrust God’s grace,” said Calvin, “and on the other hand, he will make us believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is far from us, and even tempt us to murmur against Him, or to raise trifling and unprofitable questions, or else blasphemies, and similar things. And all these are darts.”⁷

CONCLUSION: The apostle Paul referred to faith as something that should continue to grow (II Corinthians 10:15; II Thessalonians 1:3). The faith that brings a person to salvation in Christ does not depend upon the strength of faith, but in the reality of it. But faith must grow if progress in Christian maturity is to be made. “While even the weakest faith mediates a perfect justification, the degree of sanctification is commensurate with the strength of the Christian’s faith and the persistence with which he apprehends Christ.”⁸ It is faith in God as He is revealed in Scripture. Faith comes from hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17). Faith must be nurtured on the God revealed in Scripture. In order for faith to be strong it must be God-centered, Christ-centered, Word-centered. This is our shield. Anything else is tissue paper. Finally, faith is never to be viewed in the abstract. It always has its orientation to the Gospel. “Hence there is never,” declares Berkouwer, “a stretch along the way of salvation where justification drops out of sight. Genuine sanctification – let it be repeated – stands or falls with this continued orientation toward justification and the remission of sins.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ J. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Ephesians* (Moody, 1986), p. 358.

² R. Scott Clark, The Heidelberg.net, June 8, 2014.

³ Markus Barth, *The Anchor Bible: Ephesians II* (Doubleday, 1960), p. 772.

⁴ In Gnosticism, not only the object of faith (Christ), but the act of faith, becomes radically revised. In Christianity, faith is trust in God's specific promise of salvation through Christ. In Gnosticism faith is magic. It is a technique for getting what we want by believing in it strongly enough. As C. Peter Wagner, an advocate of the Vineyard movement, puts it, "Empirical evidence also validates the absolute necessity of faith or whatever else you want to call it – possibility thinking and goal setting – as a prerequisite for church growth." Is faith really a synonym for possibility thinking and goal setting? Then would not everyone possess faith? Or is faith a unique gift from God to trust in Christ, as in biblical teaching? The Second Helvetic Confession (a 16th century Reformed statement) declares, "Christian faith is not an opinion or human conviction, but a most firm trust and a clear and steadfast assent of the mind, and then a most certain apprehension of the truth of God presented in the Scriptures and in the Apostles' Creed, and thus also of God himself, the greatest good, and especially of God's promise and of Christ who is the fulfillment of all promises." M.S. Horton, "The New Gnosticism" *Modern Reformation* (July/Aug., 1995), p. 11.

⁵ In the discussion by D.W. McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (NavPress, 1995), pp. 44-45.

⁶ J.R.W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 1979).

⁷ *John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 673.

⁸ L. Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 536.

⁹ G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Sanctification* (Eerdmans, 1952), p. 77.