

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## THE ESSENTIAL SHIELD

Ephesians 6:16

By

Steven J. Cole

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Ephesians Lesson 59

## The Essential Shield Ephesians 6:16

I once heard a Christian psychologist on the radio say that to tell hurting people to “trust God” is useless advice. Giving him the benefit of a doubt, perhaps he meant that just to repeat that phrase without explaining *how* to trust God, is useless advice. But that’s obvious. I rather think that he meant that trusting God wouldn’t help the hurting person work through the deeper struggles in his life. For that, he needs a psychotherapist!

If he was right, I wonder how the many generations of saints through the centuries before the advent of modern psychotherapy managed to deal with life’s overwhelming problems? They faced the sudden death of loved ones. They had disappointments and discouraging setbacks. They struggled with friends and family who betrayed them. They had to cope with failing health, the loss of income, and the fears of armies that threatened to invade their homelands. Life wasn’t any different then than it is now. How did they cope without psychotherapy?

Answer: they trusted in the living God. Listen to how David described his grim situation (Ps. 31:13): “For I have heard the slander of many, terror is on every side; while they took counsel together against me, they schemed to take away my life.” Then he added (31:14-15a), “But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord, I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in Your hand.”

Trusting in the living God is *not* useless advice! It is the secure stronghold of saints in dire circumstances down through the centuries. And it is Paul’s counsel to us here:

To stand firm against the enemy’s attacks,  
take up the shield of faith.

Paul pictures the believer in the heat of battle. The air is thick with flaming arrows that had been dipped in pitch and set on fire. It’s a life and death situation. How will he survive? Paul’s answer is (Eph. 6:16), “In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the

evil one." He means, "the shield, which is faith." When the enemy attacks, believers are to trust in God and His sure promises to block and quench the flaming arrows.

The Bible is full of stories of believers who were in overwhelming circumstances, where they despaired of life itself. What did they do? They couldn't get an appointment with their psychotherapist. He didn't do battlefield calls. So they cried out to God and trusted in Him. In many cases, He delivered them from death. In other cases, He sustained them as they died in faith. You can read a summary of these stories in Hebrews 11, which makes the point that whether they were delivered or whether they died, they believed God and His sure Word. Faith in God is the essential shield that quenches the arrows of the evil one. We can draw four lessons from our text:

1. There is an evil enemy that is seeking to destroy you.

We have already seen this (in 6:11-12), but it bears repeating. Satan is the evil one, a hideously malevolent power who is relentlessly opposed to God and to God's people. As we saw, this is not just an impersonal force for evil in the world, but rather an intelligent, cunning personal evil spirit who commands an army of evil spirits at war against God, His holy angels, and His saints.

Thankfully, I never had to engage in military combat, but I've seen enough war movies and watched enough news programs and talked to enough soldiers who have endured the real thing to know that war is not pretty. Many die violent deaths. Others are maimed for life. Those who survive have deep emotional scars that often plague them for years. Knowing that the enemy wants to do him in, it would be utterly crazy for a soldier to cavort with the enemy!

And yet many professing believers do just that! They know that Satan and the demons are gunning for them, and yet they often stroll into enemy territory as if they were taking a walk in the park. They watch movies and TV programs that pollute their minds with filth. They go to Las Vegas to gamble and watch sensuous dancers and listen to filthy-mouthed comedians. They sneak in a little pornography when they think the coast is clear. But that's like inviting an armed enemy into your home! It is to ignore that the evil one is shooting flaming arrows at you!

What are these flaming arrows of the evil one? They include all forms of temptation that are common to us all. It may be the temptation to pride and selfishness that we all battle every day. It can be the slanderous things that others say about us. It may be the temptation to fear world events or to fear our own difficult circumstances, including health problems or death itself. There are the flaming arrows of discouragement, despair, and doubting God. Many of our brethren around the world face the arrows of persecution. They have lost loved ones and all of their personal possessions because of their faith in Christ. They are under intense pressure to renounce their faith in order to escape with their lives.

In addition to all of these flaming arrows, Paul may be referring to the evil thoughts or images that suddenly pop into our minds. Maybe it's as you are praying or reading the Bible or worshipping God with the saints on the Lord's Day. Suddenly, you get a blasphemous thought or you picture in your mind a lustful image that seems to come out of nowhere. You had not been filling your mind with these things. In fact, you deliberately resisted the temptation to indulge in thinking about such things. And yet, this horrible evil suddenly comes into your mind, right as you are seeking the Lord. These are the flaming arrows of the evil one.

The enemy will follow up the arrows with the accusation, "Ha! You call yourself a Christian, but look at how you're thinking! You're just fooling yourself! You aren't following Christ or you wouldn't have thoughts like that!" How do you deal with this attack? You take up the shield of faith! But, what does that mean?

2. To take up the shield of faith means actively trusting in the living God and His Word.

Paul has used the word "faith" in Ephesians to refer to the Christian faith, that is, to the body of truth that centers on the gospel (Eph. 4:5, 13). But, he has also used it to refer to our faith in the gospel and in God's promises (1:15, 19; 2:8; 3:12, 17; see also, 6:23). Since the belt of truth (6:14) refers to the body of truth revealed in God's Word and the gospel, I understand Paul to use the shield of faith to refer to actively trusting in God. It is applying what God is and what He says to the particular problem or temptation that the enemy has shot at us. Note three things:

A. The shield protects us as we take refuge behind it.

Roman soldiers had two kinds of shields. They had a smaller shield that fit on one arm. It could be easily maneuvered to ward off the enemy's sword in close combat. But they also had larger shields (referred to here), about four feet high by two and a half feet wide, that they hid behind while advancing against the enemy. They were made of wood, covered with leather, and bound with iron. The soldiers would stand shield to shield, forming a wall of protection against the enemy's flaming arrows. As long as they were behind their shields, they were protected. If they moved out from behind the shield, they could suffer painful or fatal wounds. One soldier reported having over 200 enemy arrows in his shield after an intense battle! So the shield was essential for survival!

Paul says that faith is our shield. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*The Christian Soldier* [Baker], p. 305) 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." Peter gives similar counsel to a suffering church. After warning them that their adversary, the devil, was prowling after them, to devour them, Peter adds (1 Pet. 5:9), "But resist him, firm in your faith...." Stay behind the shield of faith and you will be safe. Move out from behind it and you will be a casualty. But, what exactly is this shield of faith?

B. The shield is our faith in the living God and His Word.

The Bible often refers to God Himself as our shield. In Genesis 14, Abraham led his men against four kings that had taken his nephew Lot and his possession into captivity when they conquered Sodom. Abraham defeated them and recovered Lot and his possessions. But afterwards he was afraid that these kings would regroup and come after him. At that point, the Lord appeared to Abraham in a vision and said (Gen. 15:1), "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great."

David knew God in the same way. In the psalm extolling his victory over all his enemies, David exults (Ps. 18:2-3), "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies." Psalm 115:9-11 hammers it home, "O

Israel, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield."

So while God Himself is our shield, Paul here applies that fact by saying that our faith, meaning our faith in God, is the shield that protects us from the evil enemy. In other words, there is a difference between *knowing intellectually* that God is a shield to all that take refuge in Him and *actually taking refuge in Him by faith*. Thus,

C. To take up this shield, we must actively trust in God.

Paul says that we must *take up* this shield. It's not automatic, where if you're a believer, you're protected. Rather, you must actively trust in God when the enemy's arrows fly. This involves at least three things:

- (1) Actively trusting God involves looking at your circumstances and at God's promises and deciding to rely on God.

I hope that you read the Psalms often. My normal habit is to read a psalm each day and then to read consecutively from the Old Testament and from the New Testament. The Psalms are experiential examples of men in desperate circumstances that trusted in the Lord for deliverance. Often, the psalmist's life is in danger. He rehearses his circumstances and then cries out to God for help. By the end of the psalm, even though his circumstances have not yet changed at all, he rejoices in God's promised salvation.

That's how you actively trust God. You analyze your situation. "God, I've just been diagnosed with cancer." "God, my teenager is rebelling against you and being sucked into this evil world." "God, I need a job to provide for my family." You tell the Lord your desperate situation. Then, you rehearse who God is and what He has promised and you make a decision to rely on Him. You may have to say with Job (13:15), "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him," because you know that beyond the grave you have eternal life with Him. Implicit in this process is the next step:

- (2) Actively trusting in God requires knowing your weakness and God's strength and His promises.

We all tend to trust in ourselves and in our own ability to get ourselves out of the difficulties we face. So the Lord has to bring us to see our weakness. John Calvin pointed out (*John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians* [Banner of Truth], p. 672) that faith by definition looks away from oneself and to God alone for help. He said, "Paul meant to humble us and to show us that God must provide us with all things belonging to and requisite to our victory." If we think that we're capable of handling things on our own, or with just a little boost from God, then we'll take credit for the victory. So the Lord has to humble us to see our own weakness.

But to trust in God we must also know God's strength and His promises. We learn of these qualities and promises in God's Word. Sarah knew her own inability to conceive a son. She was 90 years old and had passed through her normal childbearing years. But she didn't know God's strength or count on His promise to give them a son. So when the angel of the Lord promised that they would have a son the next year, she laughed. The angel confronted her by asking (Gen. 18:14), "Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son." He reminded her of God's strength and God's promise.

Sometimes Christians complain that they don't have enough faith. They see a Christian with strong faith and they say, "I wish I could have faith like you have!" But that puts the focus on faith itself, rather than on God. Faith is only as good as its object. If you watch giant trucks with heavy loads rumbling over a sturdy bridge all day, it doesn't take a great deal of faith for you to walk over that bridge. Why? Because you have watched it carry the heaviest loads. You know what it can do.

Your faith will grow stronger as you read God's Word and see how He has sustained believers in every imaginable kind of difficulty. Read of men like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who as they faced the flames, said to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:17-18), "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

In addition to the Bible, read Christian biographies and see how He has rescued missionaries and pastors who have trusted in Him. In some cases, they went through horrible trials, but they knew how great God is and they knew His promise of eternal life. Rowland Taylor, who was burned at the stake by Bloody Mary in 1555, wrote to his son five days before he was burned (J. C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* [Evangelical Press], p. 133),

“I say to my wife and to my children, The Lord gave you unto me, and the Lord hath taken me from you and you from me: blessed be the name of the Lord! I believe that they are blessed which die in the Lord. God careth for sparrows, and for the hairs of our heads. I have ever found Him more faithful and favourable than is any father or husband. Trust ye, therefore, in Him by the means of our dear Saviour Christ’s merits. Believe, love, fear, and obey Him: pray to Him, for He hath promised to help. Count me not dead, for I shall certainly live and never die. I go before, and you shall follow after, to our long home.... I have bequeathed you to the only Omnipotent.”

Few of us face problems like that dear brother faced! But that is how we trust God in our trials, when the enemy shoots his fiery arrows at us. We know our weakness, but we consciously lean on God’s strength and His promises.

(3) Actively trusting in God means obeying what God has commanded.

Faith and obedience are closely related in Scripture (John 3:36; Acts 5:32; 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 15:18-19; 16:26). Genuine faith necessarily results in obedience to God (1 John 2:3-4). So when I talk about trusting God, I am not divorcing it from practical obedience. If your faith is truly in God, you will obey His commandments.

Thus, an evil enemy seeks to destroy you. You take up the shield of faith by actively trusting in God and His Word. Third,

3. Taking up the shield of faith implies that we are not in the fight alone.

As I said, the Roman army moved ahead by the soldiers putting their shields side by side, forming a wall of defense. While each

soldier had to hold his own shield, the strength came by doing it with all the others.

So while each believer must take up the shield of faith individually, we do it together with others who are trusting God in the battle. You'll be stronger in the battle if you know that your brothers and sisters down the line are fending off the enemy's arrows by their shields. We must stand together and pray for one another, so that we can encourage one another in the fight of faith. Finally,

4. When we take up the shield of faith in our trials and temptations, we learn in a deeper way to savor the sweetness and all-sufficiency of Christ for our souls.

A main reason God allows the enemy to shoot his fiery arrows at us is that it drives us to a deeper experience with Christ. We all tend to trust Him only to the degree that we are forced to trust Him. When the arrows are flying and we take refuge behind our shield, we come to know aspects of His glory and beauty that we did not know before the battle. As He delivers us, we know by experience, as David did, that He is "my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold" (Ps. 18:2).

That's why I contend that psychology has nothing to offer the believing saint. Why do you need that when you can enjoy the sweet comfort of the sympathetic Shepherd? I've asked several Christian psychologists and psychiatrists, "Can you name a single psychological problem for which the Bible lacks an answer, but psychology has the answer?" I have yet to get a single satisfactory reply. In fact, turning to psychology instead of trusting in God thwarts His blessing for the trial, namely, to drive us to a deeper experience of the sweetness and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

### Conclusion

Maybe you're thinking, "But I struggle with having faith in God in my trials. How do I get the faith that I need to make Christ the shield for my soul in times of trouble?" Five things:

*First, recognize that your lack of faith in God constitutes a relational problem with God.* If someone is completely trustworthy and you tell him, "I don't trust you," you're calling him a liar and creating dis-

tance in your relationship with him. Not to trust God is to say, "Your promises are not true. You're a liar." That's a terrible sin!

*Second, confess your unbelief as sin and ask God's forgiveness.* He will forgive if we acknowledge our sin and return to Him (1 John 1:9).

*Third, ask God to give you faith to trust Him fully.* Remember the man who begged Jesus to heal his son, saying (Mark 9:22-24), "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" Jesus replied, "If you can? All things are possible to him who believes." The man cried out, "I do believe; help my unbelief."

*Fourth, don't try to work up faith; rather, look to the Lord Himself.* He is trustworthy. He has never failed anyone, including the martyrs. Read your Bible to see who He is.

*Fifth, do not trust in how you feel, but trust in the sure Word of God.* Faith must often stand against feelings. God's Word is the compass to guide you when you're lost in the fog of trials. The world's counsel may seem right, but the counsel of God's Word is always faithful and true. Follow Him, not your feelings!

So, is it useless advice to say, "Trust the Lord"? I hope you see that taking up the shield of faith is the only sure way to stand firm when the enemy shoots his flaming arrows at you. As Jehoshaphat told his troops as they went out to face a powerful enemy (2 Chron. 20:20), "Put your trust in the Lord your God and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed."

### Application Questions

1. Some would say that psychotherapy is one of the modern means (like medicine) that God has given for our good. How would you reply?
2. Should a believer fear Satan in any sense? If so, how?
3. A Christian tells you that he is having trouble trusting God in a trial. How would you counsel him? Where do you begin?
4. Clearly, God permits the use of means in some situations. How can we know when to use means and when to trust God alone?

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