

If you've been trying to do good but have kept doing bad instead, if you believe God's law is holy but haven't been able to keep it, then give up on yourself, and go to Christ. He will not condemn you. He will forgive and welcome you. Accept his forgiveness, and then trust him to help you to make the changes you cannot make on your own. Depend on his Holy Spirit for the power to fight the flesh. Get together with a group of other Christ-believing, Spirit-empowered people who have been through the same struggle you've been through, who know the addictive, enslaving power of the sinful nature but also know the joyous liberating power of God. When you live in the forgiveness of Christ, in the power of his Spirit, and in the encouragement and accountability of God's people, your sinful nature will give way to the new, true you. Pray each day for fresh strength from the Holy Spirit. A centuries-old prayer in the Heidelberg Catechism provides guidance for praying against evil:

Father in heaven, deliver us from evil. By ourselves we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment. And our sworn enemies—the devil, the world, and our own flesh—never stop attacking us. And so, Lord, uphold us and make us strong with the strength of your Holy Spirit, so that we may not go down in defeat in this spiritual struggle, but may firmly resist our enemies until we finally win the complete victory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Part Three

Combat Equipment: The Armor of God

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground.

(Ephesians 6:13)

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

(2 Corinthians 10:4)

We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

(Romans 8:37)

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne.

(Revelation 3:21)

Chapter Ten

The Belt of Truth

Stand firm, then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist. (Ephesians 6:14)

Nothing, it seemed, could kill George Washington. As a young man, Washington caught smallpox but survived the dreaded disease and remained as strong and athletic as ever. As a junior officer, Washington was part of a unit that was caught in an ambush. His commanding general and most of his fellow soldiers were shot down. Washington had two horses shot from under him and four bullet holes in his coat, but not one bullet touched his body. Later, as general during the American war for independence, Washington would ride his horse where fighting was fiercest, with bullets and cannon fire whistling all around him, but he was not hit. He camped with troops in awful conditions, with many men dying of disease, but Washington survived it all.

Nothing could kill George Washington—except his doctors. After Washington retired from the presidency, he was riding his horse in the rain one day and caught a cold and sore throat. His throat got sore and swollen, so his doctors tried to help him. The doctors shared the medical opinion common at the time that one good way to get rid of a disease was to bleed it out. It was thought that when diseased blood was drained from someone, the body would replace it with fresh, healthy blood in a short time. So a pint of blood was drained from Washington. A bit later an-

other pint was drained, and shortly after that, still another pint. When Washington didn't improve, the doctors decided they should bleed him again, and this time they took a full quart of blood rather than just a pint. The doctors also used other methods to drain the disease. They gave Washington laxatives to drain his bowels. They gave him vomit-inducing drugs to drain his stomach. They blistered his hands and feet to release disease through the skin. They did all this in addition to draining five pints of his blood. At last the doctors drained all the life out of him, and George Washington died.

The treatments he received were not based on truth. Truth is vital in medicine, and truth is vital in all of life. Error in the medical realm killed George Washington, and error in the spiritual realm destroys souls. Nice intentions aren't enough; there must be truth. Falsehood destroys; truth protects and strengthens.

You may like to think that every religion is as helpful as any other, but that's like saying every medical treatment is as helpful as any other. Is draining five pints of blood from an infected person as helpful as giving that person antibiotics? No, treatment must be based on truth, or it does more harm than good. Likewise, religion must be grounded in truth, or it does more harm than good. Doctrinal errors are even deadlier than doctors' errors. False religion can destroy you for eternity.

Maybe you'd rather not distinguish truth from error. You may think it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere about it. Well, George Washington's doctors were very sincere. They sincerely cared about Washington and sincerely thought they were taking the best approach to healing him. Washington sincerely trusted his doctors and gave his consent at every step of the treatment. But no matter how sincere they were, their approach was based on error, not truth. Error killed Washington, and er-

ror can destroy you. You need truth in order to connect with God and enjoy eternal life.

When the Bible describes the armor of God that protects people from Satan and hell, the first item mentioned is "the belt of truth." Ephesians 6:14 says, "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist." A belt might seem unimportant compared to such things as a breastplate, helmet, shield, or sword. But at the time this Bible passage was written, a soldier would buckle his belt firmly in place before putting on any other armor or weapons. It was the very first piece of armor the soldier would put on. The belt was a wide, tough girdle that helped protect the softer parts of the lower body. It was important in its own right for protection, and it was also needed to hold other equipment in place. The breastplate was attached to the belt, and the sword was also attached to the belt. The soldier needed his belt on before he could put on other equipment. In the armor of God, truth is the belt. What a belt did for soldiers of long ago, truth does for soldiers of Christ. It protects parts of us that are vulnerable, and it keeps other God-given equipment in place.

Protecting Soft Spots

How does truth protect us? The belt of truth helps protect parts of us that are softest and most vulnerable to wounds from Satan. We shouldn't press the details of a word picture too far, but it may be worth noting the location of a soldier's belt/girdle: near the stomach and private parts. Few appetites are as strong as the desires for food and sex. If any part of us needs to be bound and protected by truth, it is here. Without the protection of truth, our stomach is vulnerable to gluttony or to the sense that material things are all that matter. The belt of biblical truth protects us by warning against letting our stomach be our god (Philippians 3:19) and by telling us what Jesus told Satan, "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that

comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Without the belt of truth, our sexuality is vulnerable to promiscuous, perverted desires. But the belt of biblical truth warns against adultery, fornication, homosexuality, and other sinful distortions, and the belt of biblical truth also shows us God’s beautiful design for the union of husband and wife.

But let’s not limit the belt of biblical truth to the area of a physical belt, such as stomach and sexuality. Truth is vital in every area. Truth tells us that we have an eternal future, and this protects us from the deadly lie that this life is all there is. Truth tells us who God really is and what he’s really like, protecting us from idols and false gods. Truth tells us who we are as creatures made in God’s image and as fallen into sin, protecting us from having too low an opinion of our value and too high an opinion of our virtue. Truth shows us ultimate reality in Jesus, protecting us from putting anything else on the throne of our hearts. Truth is vital in every area, and error is deadly. Indeed, the difference between truth and lies is the difference between God and Satan. Scripture speaks of the Lord as “the God of truth” (Isaiah 65:16) and of Satan as “the father of lies” (John 8:44). Satan uses error to attack us; God uses truth to protect us.

Of all the sins and errors that can harm us, none is worse than errors about what it takes to save us. Various religions offer different ways of salvation, but only the blood of Jesus can bring pardon for our guilt, and only the divine life of Jesus can give us eternal life. That is the truth. Religions that ignore or deny this truth may offer other cures, but these cures kill. No sin is as deadly as a false way of salvation. Some cures are worse than the disease they are supposed to heal. George Washington’s sore throat may have been serious, but his doctors’ attempts to help him were even worse. Likewise, sin is serious, but false religions and phony ways of salvation are deadlier than any particular sin. Truth is a belt of protection against

false ways of salvation and against all Satan’s lies. The way to buckle truth in place is to believe with all our heart the vital truths God reveals in the Bible.

Holding Things in Place

A soldier’s belt was the first piece of armor he put on. It was important for helping to protect the lower part of the torso, and it was also important for holding other equipment in place, such as the breastplate and the sword. In the armor of God, the belt of truth holds other things in place. The breastplate of righteousness can stay in place only when it’s connected to the belt of truth. The sword of the Spirit, God’s Word, will be available as a weapon only when the belt of truth keeps it close to our side.

Regarding the breastplate of righteousness: righteousness is having a right standing with God by measuring up to God’s perfect character. The only human who measures up perfectly is the God-man, Jesus Christ. The only way I can have God’s righteousness is by having Jesus’ perfection credited to me as a gift. I can’t make my own breastplate of righteousness. Jesus makes a breastplate of *his* righteousness and gives it to me. The way I put it on is by faith, by trusting that Jesus’ perfection counts as mine. This breastplate protects my heart from Satan’s accusations that I am unrighteous and unacceptable to God. This breastplate repels every stab of guilt and despair.

What does the breastplate of righteousness have to do with the belt of truth? Well, just as a soldier couldn’t put on the breastplate without first putting on the belt and connecting the breastplate to it, so I can’t receive God-given righteousness unless I first believe God-revealed truth. I must believe that God speaks the truth and keeps his promises before I can receive his promised gift of righteousness in Christ. Scripture says Christ is the righteousness of God for those who believe. Is that true, or isn’t it? If I don’t have confidence in God’s Word and don’t believe it’s true,

I can't possibly receive that righteousness for myself. But if I first get buckled up in God's truth and take him at his word, his righteousness connects with his truth and covers me. No one ever received righteousness in Christ without believing the truth about Christ.

The belt of truth provides a connection to help hold the breastplate of righteousness in place, and the belt of truth also keeps the sword of the Spirit at hand for immediate use. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. God's Word, given to us in the Bible, is the chief weapon in fighting spiritual battles. But a sword is of little value to us if it's not at our side when we need it most, and the Bible is of little value to us if it's just lying around somewhere, but is not belted at our side by our love of truth and confidence in truth. If we belt on God's truth by believing the Scriptures and studying God's revelation and storing it in our minds, then we also have God's Word near at hand as a weapon when we need to fight.

We shouldn't stretch a word picture too far. In a sense we could say that the belt of truth and the sword of the Spirit are the very same thing: God's Word, the Bible. The main point is to depend on Scripture. Still, before we can put the Bible to use in daily living and in winning others to Christ, we must first know it and have biblical truth buckled around our being.

Wearing the Belt

Are you wearing the belt of truth? Are you convinced that the Bible is God's truth? Do you believe that Scripture is the message of the Lord who cannot lie? How often do you read the Bible? How well do you know it? How much of it do you memorize? How eagerly do you listen to biblical preaching? How often do you study the Bible with others? Do you take knowledge of the truth with you wherever you go and in whatever you do? Are you wrapped firmly

in the belt of truth? Do you count on God's truth in Christ to keep other things in place?

Truth is vital, and so much else depends on it. Buckle it on! Wear it! If a belt was left hanging on a hook or off in a corner somewhere, it wouldn't help a soldier much, and other pieces of armor won't be of much use either, because the belt helped keep things in place. Likewise, a Bible gathering dust on a shelf somewhere is of little use in battling Satan. You need God's truth for its own sake, and you need the truth so that God's other blessings can be in place. You need the truth!

Truth is the basis for lasting success. If you want to succeed as an auto mechanic, you must learn the truth about cars. If you want to succeed as an architect, you must learn the truth about construction design. If you want to succeed as a history teacher, you must learn the truth about history. If you want to succeed as a surgeon, you must learn the truth about anatomy. If you want to succeed as a pilot, you must learn the truth about operating an airplane. In one area of life after another, success depends on knowing the truth. This is supremely true in relating to God and succeeding as part of the armies of Christ.

I would not want to live in a house designed by an architect who didn't know any principles of safe construction. I would not want to be operated on by a surgeon who knew nothing about the inner workings of the body. I would not want to get on an airplane with a pilot who didn't know how to fly. And I would not want my eternal life to depend on someone who doesn't know God or the way to God. For eternal life, I depend on Jesus himself as the way, the truth, and the life. As I live by faith in Jesus and as I teach others, I want to base everything on the teaching of Jesus and have as much of the mind of Christ as I possibly can. I can't afford to be careless about truth, and neither can you. Truth is crucial for your eternal future and for the future of those whom you influence—children,

friends, neighbors, fellow workers. You can't be saved without truth, and you can't help others be saved without truth.

Belonging to a religious group is no substitute for knowing truth personally and buckling the belt of truth firmly in place. If you don't know the truth personally, you may never notice if the religious group you belong to has no real truth. If you don't have a deep love of truth, if you aren't constantly seeking to gain more truth and to understand it better, you may lose what little truth you had and not even know it.

William Gurnall, a Christian from centuries ago, wrote a classic titled *The Christian in Complete Armor*, which has been helpful for my own life and helpful in writing about spiritual warfare. Gurnall said,

If we do not desire to know truth we have already rejected it... Truth and error are all the same to the ignorant man and so he calls everything truth. Have you heard about the covetous man who constantly hugged his bags of gold? He never opened them or used the treasure, and thus when a thief stole the gold and left his bags full of pebbles in his room, he was as happy as when he still had the gold.

That's what can happen if you belong to a religious group but never bother to check whether it's actually teaching the truth. When people stop studying the Scriptures and stop seeking God's truth, they hardly know the difference if the truth is stolen from their church by false teachers. As long as the show goes on in some form, they never realize that the jewels of truth have been taken away and replaced by rocks of worthless error, and they will have no treasure in heaven. Belonging to a religious group is no substitute for seeking the truth personally. You must know biblical truth for yourself.

Community of Truth

Does this mean the search for truth is entirely personal and private, and that you should ignore the community of faith? No, just because a soldier is responsible to put on the belt of truth doesn't mean he's an army by himself and can ignore everyone else. It may be heroic for a soldier to arm himself well and to do his part bravely, but it would be foolish for a soldier to always stay separate from fellow soldiers. Christ calls his soldiers not to remain alone but to stand together with each other in the truth. Love of truth must be personal but not merely private. Those who love truth are eager to learn from other seekers of truth and to band together with them.

There are false, misguided religious groups out there, including some that claim to be churches of the Lord. You must know biblical truth well enough to recognize when a church has fallen into deadly error, and you should stay away from such a group. But don't use the error of some as an excuse to avoid all churches. There are many congregations that truly exalt Jesus and teach the truth of the Bible. Such congregations are part of the great church that extends throughout all history and on every continent, what the Bible calls "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The true church is a mighty fortress of truth, and Satan's forces will never conquer it. Jesus promises, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Don't fall for the lie that all congregations are too corrupt for you to join. The true church still stands, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and every soldier of Christ should be connected to a congregation if possible.

At various times in history, Satan has peddled the lie that no true church is left, and he peddles the same lie still today. Satan believes in recycling. The lies that fool people in one era of history, Satan recycles in a slightly different

form for another era. The anti-church lie is a favorite in Satan's recycling operation.

A religious radio broadcaster named Harold Camping made the news by wrongly predicting the date of Jesus' return. But that wasn't Camping's biggest error. He also declared that the church age had ended and that Christians should stay away from anything that called itself a church. Camping said that God had no further use for the church and that God worked only through non-church ways, such as Camping's radio network. Harold Camping quoted the Bible a lot, but in saying that no church was worth joining, he was recycling a very old lie of Satan. Camping was very sincere—as sincere as George Washington's doctors who bled him to death in an effort to cure him. Many people are already too isolated, too dependent on their own limited wisdom, too removed from the shared wisdom and encouragement of people who know the Bible and love the Lord. Telling people to become Christians but to avoid churches is like telling them to join the army but stay away from other soldiers.

Not all churches teach the exact same thing on every point. Maybe you're tempted to think that if they can't agree on every point, you're not going to join any of them. But don't make too much of minor differences among Bible-believing Christians who agree on the basic truths of what God is like, of human nature, of salvation through God's grace in Christ, and of Christian moral principles. If you really love truth, don't let disagreements about smaller truths get in the way of the fact that many churches agree on the really big truths.

If you refuse to join any church because churches aren't all exactly alike and don't entirely agree on every exact point, says William Gurnall, you are "as foolish as the man who refused to eat his noon meal until all clocks in the city struck twelve at exactly the same time." Think of it: noontime arrives, and various clocks start chiming,

but they're a few seconds apart from each other. They don't quite chime in perfect unison. Is that a good reason to deny that it's noontime or to refuse to eat your noon meal? If watches are a few seconds or even a few minutes different from each other, they can still be basically telling you the right time, and you'd be crazy to refuse food at mealtime until all timepieces were perfectly synchronized with each other. Likewise, many good churches may not agree exactly on all points, but if they are sound on basic truths, you will benefit from whatever Bible-based, Christ-honoring church you join, and you'd be foolish to say you were going to wait for all the churches to be perfectly the same. As you put on the belt of truth, be sure to join the community of truth, the forces of truth united under the leadership of Jesus.

Let me ask again: have you buckled on the belt of truth? Do you buckle it on again each new day? Start every day by reading part of God's Word personally. If you have a spouse and children, focus on God's truth together as a family. Then band together with a church. Encourage each other in the truth, and join forces in spreading the truth to others. Don't go anywhere without the belt of truth. You can't fight Satan effectively if you're uncertain or confused or just plain wrong. Study the truth. Ask God to increase how much you know and to help you believe more clearly and more firmly than ever. "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist."

Chapter Eleven

The Breastplate of Righteousness

...with the breastplate of righteousness in place... (Ephesians 6:14)

If you were fighting a battle, what would you want to wear? With artillery firing and shrapnel flying, would you rather be wearing a baseball cap or a heavy-duty helmet? If an enemy was using poison gas against you, would you rather be wearing designer sunglasses or a gas mask? If a sniper was aiming bullets at your heart, would you rather be wearing a light T-shirt or body armor? If you were advancing against an enemy position, would you rather be riding in a golf cart or an armor-plated tank? If you were in a war, you would want the best protection you could get.

Protective equipment isn't always colorful or comfortable. A combat helmet is not nearly as soft and pleasant as a baseball cap. A gas mask is more awkward and ugly than designer sunglasses. Body armor is heavier and hotter than a T-shirt. A tank is noisier than a golf cart, and a tank doesn't catch cool breezes or give a nice view like a golf cart does. But in battle, none of that matters. You care more about solid protection than about style or short-term comfort. You care more about staying alive for the long term than about how you feel or look for the moment.

That's common sense for any soldier in a battle, and it also makes sense for the ultimate conflict against Satan. You need strong protection, whether it seems pleasant to you or not. It's more important to live forever and to avoid

the horror of hell than to do whatever seems easiest at the moment. To survive the attacks of Satan and have eternal life, you need the armor of God, even if you think other clothing would be more comfortable.

Among the various pieces in the armor of God is "the breastplate of righteousness." At the time the Bible was written, soldiers used different gear than modern troops, but the basic principle of protection was the same. Every piece of armor was important, and the breastplate was second to none. The breastplate extended from the base of the neck down to the abdomen. It covered the torso, the trunk of the body. The breastplate protected the heart, lungs, liver, and other vital organs. The breastplate was less comfortable than an ordinary shirt or tunic, but it provided far better protection against swords, spears, and arrows. In the armor God provides for spiritual warfare, righteousness is the breastplate that protects the heart, the very core of our being, the wellspring of life.

Righteousness may not sound very appealing. The very word can almost cause an allergic reaction. For some of us, "righteousness" sounds like an impossible standard, something to make us feel like rotten failures. For others, the word "righteousness" is associated with being a stiff, pompous, holier-than-thou perfectionist. Just the mention of righteousness makes us feel awkward and uncomfortable. But don't let that discomfort turn you off to righteousness before you find out what it really is and how much you need it. Righteousness may sound unpleasant, but so does the roar of a heavily armored tank. Righteousness may seem hard and unstylish, but so is a combat helmet. Righteousness may appear ugly to you, but a gas mask isn't exactly pretty. Righteousness may feel too heavy, but a breastplate or a bulletproof vest is heavier than a flimsy T-shirt. So if talk of righteousness makes you feel awkward or uncomfortable, hang in there. The goal is to be alive for the long term—for eternity—not just to go with

whatever you happen to like at the moment. You should want righteousness no matter how little it appeals to you, simply because you can't survive without it.

Let me add, however, that if you really examine this breastplate and put it on, you'll discover that it's not so unpleasant after all. Righteousness is not so hard, heavy, and clunky as you'd think a piece of armor would be. The breastplate of righteousness is very strong and resistant to evil attacks—stronger than the equipment of any army—but it also turns out to be beautiful, comfortable, enjoyable, and precious beyond price.

Alien Righteousness

What is righteousness? It is meeting God's standard and being right with him. Righteousness is measuring up to God's perfect character and being able to relate to him and have access to him. Without righteousness, you have no relationship with God, and you perish in hell without him.

Where can you get this righteousness? Many religions of the world see the importance of having some sort of righteousness. They see that morality matters. To that degree these religions are correct. Where they go wrong is that they offer do-it-yourself righteousness. They tell you how to earn your own righteousness and how to make yourself measure up to the level God requires. This is a fatal error. You can try your hardest to do good things, but you can't measure up to God's righteousness. You can put yourself through painful sacrifices to make up for sins, but such penance can't atone for the wrongs you've done. You can try every pilgrimage, every ritual, every relic, every method of meditation, but such things can never give you access to God's throne room.

If you follow a religion that tells you how to earn your own righteousness, you get tangled in at least two lies. First, you lie to yourself about God's standard and imagine God's righteousness to be lower than it really is. Second,

you lie to yourself about your character and conduct, and you imagine yourself to be higher than you really are. Every religion that teaches righteousness by your own effort drives you to think of God at too low a level and yourself at too high a level. How else could you bring yourself to God's level of righteousness? You can't afford to see how high God truly is or how low sin really is. Otherwise, you would have to admit that God's righteousness is impossible for you.

Righteousness is absolutely necessary, yet utterly impossible for any of us to achieve. Man-made religion can teach man-made righteousness, but this can't save anybody. Righteousness means measuring up to God's standard, and that is something you and I cannot do. We cannot build our own breastplate of righteousness, so where can we get it? The answer is that we must have alien righteousness.

The word *alien* may bring to mind odd critters from other galaxies flying around in spaceships. But alien righteousness has nothing to do with UFOs or science fiction. *Alien* means "other, someone else, someone very different." To have alien righteousness means that I somehow get the righteousness of someone else, someone very different from myself. It means that someone alien to me, someone who is not sinful like me, someone who measures up to God's standard and is at God's level, somehow transfers his righteousness to me. Such righteousness is alien to my fallen, sinful character, but this alien righteousness must somehow count as mine, even though it comes from someone else and not from me. The only righteousness that can make an effective breastplate is God's righteousness in Jesus Christ transferred to me.

Alien righteousness is the complete opposite of self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is not part of the armor of God; it is one of Satan's favorite weapons to destroy us. Trusting your own righteousness is like putting on a

breastplate with long, sharp spikes on the side that goes next to your body. The more tightly the breastplate is strapped on, the deeper the spikes press into you. Satan is happy to help you put it on. He needs no other weapon against you if he can strap you so tightly in self-righteousness that it pierces your heart and destroys you.

Satan loves to use religion to destroy people, to make them enemies of God and sometimes even killers of other people. This has happened to far too many religious people. Trusting their own righteousness, they think they measure up to God's standard. If they fall a bit short, they think they can make up for it and rise to God's level by killing God's enemies in holy wars or by giving their lives in battle against the infidels. This has happened at various times in history, and it still haunts our world today. But inflicting pain on others or absorbing pain ourselves cannot atone for sin and make us righteous. Homicidal murderers and suicidal martyrs cannot use blood to escape guilt and raise themselves to God's level. Only the blood of Christ can pay the price, remove the guilt, and open the way to heaven.

The apostle Paul knew from personal experience how deadly self-righteousness could be. Paul had grown up in a religious home, and as a young man he tried his hardest to measure up to God's standard. He was proud of his righteousness and opposed those he thought were out of tune with God. What was the result? Paul hunted Christians, imprisoned them, and killed them, all in the name of doing God's will.

But then this self-righteous, Christian-hating murderer had a direct encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. No longer was Paul proud of his own righteousness—he wanted to take it off and throw it away like garbage. No longer did Paul think he had earned God's approval—he knew he deserved nothing but God's wrath. Paul saw that his old self-made righteousness had made him “a blasphemer and a

persecutor and a violent man,” and he called himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:13,15). Speaking of his religious background, his zeal, and his efforts at righteousness, Paul said, “I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Jesus Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Philippians 3:8-9).

It was this very same Paul who wrote about the armor of God and told us to have “the breastplate of righteousness in place.” Clearly this breastplate must not be our own righteousness but alien righteousness, righteousness from beyond us, the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ.

Imputed Righteousness

What does it mean to have the breastplate of righteousness in place? We need the complete righteousness of Jesus *imputed* to us, credited to us, counted as ours apart from anything we do, as the basis for our relationship to God. And once we receive imputed righteousness by faith in God's free gift, we also need *imparted* righteousness, Jesus' character shaping our character.

Maybe you're tempted to say, “Stop throwing strange words at me. Imputed! Imparted! Righteousness isn't a favorite topic to begin with, and these words make it even more complicated and unpleasant.” But remember what I said earlier. It's easier to slip into a T-shirt than to strap on body armor, but it's not safer if you're heading into battle. So why be careless and unsafe about your soul? Why be willing to study years and years to prepare for a job in some profession, but unwilling to spend a few minutes preparing our minds for matters of eternal importance? Why think military forces need topnotch training in military technology and strategy, but think that in spiritual warfare it's okay to be lazy and mush-minded? In your walk with God and your battle against Satan, you need to

grasp the distinction between imputed and imparted righteousness. This isn't just theory for theologians. It's protection for ordinary people from Satan's attacks.

Imputed righteousness is an accounting method God uses, in which Jesus' perfection gets credited to your account. The Son of God always had a perfect relationship and union with his Father, even before he came to earth and took a human nature. When he became human, Jesus did what no human before or since has ever done: he kept God's law perfectly. Everything Jesus did, everything he said, everything he thought, was perfectly in line with God's law. Jesus honored his heavenly Father with his whole being. He did his Father's will without sinning even once. He obeyed his Father all the way to laying down his life on the cross. Jesus was and is totally righteous.

If this active obedience, this righteousness of Jesus, is imputed to you, it counts as yours. God transfers Jesus' record to you. You might have a shameful record of sin, but if you put your faith in Jesus, God sees you as he sees Jesus: not guilty, fully accepted in love. But what about your own record of sin and disobedience? That gets put on Jesus' account and is paid fully by the blood he poured out when he died on the cross. Your sin is counted as his, and his righteousness is counted as yours. When you put your faith in Christ, God not only takes away your sins but he also credits to you the perfect obedience of Christ. You don't just get rid of guilt; you get the same right standing as Jesus.

How does imputed righteousness serve as a breastplate against Satan's attacks? It protects from two of Satan's chief weapons: pride and despair. Sometimes Satan tempts you to be proud, to think you've worked your way to God's level of righteousness and to despise others. But if you trust entirely in Jesus' righteousness and regard your own righteousness as rags and rubbish, you are protected from pride. How can you be proud of yourself when your

entire standing depends on someone else, on Jesus? The breastplate of imputed righteousness protects from pride.

If Satan can't pierce your heart with pride, he may switch weapons and attack you with doubt and despair. When you do something wrong or when you remember a sin from the past, Satan says, "Do you really think God would accept someone who did something like that? God is holy, and you are bad. God is pure, and you are rotten. Look at the sort of person you are! Look at the things you've done! You might as well forget about eternal life." But with the breastplate of righteousness in place, you tell Satan, "I know everything you're saying. I am sinful, and God is holy. But I look to Jesus, not myself. I don't count on my own ability to measure up. I count on Christ, and God imputes to me Jesus' perfect righteousness. Satan, before you can pierce me with despair, you will have to find something unrighteous in Jesus, for his righteousness is my breastplate." Satan can't handle that. Satan can shoot all sorts of holes in *your* righteousness, but he can't find even one tiny weakness in *Jesus'* righteousness.

If you try to resist despair by working up certain feelings or depending on special experiences, your heart will not survive. But your heart is safe if it is protected by the imputed righteousness of Jesus. This is what the Bible calls "being justified by faith." The word *justified* simply means "counted righteous by God," and when you are counted righteous through faith in Jesus—justified by faith—your heart is protected from Satan's attacks.

Imparted Righteousness

Imputed righteousness is the basis for your entire standing with God, apart from anything you do. Once you have a new standing with God, you need to be made into a new person. Once Jesus' righteous standing before God has fully been imputed to you—that is, credited to your account—his righteous character is then gradually *impart-*

ed to you, that is poured into you, made a part of your being, so that you start thinking, talking, and acting more like Jesus would.

This doesn't happen all at once. *Imparted* righteousness doesn't come in a moment; it comes in ever-growing measure over the course of a lifetime. Unlike imputed righteousness, which is complete the moment God credits Jesus' finished work to you, imparted righteousness is not complete until God has made your actual character and conduct exactly like Jesus. Imputed righteousness is the complete work of Christ credited to you once for all when you put your faith in Jesus. Imparted righteousness is your developing, partial resemblance to Jesus, which is never complete in this life. Only when you go to heaven will you be sinless and perfect like Jesus.

Imparted righteousness is never the basis for your acceptance by God. Rather, the reverse is true: your acceptance by God is the basis for imparted righteousness. The complete righteousness of Jesus must be credited to you before you can be accepted by God and start to develop into a person like Jesus. God accepts you only on the basis of complete, perfect, imputed righteousness that is not your own, and once he accepts you, his Holy Spirit begins the process of making you more and more like Jesus. This ongoing process of imparting more and more righteousness to your actual character and conduct is what the Bible calls "being sanctified" or "made holy."

To ward off Satan's attacks on your heart, you must know the difference between imputed righteousness and imparted righteousness, between justification and sanctification. The moment you start thinking that your acceptance with God depends on your progress in becoming like Christ, you will either be puffed up with pride by overestimating your progress, or you will be cast down in despair at how little progress you've made. To be secure, you absolutely must depend on justification by faith in the fin-

ished work of Christ imputed to you. Once you realize that Satan can't destroy your standing with God, you are set free to live in the same kind of joyful, loving obedience that Jesus gave to his heavenly Father.

Imputed righteousness is your chief protection against self-righteousness, pride, and despair, but that doesn't mean imparted righteousness has no place at all in the breastplate of righteousness. Satan can't fatally wound and bring to hell anyone to whom God has credited Jesus' perfection, but Satan can still inflict a lot of wounds that are not fatal to the soul but are still very painful and damaging. The more righteous we become in character, the harder it becomes for Satan to tempt us successfully and wound our spirits. We need more and more of the Holy Spirit's life and power, more and more of Jesus, more and more healthy patterns and less enslavement to old habits, in order to be vigorous, effective warriors for Christ. Also, imparted righteousness can strengthen our assurance of salvation. If there's not even a hint of imparted righteousness growing in us, we might be mistaken in thinking that the full righteousness of Christ has already been imputed to us. Those God accepts fully and freely in Christ, he also begins to transform.

Imparted righteousness can serve as a fruit of spiritual life which encourages confidence that God has accepted us for Jesus' sake, and the more righteousness becomes part of our being, the harder it is for Satan to tempt us successfully and the easier it becomes for us to advance against Satan and attract others to the beauty of the Savior.

Mithril from Christ

Earlier we saw that in a military conflict, we're more concerned about solid protection than about style or short-term comfort, and that we should seek the breastplate of righteousness, even if it might seem uncomfortable and ugly, simply because our survival depends on it. But once

you understand righteousness and put it on as a breastplate, once you know the wonder of God justifying you for Jesus' sake and sanctifying you to become more like him, you find that righteousness isn't unpleasant and ugly after all. It's more like the mithril coat of mail worn by the hobbit Frodo in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

In Tolkien's tales, Frodo's mithril coat provides powerful protection. More than once, it saves Frodo from being stabbed to death. Still, even though it provides life-saving protection, mithril is light and lovely. Frodo's mithril coat is so precious that it is worth more than the wealth of the entire Shire, the neighborhood where Frodo grew up. Frodo could never have made this mithril coat himself, and he could never have come up with enough wealth to purchase something so precious. Someone else made it. How did Frodo get it? He received it as a gift from someone else.

Mithril isn't just Tolkien's legend; the breastplate of righteousness is mithril. The breastplate of righteousness is not heavy, ugly self-righteousness but the light, lovely righteousness of Jesus Christ. This breastplate is made of the loving obedience of Jesus to his heavenly Father, who prizes his eternal Son more than all the treasure in the universe. This breastplate, given freely to us as a gift, is paid for by the blood of Jesus, of which one drop is more precious than all the splendor of men and angels. We could never make such a mighty protection for ourselves. We could never earn such a precious adornment. But it can be ours simply by accepting God's gift and putting it on. This mithril breastplate of Christ's righteousness is strong enough to turn aside Satan's every attack on our heart, and it is beautiful enough to make angels marvel at our splendor in Christ. Accept God's gift. Stand against Satan with the mithril breastplate of righteousness in place to defend you, and you can also stand before God with that same breastplate to adorn you and make you beautiful enough to belong in heaven.

Chapter Twelve

A Soldier's Footwear

...with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. (Ephesians 6:15)

Achilles had a teeny, tiny problem with his foot. The hero of Greek myth had a body that could not be injured, except for a little spot on his heel. Back when Achilles was a baby, his mother, Thetis, tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx. The magical water gave total protection to anything it touched. But Thetis held her baby by his heel, and that part of Achilles' foot was not touched by the protective water.

Achilles grew up to be the mightiest warrior among the Greeks. He joined the Greek forces in the campaign against the kingdom of Troy and defeated every enemy he faced. He conquered various villages and killed Troy's fiercest warriors, including the mighty prince Hector. No weapon could hurt Achilles. No warrior could beat Achilles. But then Prince Paris of Troy shot a poisoned arrow that happened to strike Achilles at his only weak point, that teeny, tiny spot on his foot. The poison did its deadly work, and that was the end of Achilles. He died.

Shaquille O'Neal had a teeny, tiny problem with his foot. Such a small problem on such a big man wouldn't seem to matter. In 2002, the giant basketball star had just led the Los Angeles Lakers to a third straight championship, and looking ahead to the new season, a fourth championship seemed almost certain. But the Lakers began the

season as losers, with Shaq on the sidelines. He had only one small problem: a bad toe. The toe had required surgery, and Shaq sat out the first twelve games of the new season. Shaq still stood over seven feet tall and weighed over 320 muscular pounds, but that didn't help as long as his toe needed to recover. No opposing player could stop Shaq, but the toe stopped him. The world champions suddenly looked as bad as any team in the league. Playing without Shaq, they lost nine of their first twelve games. Even after he returned to the court, the Lakers lost 19 of their first thirty games. Eventually the toe recovered, and Shaquille O'Neal and the Lakers again became a force to reckon with. The difference between being champions and losers was one toe.

Small weaknesses can cause huge problems. That's true not just in Greek myths or professional basketball but in spiritual warfare as well. Satan is always looking for a weakness to exploit. He looks for ways to turn small sins into big problems that destroy people forever. Something starts as a small doctrinal error, and Satan finds a way to turn it into a huge heresy. Something starts as a careless choice, and Satan finds a way to make it a deadly addiction. Something starts as a little quarrel between husband and wife, and Satan turns it into a grudge and a divorce. Something starts as a minor disagreement between nations, and Satan turns it into a war. Something starts as a little step away from God, and Satan turns it into the highway to hell. Satan is an expert in this. He looks you over, searching for a weak spot. It might seem small and unimportant, but Satan can use it to bring you down.

With an enemy like that, partial protection isn't enough. You need total protection. When the Bible talks about spiritual warfare and the armor of God, it doesn't just say to put on a few parts of the armor to protect what you think is most important. It says to put on the *full* armor of God. It says to use every piece of equipment, covering

even parts of the body that might seem less important—such as the feet. Ephesians 6:15 says to have “your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.”

Proper Footwear

For a soldier in biblical times, it was dangerous to have unprotected feet. The main danger was not a poisoned arrow in the heel, as in the legend of Achilles—that didn't happen very often. But there were other dangers for a soldier with unprotected feet. If you were in a fight and you slipped and fell because of bad shoes, your opponent might kill you before you could regain your feet. If you were marching barefoot over an area with thorns and sharp stones, your feet might be so torn up that you wouldn't even make it to the battle front. If you charged an enemy position that was fortified with short, sharp stakes in the ground, unprotected feet would be pierced, you would fall to the ground in pain, and your enemy could easily finish you off. If you marched in an area that had scorpions or poisonous snakes and didn't have proper protection, a bite or a sting could lay you low. If you had to march in mud or cold weather without proper footwear, cold and wetness could make you sick. Fevers and other illnesses destroyed many soldiers.

Strong armies understood the importance of a soldier's feet. The bottom of their footwear had thick soles, enabling them to walk in dangerous areas without injury. Often this footwear also had spikes on the bottom to provide firm footing, prevent slipping, and help the soldier hold his ground. What a soldier wore on his feet might seem less important than how he protected his head and chest, but wise generals and soldiers knew that a foot problem could be as bad as any problem. It could lead to death, and even if a soldier didn't die, injured feet or illness could make him totally useless for combat, more of a hindrance than a

help to the cause he was serving. A soldier's feet needed proper protection to help him survive and to give him mobility to go wherever his commander told him.

When the Bible talks about spiritual warfare against sin and Satan, it urges us to put on the full armor of God, including the right footwear. There may be areas of life that don't seem very important, but if we're careless in little things, Satan can use them to destroy us or to make us ineffective in the service of Christ. To stay on your feet amid Satan's attacks, to hold your ground against the devil, to march wherever Christ calls, and to triumph in the Lord, you need proper footwear. You need "your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace."

A soldier needs proper footwear not just for defensive reasons but also to go on the offensive. The goal in warfare is not just holding ground but marching forward, not just survival but victory. Some of the great military campaigns of history depended on the ability of armies to move faster and farther than their enemies thought possible—and the ability to march was helped by equipping soldiers with excellent footwear. The armies of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar had brilliant leadership and excellent weapons; they also took good care of their feet. This enabled them to move swiftly and surely, to outmaneuver opponents, and to win amazing victories.

Likewise, in spiritual warfare, the goal is not just survival but victory. The aim is not just to avoid defeat but to drive back the evil one and take territory away from him. To put it another way, the aim is not just to resist Satan and avoid hell personally but also to spread the message of eternal life to others, win them to faith in Jesus, and bring more parts of life under Jesus' life-giving rule. "The readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" is vital for defense and for offense: it enables you to stand firm and defend yourself when Satan attacks, and it enables you to go

on the offensive and march forward to victory under Jesus' direction.

When Ephesians 6:15 says to have "your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace," what does it mean? For a soldier of Christ, readiness means that you are ready to stand firm and fight off Satan, and it means you are ready to move into enemy-occupied territory, win victories for Jesus, and carry out the mission he gives you. Where does such readiness come from? The gospel of peace. The word *gospel* means "good news" or "glad tidings." In Isaiah 52:7, the Bible says, "How beautiful ... are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say..., 'Your God reigns!'" The gospel is good news because it is the glad message of peace: peace with God, peace in your heart, peace spread to others.

Peace With God

In spiritual warfare, a soldier of Christ must wear combat boots of peace. Isn't that a contradiction? How can war bring peace? How can the footwear of peace serve as combat boots? Well, sometimes the best way to enjoy lasting peace is to first win a war that gets rid of a constant threat to peace. And sometimes the best way to win a war against a strong enemy is to make peace with a different enemy who is even stronger and who then becomes your ally in the war you need to win.

Suppose you're a weak nation being attacked by a cruel, aggressive nation that won't leave its neighbors alone. The only way to have peace is war. The only hope of peace is to defeat that nation and be free from its aggression. But what if you're not strong enough to win this war? Well, suppose there's a third nation that is strongest of all. It's a good, peaceful, free nation, and it has the power to defend you and defeat your attacker. If that nation were your ally, you'd win for sure.

There's just one problem: you're not at peace with the good nation. That nation has never wronged you, but you still resent that nation; you've gone against its interests many times, and you've done various things to make yourself its enemy. This nation doesn't wish you ill. It isn't eager to destroy you, and it certainly isn't on the side of your evil enemy, but why should it help you if you remain at odds with it? If it wanted to punish you, it wouldn't even need to attack you directly. It could simply leave you to the cruelty of your vicious enemy. To win a war against the nasty enemy, your only hope is to get on peaceful, friendly terms with your good enemy. Peace with the good enemy is the key to winning the war with the evil enemy.

Satan is an aggressive enemy. War against Satan is the only means to lasting peace, and making peace with God is the key to winning the war against Satan. Satan is stronger than we are, but God is stronger than Satan. The Lord will defeat Satan for us, but only if we're at peace with God.

But how can you have a peace treaty with God if you're his enemy? People who sin and go against God's will—that's all of us—are by nature "God's enemies" (Romans 5:10). Once we've made ourselves God's enemies, we're doomed, unless God deals with our offenses, forgives our sins, and makes us his friends again.

This is exactly what God has done through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Jesus paid the price for our offenses, "making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you [made you his friends] by Christ's physical body through death" (Colossians 1:21-22).

Even after we've gone against God and done all sorts of damage, the Lord chooses to pay for the damage himself instead of requiring us to pay. He chooses to offer us a peace treaty instead of wiping us out or letting Satan wipe us out. This peace treaty, this new covenant, is how we can

stop being God's enemies and be his friends instead. In this friendship, this alliance, we no longer face Satan on our own. When we have peace with God, the Lord fights on our behalf. Peace with God is the key to winning the war against Satan, and once that war is won, we will have eternal peace and joy with no more grief or pain.

Do you have peace with God? Have you accepted his peace treaty through faith in Jesus' blood? Peace with God and an alliance with him is entirely the work of Jesus. Accept his treaty by trusting Jesus. It is a horrible offense against the Lord to despise and reject his peace treaty after he has paid for it with his own blood. If you reject Jesus, you have no protection from Satan, and no defense against God's anger. So trust God's treaty. Accept by faith what Jesus has done, and God will be your ally and defender. Scripture says, "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). God is no longer an enemy but our best friend. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Even Satan himself can't stand against us.

The good news of peace with God equips our feet with readiness. This readiness is like wearing footwear with spikes. Dig in and stand firm against Satan. Don't slip and slide around. Be sure of the gospel. Don't change your mind; keep believing in Jesus. Don't change your mood; keep rejoicing in peace with God. The sturdy footwear of readiness enables you to dig in your spikes and stand firm.

This footwear also enables you to march against Satan in all types of territory. Go on the attack against the evil one. Rescue others from his clutches. Enlist them in God's army. Scripture says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Always prepared! Always ready! Have your feet fitted with readiness to share the gospel of peace with others. Tell how they can escape

Satan's attacks and defeat him by accepting peace with God through faith in Jesus.

Inner Peace

Peace with God is an objective reality based on the work of Christ and the new covenant treaty established by God. This objective reality also produces the subjective experience of inner peace. When you know God is your friend, you have peace inside that is beyond anything words can explain. The Bible says, "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

The inner *feeling* of peace depends on the outer *reality* of peace with God. Some people try to make you feel better without actually making anything better. They like to say, "Peace" when there is no peace (Ezekiel 13:10). Nothing can really set your heart at peace except to know that you are right with God. William Gurnall's classic *The Christian in Complete Armor* says:

It would not help a condemned man on the road to execution if you put a fragrant rose in his hand and advised him to smell the flower and feel better about everything. He would still see the gallows just ahead. If a messenger from the prince should press a pardon into his hand, though, he would be overcome with joy. But this is the only thing that could change the man's heart. Anything short of pardoning mercy is as insignificant to a troubled conscience as that flower would be in a dying man's hands.

Peace with God is the key to inner peace. If you're not right with God, if you're his enemy, you can't be truly calm. "The Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life" (Deuteronomy 28:65-66). Inner

turmoil is often a symptom of being at odds with God. "'There is no peace,' says the Lord, 'for the wicked'" (Isaiah 48:22).

Peace with God is crucial to inner peace. If you're torn up inside by guilty feelings, God's pardon can bring peace. If you're full of anxiety and despair about the future, God's strength can give you peace. Lack of peace with God can sometimes move you to do things that are self-destructive or harmful to others. Something inside us tells us that if something is wrong, somebody's got to pay for it—so we either put ourselves through needless suffering or make other people suffer by being cruel to them. But if we know that Jesus has suffered for us and paid the price to give us peace with God, we have inner peace. This inner peace replaces guilt with assurance, anger with compassion, fear with courage, despair with confidence.

When God makes a peace treaty with you and you feel his peace in your heart, you become a fearless warrior for God. Satan loses his ability to intimidate you. Satan will attack your heart, but if your feet are fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, your inner peace will stay strong. Thorns and sharp stakes and cruel snakes cannot pierce feet that are protected by peace. Jesus says, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you" (Luke 10:19).

Spreading Peace

As we receive peace with God and experience inner peace, we must spread this peace to others. Wear those combat boots of peace! Stand strong against Satan, march forward against him, and bring to other people the good news of God's peace treaty.

In spreading peace, begin at home. Make sure you are at peace with God and that your heart is ruled by peace, not by restlessness and combativeness. Make sure you are at

peace with family members and fellow Christians. You can harm yourself and others if you go on the march in campaigns for various causes without the footwear of peace. Your only result may be to upset others and to get upset yourself. When you're truly at peace, you might still upset people, but not as often, and only for the right reasons. The Bible says, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men" (Hebrews 12:14). "If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9).

In a war, it's especially important that you be at peace with others who are on your side. Fight the enemy; don't fight each other. If members of a military unit are lobbing grenades at each other and shooting at their fellow troops, how can they ever defeat the enemy? They are defeating themselves. The Bible tells church people who bring lawsuits against each other, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already" (1 Corinthians 6:7). William Gurnall says that church people bickering with each other are like navy shipmates arguing with each other while an enemy is drilling a hole in the bottom of their ship. Satan loves to stir up disputes among Christians.

Arguments with fellow believers might not always seem so serious—a little gossip here, a little grudge there, a little dispute over music now and then. But remember Achilles' heel and Shaquille O'Neal's toe. A teeny, tiny foot problem can turn a champion athlete into a loser and a military hero into a dead man. A teeny lack of peace in the conscience, a tiny lack of peace with fellow Christians, can make our feet vulnerable to injury and disable our effectiveness against Satan. God's people must be at peace within their own hearts and at peace with each other in order to stand up to Satan's attacks and march against him.

Christians, let's unite with each other and proclaim God's gospel of peace to the world. Are your feet fitted with readiness to take back territory from Satan and win people for Christ? Don't be slowed by those who say you shouldn't call people of other cultures and other countries to Christ. Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of *all* nations" (Matthew 28:19). Don't be held back by those who say all religions are equally helpful and who say you should leave everyone to their own religion and not try to lead them to faith in Jesus. Jesus does not say every religion works equally well. Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Not everyone agrees with that, but that's what Jesus says, and I'm not about to contradict the Son of God.

Religion doesn't give peace with God; only Jesus does. Religion doesn't give lasting inner peace; only Jesus does. Religion doesn't have power to defeat Satan; only Jesus does. Religion doesn't give eternal life; only Jesus does. Religion doesn't have the power to bring world peace; only Jesus does. World peace will occur only after Satan has been defeated, his lies have been debunked, and Jesus comes again to bring the whole world under his reign of peace. True peace comes only through the gospel of peace.

Believe that gospel, and then go on the march to spread it everywhere. Jesus is on a mission, and he calls you to join his mission. The Bible says, "He himself is our peace... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:14,17). To all whose feet are fitted with the readiness of the gospel of peace, the Bible promises: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20). "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way" (2 Thessalonians 3:16).

Chapter Thirteen

Shielded from Arrows

Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. (Eph. 6:16)

Saturday night tends to be my hardest night of the week. If something goes wrong, it doesn't happen just any night. It usually happens Saturday night. If our computer crashes, it happens on Saturday evening. If our fire alarm system gets messed up and goes off, it happens Saturday night, waking the whole family and ruining our sleep. If our children are sick, Saturday night seems to be the favorite time for illness, keeping children and parents awake most of the night. If there's a ferocious storm and we lose electricity, it happens Saturday night. If there's a torrential downpour and our basement is in danger of flooding, it happens Saturday night, and I'm awake much of the night hoping to prevent trouble.

Why does Saturday night seem to be my worst night of the week? I don't think it's a coincidence. I think it happens because I'm a preacher of the gospel, and Satan wants to weaken me. On Sunday mornings I must speak to people who need God's Word. That's harder to do if I'm short on sleep and have too many hassles on my mind. Sometimes I've had to preach on less than two hours of sleep the night before because of all the things that went wrong. Satan likes to fire volleys to weaken me and keep me from bringing God's Word in its full, saving power.

Saturday nights are often hard, and so are Sunday mornings. It's harder than usual for our family to get along on Sunday mornings, and that's true of other churchgoing people as well. Friends tell me that their children seem to be at their worst on Sunday morning. The kids argue and pick on each other more than usual. At Sunday breakfast they spill more than usual. The parents are more short-tempered than usual. Family members sometimes yell at each other eating breakfast, getting dressed, and even in the car on the way to church. When they get to church, they might feel so upset or so guilty that they feel they shouldn't even be there.

Are those miserable Sunday mornings a coincidence? I don't think so. Sunday worship is vital for Christians, so Satan fires volley after volley after volley, trying to break us down and prevent us from getting built up and strengthened in church. I know that some problems arise from ordinary weariness and grumpiness, and I'm not the sort of person who blames every little problem on a demon. But I take the Bible seriously when it says that our struggle is not just against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil. I believe Scripture when it talks about "the flaming arrows of the evil one."

Flaming Arrows

Satan picks certain times to fire his volleys of arrows. He picks Saturday nights and Sunday mornings to wound worshipers before they gather in God's name, and that's far from his only time to shoot his volleys. Many of Satan's worst attacks are timed to strike people when they are about to start a new chapter in their life.

If you have ignored God for years but then start to get interested in the Bible and in Jesus, a lot of Satan's arrows are likely to fly your way. He will fire distractions and all sorts of things that make you feel too busy to get serious about God. If someone has been talking to you about the

Lord, you may suddenly find yourself so busy with lots of stuff that you feel you don't have time to talk with your Christian friend. If you start visiting a church, Satan will try to fill your Sunday mornings with other things to do, or he will help you to focus on things you don't like about the church's music or its members or even its paint or its carpet or a pothole in the parking lot. Even better, in Satan's view, is a rude remark from a church member or a blunder by the pastor—anything that gets your focus away from Jesus and your need for him. The Bible says that the best defense against Satan's flaming arrows is the shield of faith, and if Satan thinks you're getting close to faith, he wants to strike before you get that shield.

But Satan's not the only one at work. God is also active, and he can give you faith despite all Satan's attacks. When that happens, Satan may try to destroy you before you learn to use your shield well. New Christians often face worse troubles and stronger temptations than ever before. Even if there's a healthy, positive change in you, your friends and family may not like it. When you became a Christian, you may have expected your family life to improve, but sometimes it gets worse. You lose some friends, and there's more conflict than ever with family members. If that happens, the problem may be more than just humans not getting along. It may be Satan's fiery arrows. You may also have a harder time with your job and finances. A voice in your minds says, "Christianity is supposed to make life better, but it's getting worse. Life was better before I became a Christian." That little voice isn't just your own thought; it's Satan's suggestion. "You'll be happier if you just forget this religion stuff and go back to the way things were."

Satan times his attacks for greatest effect. A student from a Christian family leaving home for the first time and going to a university is a prime target for arrows of doubt and temptation. You meet smart people who sneer at the

Bible, and something in your mind says over and over, "Is the Bible really true? Does God really exist? Is Jesus really the only Savior? How do you know? The people at this university are a lot smarter than the people in your family and church. What did those folks back home really know?" The voice that whispers these doubts is not just your own mind at work; it is the voice of Satan.

When you go to the university, you might not come across any new fact or strong reasoning against the Bible, and yet you somehow feel that it's not intellectually respectable to trust Scripture and take God at his word. If you really knew the truth about your unbelieving professors and fellow students, you might find that their wisdom isn't so great, that their minds are muddled and their lives are a mess, but Satan doesn't show you the mess. He makes unbelief seem smart and sophisticated.

As Satan fires darts of doubt at your mind, he also fires arrows of temptation at your will and conscience. Satan can fire his arrows of temptation at any time, but he often fires his strongest volleys at those who are entering a new phase of life, such as leaving home for college or the military. He makes drunkenness, drugs, and sex appear the height of happiness. Away from home for the first time, you're free at last, free from rules and inhibitions, free to have fun, free to enjoy yourself! Satan's arrows inflame your desires and put a cloud of smoke over your thinking. Diseases, addictions, broken hearts, and hellfire can spring from such behavior, but the smokescreen of Satan may keep you from seeing this.

Satan is clever in his timing. He is firing various darts all the time, but he reserves his major volleys either for times when we are most vulnerable and unprotected or else for times when we are about to get close to God or attempt something important for the Lord. When you're about to open your Bible, a thousand different thoughts fly into your mind. Even if you're usually very good at focusing

your mind, even if you're usually able to think through a complex business project or to concentrate on a difficult scientific theory, you suddenly find it hard to focus when you open a Bible. You may be able to carry on long conversations with people, but when you try to pray and have a conversation with God, your mind suddenly goes blank or is interrupted by all sorts of things. This gets discouraging. You may wonder, "Why is it so hard for me to read the Bible? Why is my mind on so many other things? Why are my prayers interrupted by all these distracting thoughts?" You might think it's just lack of concentration, but it may be a round of missiles from Satan. The sooner you know you're under attack, the sooner you can deal with it.

Another occasion when Satan is most likely to attack is when you are about to do something for God that threatens him. Missionaries are often targets of fierce persecution or of dreadful attacks of discouragement. A church experiencing spiritual revival often comes under demonic attack. In nations that were mostly non-Christian, any growth in the number of Christians is often met by ferocious resistance. Satan is quick to attack anyone who begins a new work for God.

Perhaps the hardest year of my life was my very first year as a pastor. My wife was in the hospital for seven weeks. Our child was in the hospital almost six months and then died. I struggled against doubt, against a sense of being overwhelmed. I think Satan wanted to crush my spirit before I could get started preaching the gospel. God is stronger than Satan, of course, and the Lord carried my wife and me through that awful time. I'm still preaching the gospel today. But Satan and his demons didn't make it easy.

If you work to win people to Jesus, Satan will attack you. The more effective you are, the more arrows he will fire at you. Satan isn't stupid—he doesn't ignore those

who are a threat to his cause. If you are spreading the gospel, helping other people, and working to make your community and your country better, don't expect Satan to stand idly by. He will try to wipe you out, and if he can't destroy you, he will try to cripple you and limit your effectiveness.

Satan gets especially upset when his own tactics are exposed and God's armor is presented for people's protection. When C.S. Lewis wrote about the methods of demons in *The Screwtape Letters*, he said, "It almost smothered me before I was done." As for myself, writing about spiritual warfare has been hard. I have often felt burdened or distracted or severely tempted. When I get close to the front lines of battle, Satan comes after me. If you get close to the front lines, he will come after you. If you get serious about fighting sin and leading others to God, you might as well expect a lot of flaming arrows to fly your way.

A Strong Shield

We must be alert to Satan's fiery arrows, and we must have a missile shield to protect us, a shield that makes the arrows bounce off, a shield that even puts out their fire. What shield can do this? The shield of faith. In Ephesians 6, the Bible talks about "the evil day" when Satan's attacks are especially fierce, and urges us to put on God's armor. "In addition to all this," says Ephesians 6:16, "take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

At the time these words were written, the shield was a vital part of a soldier's equipment. The shield was usually quite large: about four feet high and about two and a half feet wide. If you held the shield in front of you during hand-to-hand combat, it provided much protection, and the shield was even more important when someone was firing at you from a distance.

Modern military forces often launch air attacks before ground attacks. Missiles and bombs prepare the way and

destroy much of the opposing force before ground forces move in. The technology was different in earlier times, but the principle was much the same: shoot from a distance before closing in for hand-to-hand combat. Generals would order archers to shoot volleys of arrows at the enemy from a distance. If the arrows did enough damage, the attackers would close in and finish off their opponents. Attacking archers fired sharp arrows that could pierce the body, and some fired flaming arrows. They would put something flammable on the arrow, set it on fire, and shoot it at the enemy. If you faced a barrage of these flaming arrows and didn't want to be pierced or burned, you needed a shield that was too strong for arrows to go through, and you needed a shield that was fireproof.

When Satan fires his flaming arrows, you need a strong shield, a shield that can't be penetrated, that can't be burned, that can even put out fires. Faith is the shield that can do this. God promises that the shield of faith "can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." God doesn't say faith *might* be able to do this; he says it *can*. It's not just a possibility; it's a certainty. Faith doesn't just *repel* Satan's arrows and make them bounce off; it puts them out, it *extinguishes* their hellish fire. Faith can put out not just *some* of Satan's arrows but *all* of them, every last one. Faith protects not just from little problems but from the very worst attacks. Faith has power to deal not only with human opposition or the attacks of lesser demons but also from the fiercest attacks of *the evil one*, Satan himself. Not the deadliest arrow in Satan's arsenal, not the fiercest volley he can fire, is too much for faith to deal with. The shield can handle the worst attacks from the prince of darkness himself, so it can surely handle any lesser attacks as well.

Why is this shield so strong? Because God is so strong. When faith is your shield, *God* is your shield. God told Abraham, the father of believers, "I am your shield" (Gen-

esis 15:1). Moses told God's people, "Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord? He is your shield" (Deuteronomy 33:29). King David said, "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped" (Psalm 28:7). The book of Proverbs declares, "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him" (Proverbs 30:5). There are so many Bible passages that speak of God as a shield that I can't quote them all here, but I trust you get the point. The power of faith comes not from the one who believes but from the one we believe in. The shield of faith is not faith in yourself or faith in positive thinking or faith in faith; the only faith that can shield you from Satan's attacks is faith in God as the ultimate protection. Faith is confidence in God, belief in his truth, assurance of his promises. Faith is God's means of applying his power and protection to us personally.

Take Up the Shield

When Ephesians 6:16 says to "take up the shield of faith," it calls on us to apply our trust in God to our particular situation and to any attack we are facing. A shield is not merely something to own but something to take up and use. When Jesus' disciples were sometimes defeated by doubt or snared by sin, Jesus would ask them, "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25) They were already believers, but sometimes they would forget their faith, almost as though they had mislaid it. Jesus wanted them to find their faith back and make use of it. What about your faith? If you don't have any faith at all, you need to be born again and trust Jesus for eternal life. And even if you do have faith, remember that faith isn't just something to have but something to use. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, writing about the shield of faith, says, "Faith here means the ability to apply quickly what we believe so as to repel everything the devil does or attempts to do to us."

When Satan fires flaming arrows of *doubt*, take up the shield of faith and put out those arrows. Don't try to defeat doubt by clever reasoning or by gathering evidence. Satan "has sharper reasoning than you," says William Gurnall. "There is more difference between you and Satan than between the weakest idiot and the greatest theologian in the world." Satan is far smarter than you are, and he is a master liar. He is an expert in twisting arguments, evidence, and statistics to support his lies. He can bring up one hard question after another, until your mind spins. Don't try to out-think the devil. Don't try to out-argue him. Don't try to answer every question he brings to your mind. Take up the shield of faith! Extinguish those flaming arrows!

A friend of mine once asked his godly mother, "How do we know the Bible is true?" She responded, "That's from the devil!" That made a deep impact on the young man. From then on he simply believed the Bible without questioning every passage. Questioning isn't always bad. But doubt of God's Word isn't an innocent question; it's a flaming arrow from the devil. If we try to block doubt with a shield of our own thinking skills, we are using a shield of paper against a flaming arrow. Only the shield of faith can stop the arrow of doubt and put out its deadly fire.

If you believe Scripture only when it fits your standards of evidence and reasoning, then you rate human thinking higher than God's Word. The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). This doesn't mean that God wants you to shut off your brain or that reasoning is bad. Gurnall says,

Certainly God's gift of reason can confirm His gift of truth. But faith must not depend on reason, but reason on faith. I am not to believe what the Word says merely because it agrees with my reason; but I must believe my reason because it aligns with the Word.

When Satan fires flaming arrows of *temptation*, take up the shield of faith to extinguish those arrows. Don't depend on the shield of your own willpower, or the temptations will overwhelm you. Faith in God's goodness, in his rich blessings and his promise to satisfy your deepest desires, is the best protection against temptation. Faith, not willpower, is your shield.

When arrows of *persecution* come at you, when Satan turns people against you because you belong to Jesus, take up the shield of faith. You may face mockery and job discrimination. In some places you may even face torture and death for Jesus' sake. But take up the shield of faith, and God will be there for you no matter what. Faith says to God, "Your love is better than life" (Psalm 63:3). "Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glories that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed... With that same spirit of faith... we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus" (2 Corinthians 4:8-14).

That kind of faith puts out Satan's flaming arrows, so that no amount of persecution can separate you from God or destroy the eternal life that is yours in Christ.

Satan may fire a volley of smaller arrows, *irritations* and problems that may not seem all that dangerous. When I've had a lousy Saturday night before I have to preach Sunday morning, I take up the shield of faith. I don't depend on whether I'm well-rested or in a pleasant mood but on the power of God. Satan may have sapped my energy, but when I'm low on energy, God has as much energy as ever. When I get up to preach his Word, I put my faith in his Holy Spirit to get results, and then the weary state of my own spirit no longer matters. I can brush aside Satan's arrows and extinguish them by the shield of faith.

Some of Satan's worst attacks are his flaming arrows of *accusation*. In fact, the very name Satan means "adversary" or "accuser." He likes to accuse and make you feel guilty for things you haven't actually done. Of course, if you have done wrong, he piles on the guilt and tells you that you're beyond hope.

Have you ever had a horrible thought come into your mind? Satan can send things into your mind so that you have a thought that doesn't really originate with you. You might hate the thought the moment it comes to you and not give in to it at all. But Satan may still try to make you feel guilty about having had such a thought. He may send temptations your way and then make you feel rotten for being tempted, when in fact you should be rejoicing that despite the force of the temptation, God kept you from giving in. It's no sin to be tempted; even Jesus was tempted. If you don't yield, the sin is Satan's, not yours. The tempter is wrong, not the one who resisted temptation.

But what about the times when you do sin? When you know you're guilty, Satan tempts you either to make excuses without repenting, or else he tells you that your sin is too bad for God to forgive. When these arrows of accusation fly at you, take up the shield of faith. You can't earn God's forgiveness, but you don't have to. Forgiveness comes through faith in Jesus' blood. That is your only shield against the accuser. Tell Satan, "My sin is huge, but the value of Jesus' blood is infinitely greater. Satan, if you say my guilt is too great for God, you are lying. Where sin increases, grace increases all the more (Romans 5:20). The Lord rebuke you, Satan. The Lord rebuke you (Zechariah 3:2). You say God can't forgive me, but God says he will. You're a liar, Satan, and God never lies, so I'm going to believe God, not you. God's mercy swallows up my biggest sins as the ocean swallows a rock thrown into it (Micah 7:19). God says that when a search is made for guilt, there won't be any to find, because God's forgiveness will

make it vanish completely (Jeremiah 50:20). I am justified by faith, Satan, so away with your accusations."

Friend, beware of Satan's flaming arrows, but be confident in God. When the fiery volleys come, be strong and courageous. "Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."