

Last summer I was on a hike in Weston, MO and found myself at a literal fork in the road. I figured I was about halfway through, and it was time for the path to start curving back towards the start. The problem was the trail map I was using told me to go on a path that didn't seem to make a lot of sense. I didn't see how going that way was going to get me to where I wanted to go, while the other path seemed to be heading in the right direction. So, I had a decision to make. Would I put my faith in the mapmaker and map and go the way it told me, or would I take the path that, at that moment, seemed like a better option?

What was a literal fork in the road for me is a picture of the proverbial and spiritual forks in the road we experience often. Our days are filled with moments of decision. Will we choose the path our heavenly mapmaker tells us to go, even when we can't see where it will take us, or will we choose the other path? In fact, I'd suggest the Bible is, in a way, a collection of story after story of God's people coming to forks in the road and having to decide if they will faithfully follow him or, instead, go their own way.

Adam and Eve had to decide to obey God or listen to the devil and eat of the forbidden tree. Noah had to decide to continue to build the ark or give in to discouragement as the years passed and the neighbors mocked. Abram had to decide to leave his homeland and go to another land God would show him or stay put. Israel had to decide between an advancing army or walking through the parted Red Sea. David had to face Goliath or run. Jesus had to decide to continue to the cross even after asking it be taken from him. And the early church had to decide to live out their new faith in a world hostile to it, or keep it to themselves. That same regular decision continues with us today. Are we going to choose the path God has directed, or the path away from God? In those moments, we are not alone. Our God is with us, but so is an enemy eager to get us off track. And when he is successful, we miss out, disobey, distance ourselves from God. Thankfully, as we've seen all series, God gives us a piece of armor to stand firm.

**[Ephesians 6:13-16] <sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, <sup>15</sup>and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.**

This morning we talk about the shield of faith. In biblical times the Roman army was unstoppable because of their organization, discipline, and precision. The only chance an opposing army had was to break their lines. So they started using flaming darts, javelins, spears that would do damage if a direct hit but were more intended to distract and disrupt, creating fires that broke their formation. The Romans responded by using 4'X2' wooden shields that were covered in linen and wet leather that would extinguish these darts upon impact.

For the Christian, the battle is the same. Satan throws fiery darts to distract and disrupt us to break our lines and get us off track. But God gives us the shield of faith to protect ourselves and extinguish the darts before they can do damage. We are to use that shield in all circumstances because every moment of our lives is one spiritual fork in the road after another. Now, there is a question of if this faith is ours or God's faithfulness. I suggest it's both. Let's start with us.

**[Hebrews 11:1] Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**

The writer of Hebrews says our faith (living faith, not saving faith) is assurance, a confident belief God will see through the plan of salvation he has undertaken. But along with that comes conviction even when we don't see how it's all going to work out. Conviction, *elanchos*, means proven/proving. **Belief is knowing what's true. Faith is acting on it.** Faithfulness is the proof I believe what I say I believe. Each of you practiced faith this morning. You believed the chair would hold you, but you didn't exercise faith until you sat down. Faith is the daily, active expression of the belief God is telling the truth, and it is evidenced by us aligning our lives with his commands and counsel **without needing to see how things will turn out.**

**“It is a poor faith which can only trust God when friends are true, the body full of health, and the business profitable; but that is true faith which holds by the Lord's faithfulness when friends are gone, when the body is sick, when the spirits are depressed, and the light of our Father's countenance is hidden. A faith which can say, in the direst trouble, ‘Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him’, is a heaven-born faith.” -Charles Spurgeon**

Faith is called faith because we can't see it all. If we could, we wouldn't need faith. So when we are at a fork in the road, and we're not sure where each path leads, we take up the shield of faith by choosing the godly path. And I'm sure all of us choose the godly path all the time, right?!?! No. Since faith is active, it's a muscle that must be grown. **The magnitude of your faith is dependent upon the bigness of your God.** Faith is not a one-and-done thing. Our faith grows as our understanding of God grows. I'm not talking “If I have just enough faith then God will...” Faith does not force God to act on your behalf. Faith is us stepping confidently into what God has already promised, and the greater our faith, the greater we experience all God has for us.

How big is your faith? That can be answered by asking how big is your God? I was talking with someone a couple of weeks ago and she was choosing the wrong path. But as I talked with her I realized it wasn't about willful disobedience. It was an incomplete understanding of God, his power, and his character. She believed God was big enough to save her but not big enough to lead her in the circumstance they found themselves in. We all find ourselves in that situation from time to time, so I want you to look at these truths as reasons for us to always take up the shield of faith.

**How big is your God?**

**God is good.** Let's start there. His heart is good. His ways are good. His motives and affections towards you are good.

**God can and will do what he promises.** God is a promise maker and a promise keeper. His Word is full of promises he has kept and a few we know he will. He won't change his mind. He won't realize he's not powerful enough to do what he says he's going to do. He is willing and able. Taking up the shield of faith is our faithfulness in response to his faithfulness.

**God loves us and wants us to flourish.** God loves you enough to create you and loves you enough to save you. And just like I want to see my boys thrive in their lives, your Heavenly

Father wants the same for you. He has your best interest at heart, even when he allows you to suffer. He wants a relationship with you and wants you to live the abundant life Jesus has made available.

**God prescribes the way to flourishing.** He not only makes flourishing possible, he shows us the way to get there. His commands are not a burden. They are the path to flourishing.

The more we believe this about God, the bigger our God is, and the more we will desire to live faithfully. I heard a story of this recently. Many of you have met Grace Ward. She joined our staff last year as our Hospitality and Events Supervisor. She also leads our greeters and ushers, so her unofficial title is Chief Bouncer. But Grace's move here was not an easy one. It required a great deal of faith.

Grace and her husband Jesse lived in North Dakota. They felt like God was stirring and would ask them to move. So Grace and Jesse started to take the faithful path, prayed for God's will to be done, and upon interviewing here, Grace knew God was saying "Go". But moving meant leaving the comforts of home, families, and jobs they loved, and their hometown of a population of 130 (there are about 500 here this morning). **"Yet still, we clung to the fact that God's plan is perfect and that he has better in mind for us than we can imagine."** The result, a loving church community they've never experienced, a deeper understanding of God and his promises (their God just got bigger), and a living testimony of a living faith and a faithful God.

That's what happens when we pick up the shield of faith. Where is God calling you to live faithfully right now? What fork in the road have you come to where God is telling you which way to go? Could be a small thing like putting down your phone, eating less. Could be a big thing like fighting for your marriage, changing jobs, reconciling with someone. Will you trust him? He loves you and wants the best for you, even if you can't see it right now.

So where does our enemy come into this? If living faithfully was easy, the devil would have no recourse. But since faithful living is courageous living, the devil has room to work. These flaming darts are intended to get us to not believe or to not act on what we believe. He starts with God's character, wanting us to believe God is not good. He points to difficult times in your life and accuses God of letting you down there, so why would you trust him now? He wants us to doubt God's promises or ability to keep his promises. God is not able to make beauty from ashes, to work all things for your good, to pay for your sins. If Jesus is coming back, don't you think he would have done it by now? He tells me Jesus won't build his church. It's all up to you!

Then he comes after us. He tempts us down the wrong path by saying, "This is where the real abundant life is found." He convinces we need to have more, so we spend our resources consuming and indulging our flesh. He tells us we need to do more because he who is busiest wins. He gets us to compare ourselves to others. Can we consider that FOMO, at least in part, is straight from the pit of hell? You won't live faithfully if under the constant barrage of discontentment. He attacks our character and identity. You have to be more. That insecurity leads to striving to make much of yourself when your life is intended to make much of Jesus. Those darts come in, start to make a fire, we panic, break rank, and lose sight of where we're going and get off track. Where is he starting a fire in your life right now? What are you believing

about God or about your life that simply isn't true? Where are you on the wrong path? God has given you the shield of faith to extinguish those darts and get on the right path. How do we take it up?

**Draw near and know the bigness of God.** Want to grow your faith? Grow in your intimacy with God. Jesus said multiple times "O you of little faith." But he didn't follow it up with "Try harder." He just kept spending more time with them. Your faith can only go as far as to the extent to which you know God.

**Obey and know the faithfulness of God.** Faith and obedience are inseparable, and I've never met someone who regretted faithfully obeying to God. Every pre-marriage couple who was living outside of God's boundaries for sex but changed and lived faithfully expressed how blessed they were by it. Why? Because God is faithful. Faith requires risk. When God is asking you to choose a path and you can't see where it goes, there's risk in that. But that risk is a sure bet because it's risk in the person, power, and wisdom of God.

**Borrow others faith while your faith grows.** The Roman shields were so large that 2/3 of it covered the person holding it and 1/3 covered the person next to them. They were not intended to fight alone. In fact, their shields were made in such a way where they could link together and cover their heads, a formation known as the turtle, to protect them from all the flaming darts.

God never intended us to fight this battle by ourselves. An isolated Christian is a vulnerable Christian. For many of us, our faith is new and not very big and we need the faith of others to cover us and help us live a faithful life while our faith grows. That only happens in community, where we can share our struggles, share stories of God's faithfulness, and encourage one another to take the godly path when we come to a fork in the road. It is time for you to reengage here if you are still watching from home. We need you and you need us. We can only stand firm together.

Back to my hike. I decided to take the path the map showed. I wasn't sure where it would take me but, by faith, I went that way. And wouldn't you know it. As I walked the path began to change and curve. There was no way I could have seen it from the fork in the road. I had to walk in faith to experience it. And within 30 minutes the path got me where I needed to go.

God is going to get you where you need to be. You may not be able to see it, and there's no guarantee it will be easy, but he loves you, he wants the best for you, and he is able. The devil wants to hold you back. Pick up the shield of faith, trust in the Lord, and let him take you where he wants you to go.