

Standing Firm: Knowing the Resources Given – Part 4
Ephesians 6:16

“In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one”

Introduction: One of the most common experiences of all people for all time is a negative response to the sinful realities around us and in us. Life is hard, pressure abounds, hope is hard to see, and finding ways to feel better or happy in this world has been pursued by every generation. Mental strain, anxiety, and depression are as old as the beginning of the world.

There has been a palpable shift over these last few years of a growing diagnosis of *mental health* issues, and it makes complete sense. Health organizations have cited that mental illness has risen in the US with about 20% of the country experiencing some form of it. The source of the rise: *the proliferation of rise of social media use, Covid-19 which contributed to isolation and loneliness, and societal trends that have resulted in smaller family units and less community involvement.*¹ This has contributed to a rise in suicide rates, particularly among young people, sadness, and proliferation of medication to try to help people through how they feel and their physical responses.

But there is nothing truly “new” under the sun. How has mankind tried to cope with mental strain? As far back as Noah (Genesis 9:21), who got drunk and naked in his tent, people have used some sort of substance to help calm down anxiousness, deal with pressure, or simply feel normal. The Bible addresses drinking throughout the Old and New Testament BECAUSE it has always existed as a way of escape or pleasure. This also illustrates that issues that we face today have always existed, which ALSO means that the Bible addresses these.

The American Psychological Association classifies over 300 different mental disorders in the 1,120 page DSM 5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition). These include anxiety, depression, mania, and schizophrenia. This was written to both help diagnose and treat symptoms, but cannot or does not explain root causes, but only contributing factors. The Bible actually addresses these same issues, but identifies a sinful and broken world as the root cause. Adam and Eve felt **shame** after they sinned, running and hiding from God, isolating themselves from Him. Cain killed his brother because of jealousy and hatred in his heart toward him, which meant he would wander the earth, leading to a legacy of murder (like Lamech in Gen. 4:23).

The Bible is full of emotional toil and mental anguish and describes the same issues that are identified by observation today, especially in the Psalms. Psalmists would describe this as **distress and trouble of the heart** (Ps. 18:6, 25:17, 31:7, 9; 102:2; 118:5; 120:1), being **downtrodden** (Ps. 74:21), feeling **anguish and having the terror of death** (Ps. 55:4), being **down cast** (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5; 88:14; 2 Cor. 7:6), **bitter in soul** (Job 3:20), **despairing** (Ps. 69:20; 2 Cor. 1:8, 4:8), being **afraid** (Psalm 55:5; 56; 118:6), and being **anxious** (Phil. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:6-7). Do you ever feel these things? Then you are not alone and have joined millions before you. After Erin had a catastrophic stroke 8 years ago, we walked through the fear that came from a trauma out of nowhere. The Psalms were helpful since many of them were **raw, honest, and did not end with clean or FIXED endings**. In fact, many Psalms end without resolution of circumstances, but simply a crying out to the Lord to hear, to save, to sustain, and then a commitment

¹ <https://www.health.com/condition/depression/8-million-americans-psychological-distress#:~:text=Mental%20illness%20has%20risen%20in,units%20and%20less%20community%20involvement.>

to trust (“*why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? **HOPE in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God***” – Ps. 42:11). When we face hard circumstances, past trauma, or even when we feel negative things we CANNOT explain, we are not only NOT alone, but experience what almost every Biblical character faced, from King David to Peter.

Why is this so important to understand? One of the ways that Satan operates is to discourage, to prey on our fears, and to get us to believe that we are so broken, or so different than others, or that we cannot deal with present circumstances. In other words, he loves to work against all people in our minds and hearts, and not only wants to keep us IN anxiety and fear, but wants us to look to the WRONG solutions and pathways out. This is why our next **piece of armor is so important, especially in a world that wants to separate our mental state from our spiritual one, seeking medical fixes alone for spiritual conditions.**

The Picture Explained:

The next piece of armor is the “shield of faith” that would be used to “extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one”. This is the fourth piece of armor after the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, and feet shod with the readiness of the gospel of peace. Remember, the picture is of complete readiness and protection from an aggressive, constant, and scheming enemy. The focus on the shield brings a slight variation in language that Paul used. Notice that in the first three, the believer is “having fastened or put on”, and here the shift is to “take up”. The first three pieces of armor would be worn by a soldier all the time, even if the battle was not currently raging, but the last would be *taken up* as the enemy approached. There should be no huge implication here, except that a soldier would grab his shield, helmet, and sword specifically as the battle came to fruition.

Notice that Paul uses some all inclusive language here. He mentions **ALL circumstances** and **ALL the flaming darts**. So though a shield would be taken up for the battle, it is clear that the battle is raging all the time (so we don’t ever put the shield down). This shield is NOT the round kind that would be used in hand to hand combat (think *Captain America*), but the rectangular, table sized shield that would protect the whole body. As a Roman column would stand in a group, shoulder to shoulder, row after row, the enemy would send a volley of arrows into the column, so the collective shields would be moved in front of and over top of the soldiers, allowing the arrows to deflect off or sink into the shield, keeping the soldier safe. In order to make arrows more effective, enemies would wrap the ends with cloth and cover it with pitch, lighting it before firing it through the air. The goal was to have a pitch filled arrow hit the shield and splatter, sending molten embers into the cracks, inflicting painful, debilitating injury onto the dug in enemy. This is why shields would be covered in leather, often with metal studs to deflect, and even immersed in water before the battle, in order to extinguish the flame from the arrows.

Notice here that the **arrows** or darts are undefined, but we know that they are catapulted to do the most damage, they can come at us in all circumstances, and they are only counteracted by **faith**. This means that Satan attacks us at the level of faith or belief, including **forgetfulness, disbelief, and self-trust**. The arrows will splatter during all circumstances with the desire that we forget what God has done, disbelieve His promises, stop trusting in His sovereign goodness, look outside of Scripture, look at trials through the lens of God’s punishment or lack of care instead of refinement, and take matters into our own hands, seeking solutions that will make us FEEL better rather than deal in reality. That is why the ONLY true and lasting answer to the arrows is **faith: active, pursuing, forward moving, vibrant, dependant, and growing faith.**

The Nature and Power of Faith:

How does faith operate as a shield or protection from attack? First, we must define what faith is. Here, the term faith can refer to an objective reality of what we believe in (“The faith”), or as the actual belief required. The point of taking up the shield of faith is the believes laying hold of God’s resources, especially his power, in the midst of the evil one’s attacks. Faith is **belief and trust, and it is to appropriate the promises of God on our behalf, confident that he will protect us in the midst of battle.** **Hebrews 11:1 says,** “Faith is the ASSURANCE of things hoped for and the CONVICTION of things not seen.” In other words, it is believing in something that we cannot see, but trusting in such a way that brings assurance and conviction. It is NOT mere mental ascent, but means an **entrusting** of oneself, a giving one’s life and future to what we believe in, rather than simply knowing it in our minds. This is why **faith is so hard**, why we are called to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12), and why it is **impossible** apart from God’s grace (Eph. 2:8-9). There is NO SALVATION apart from faith alone, but faith never stays alone. Faith is trust in the goodness of God, the treasuring of Christ, and the anticipation of all that He promises us.

Second, we must see how vital faith is to our life in Christ. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ through the gospel, and this faith allows us to walk by faith, since “*The righteous shall live by faith*” (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38). **Hebrews 11:6 says** that “*without faith, it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*” This is a comprehensive statement. Trusting God is not ultimately about what He does for us but in our bringing glory to Him. If our desire is to please Him, we not only believe in Him exactly the way the Bible describes (rather than our own imagination and constructs), but also that He rewards us for seeking after Him. **What is the reward?** Him! He is our reward in Christ. It is the fact that He is more satisfying, that His promises more valuable, and the future of being with Him better than anything our world can offer or circumstances can cut off. In fact, the whole of **Hebrews 11**, affectionately called “The Hall of Faith” traces brothers and sisters from the Old Testament to the New who put up with all kinds of hardship and trial to trust in the Lord, even though some did not receive the promise on the earth (see Abraham) or faced torture and violent death (vv. 36-37). How? Because they BELIEVED BY FAITH that there was a BETTER COUNTRY (16), a heavenly one, a BETTER LIFE TO COME (35), and that there is SOMETHING BETTER coming for us (40).

The difference between joy and a lack of it is NOT a change in circumstance, but rather a change of mindset and perspective that can only come by yielding and trusting God’s promises fully. “For we walk by faith, not by sight...**So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please Him**” (2 Cor. 5:7, 9). “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*” (Gal. 2:20). To the degree that we believe God is greater and that He is sovereign over all circumstances, and that He will walk us through the deepest of valleys and darkest of fears is to the degree that we will be able to extinguish the arrows our enemy will hurl at us. God rescues us from our sin, securing us forever, but does NOT promise that He will keep us from pain, or protect us from harm, or shield us from discouragement. But He does say that in the midst of persecution, temptation, accusation, and despair He will be there, guiding us through and refining us. **But how does this play out? Why does God allow the arrows to fly at all?** Let me try to illustrate this from the life of **Peter**, our friend who experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows in the same night, and what he teaches us about faith in the midst of the **flying arrows of the enemy**.

An Illustration of protective faith when arrows fly:

Go back in your mind to the time when Jesus was marching to the cross and preparing His disciples for life after His departure. Peter was a leader among leaders, a strong force of faith and full of passion, declaring remarkable faith in the person of Christ as the source of eternal life (John 6:67-68) and even rebuking Jesus (Yikes!) for saying that He would suffer and die at the hands of the chief priests and scribes (Matt. 16:22). It was this last incident where we see Peter was an object of satanic attack, as Jesus declared, ***“Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the thing of God but on the things of man.”*** (Matt. 16:23).

Peter had followed Jesus by faith, but still struggled with fear (when the waves came) and pride. He was privy to the transfiguration, but also was in the middle of arguments regarding personal greatness in the coming of the Kingdom. He had an over-realized sense of personal strength, declaring that even if ALL others turned their backs on Jesus, he would stay true, willing to go to prison or death for Jesus (Luke 24:33). Peter struggled with **self-trust and forgetfulness, and Satan pounced on these, attacking Peter’s weak spots.**

Satan asked for and even demanded that he be allowed to “sift Peter like wheat”, a violent act that was designed to shake a kernel free from its chaff (Luke 22:31). In a Job-like experience, we get to see behind the curtain of what was going on in a spiritual realm, as Peter was attacked, oppressed, and deceived by the evil one. In a stunning response, Jesus said “Yes” to Satan’s request, with two caveats: 1) Jesus would pray for Peter that He would not fail – *much like He currently does for us* (Heb. 7:25); and 2) *when or after* he turned again, Peter would strengthen his brothers. In other words, Jesus knew that Peter would fail...and **fail miserably**. The arrow attack of Satan would hit Peter, and the scalding of the fiery pitch would leave him scarred. That is exactly how the story played out, as Peter denied Jesus **three times**, even when it was a young servant girl accusing him, even invoking a curse on himself and swearing that he did NOT KNOW JESUS. Then he met Jesus’ eyes, and **immediately** Peter remembered what Jesus had said, and he went out and **wept bitterly** (Luke 22:60-62).

The next time we see Peter in a major way, he had retreated with a few other disciples back to Galilee and returned to fishing. I’ve often thought about what Peter was thinking and feeling between the time of his denial and the point where Jesus restored him. **Shame?** For sure. **Sorrow?** Without a doubt. The text gives us some clues, as he no longer was the boisterous leader, had stopped his teaching ministry, and struggled with what had happened. Did he wonder why Jesus let him go through it? Did he question himself, now afraid to step forward? Did he think he was no longer useful, having blown it and hurting the One he loved the most? This had to be Peter’s greatest fear, and his response was that of discouragement, despair, anxiety, and perhaps even depression.

But Jesus did not leave him in that state, but came and **three times** restored Peter, challenging him to get back into shepherding ministry and helping others. Jesus even foretold what kind of death Peter would endure, one that would glorify God (John 21:15-19). In the end, the key command that Peter had to believe by faith was simply, ***“Follow Me.”***

What did Peter learn from this trial, and how would he help others as they faced theirs? It would be nice if Peter would have written a book on it....and he did that very thing. There are two passages in the epistle of **1 Peter** that speak to this experience, of fighting off the arrows by faith.

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been **grieved by various trials**, so that the **tested genuineness of your faith**—more **precious than gold** that perishes though it is tested

*by fire—may be found **to result in praise and glory and honor** at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, **you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory**, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”*

- By faith, Peter knew that his future was secure, despite his failure, sin, and shame
- By faith, Peter understood that any trial that brought **grief** (the word “grief” expresses the mental effect of suffering) was so that his **faith would be refined**, resulting in the praise and glory of God – which means he realized life was NOT about him
- By faith, Peter knew that **joy** came from this process of refinement, NOT in the change of circumstance
- By faith Peter knew that **final salvation** is still to come, and is worth living through the present pain

But that was not all. Peter also knew that there were REAL effects of earthly pain, sorrow, fear, loss, and failure. Unfortunately, the things we struggle with in our minds and hearts often turn our view ONTO ourselves, cocooning ourselves into a myopic view without perspective. So Peter said:

*“**Humble yourselves**, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the **proper time** he may exalt you, **7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you**. **8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour**. **9 Resist him, firm in your faith**, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. **10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you**. **11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.**”*

- Humility in the midst of trials, anxiety, and despair gets the gaze off ourselves and onto a better object, which is God Himself
- Our mental struggles cause us to fear a future we cannot control, and fills us with anxiousness rather than hope. Peter knew that, so his solution was to **cast it all on HIM, because He actually cares and has the future fixed already**.
- We resist the devil **by firm faith**, continually choosing to trust the Lord, not what we feel or what lies we are tempted to believe
- God does not always take us out of suffering, but promises to walk us through it
- At the end of suffering, there will be all the things we hope for – since a life of faith is a life focused on the glory of God

Life is hard, circumstances can be overwhelming, trauma is real, and sometimes we just don't feel right, and worse yet, it seems like no one really understands. This is a recipe our enemy loves to cook. So we choose, by faith, to fight to BELIEVE the following, even when the despair refuses to lift:

1. **God comforts, strengthens, and sustains** – God hears our prayers and always has a purpose for our pain
2. **Jesus understands and prays for us** – Jesus is a great High Priest who *sympathizes* with our weaknesses – and prays for us in the midst and advocates for us when we may fail (Heb. 4:15-16; 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2)

3. **We never have to be alone** – Satan wants to isolate. The world turns to therapists and psychiatrists, who will listen and try to help give ways to cope. We have each other, to listen, seek to understand, remind ourselves we are not alone, and to point us to Christ. When we feel the suffocating effects of anxiety, depression, etc., it signals we need to move TOWARD others, not away – which we must do by faith.
4. **Prayer is the great temperature gauge** – How does faith wage defensive war against arrows? Prayer. Desperate, dependent prayer with our lives laid bare before a God who loves us, hears us, and cares. Prayer does not always immediately fix our situation or how we feel, but changes our perspective and keeps us dependent on the one who sustains us.

Corrie Ten Boom was not only a great Dutch woman of faith, she taught the world what it means to trust God by faith in the most difficult, traumatic, and painful circumstances. After her family was responsible for saving 800 Jewish lives from Nazi occupation during WW!!, Corrie and many in her family were shipped to a prison camp, which led to the direct death of her father and dear sister. What sustained her as the arrows flew? *Her deep faith in Christ, her knowledge of Scripture, her commitment to prayer, and trust in God.* What may be platitudes for others were life giving and sustaining realities, being joyful in the midst of painful and humiliating circumstances. Here is what she said:

*“Faith sees the invisible, believes the unbelievable, and receives the impossible.
If you look at the world, you’ll be distressed. If you look within, you’ll be depressed. But if you look at
Christ, you’ll be at rest.”*