

That scene from the movie *Gladiator* gives you a taste of ancient warfare. It also resembles the intensity of the battle some of you are facing right now. You're not up against flaming arrows and fiery missiles in a literal sense but you know that you are under attack. You can feel the heat from the flaming darts of the evil one. This morning I want you to encourage you with the knowledge that God has provided a powerful weapon to extinguish those deadly projectiles in order to stand firm against the devil's attempts to take you out...Eph. 6:10-16.

The devil is not an impersonal force but an invisible being who was cast out of his exalted place in Heaven and now rules over a fallen earth. The very name, "devil," or diabolos, describes his strategy. The word literally means "to throw through." In other words, he hurls accusations at us and slanders the people of God. That doesn't sound very threatening does it? After all, we were taught early in life, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." That was a lie wasn't it? I have been hurt physically and I healed but I can think of things said to me in the past that still play in my head from time to time. Do you have any of those tapes playing in your head that remind you of your failure, or your inadequacy, or your habitual sin, or even accusations made about you that weren't even true? Of course they're not tapes - they have been mastered digitally to make them even more effective. So you don't take risks because you've failed. You don't love openly because you have been hurt. You're not honest with people because you are afraid of being rejected...again. The tragedy is the devil doesn't need to attack us openly on the battlefield if he can get to us before we even get out of bed.

God graciously provides us with a weapon that is to be "taken up" when the accusations come. Verse 16 begins with, "in addition to all" or "above all." Notice the progression of putting on the armor of God. The first three items are accompanied by the verb "having put on." The assumption is that once we put on truth and righteousness and peace we are to KEEP THEM ON. Then the verb changes to "take up." It is as if he is describing a soldier who keeps on his belt, breastplate and shoes to be ready to fight but once the fight begins there are some other assets he has to pick up to defend himself. In today's terminology we might think of a baseball player who wears his uniform and his cleats the whole game but doesn't take up his bat and his batting helmet until he goes to battle against the opposing pitcher who hurls flaming missiles at him.

The first piece of armor we are to "take up" is the shield of faith. This shield is not like the round shield you've seen in movies. That is a machaira. The word here (thureon) describes the large, wooden body shield that soldiers hid behind when the enemy rained down arrows like the scene we saw from *Gladiator*. (see slide). This metaphorical shield Paul describes is made of faith. So let's talk about what faith is. Or better yet, let's begin with what it is not.

Faith is not believing in something against all evidence to the contrary. Some people think that to be a Christian you have to believe in a bunch of stuff that isn't true. For them the Bible is a man-made collection of outrageous stories the gullible choose to believe. Some stories in the Bible do push the limits of plausibility. But our faith is a reasonable faith. The Bible provides an accurate record of real people in real places who participated in real events. All of this is supported by historical and archeological evidence. Even the miraculous stories are based on eye-witness accounts. We are not asked to believe without being offered compelling evidence. There is a second misconception about faith.

Faith is not a force I can use to create my own reality. "Whatever you can conceive you can achieve." Faith is often confused with "the power of positive thinking." This is a psychological trick popular among the irreligious because they can pursue positive life change without the inconvenience of believing or trusting in God. In the 1960's a book came out called *Psycho Cybernetics*. The idea put forth was to use self-affirmation and mental visualization to affect positive change. I used cybernetics as an athlete. That's when I discovered the Rule of 95. What's that? I applied Psycho Cybernetics to visualize a large ball moving very slowly toward me and I would hit it right up the middle. But the Rule of 95 states that the power of a 9-inch sphere traveling at 95 mph from a distance of 60'6" is more powerful than the power of positive thinking! Sadly, there are wolves in sheep's clothing who attach the name of Jesus to Psycho Cybernetics and make millions of dollars telling people that the only thing keeping them from health and wealth is their lack of faith. If you believe strongly enough you can make it happen. This kind of thinking, though popular, can lead to tragic results.

In a book called *We Let Our Son Die*, the Parkers tell about how they withheld insulin from their diabetic son because they were told that God would heal him if they had faith. They were told to speak "faith words" and not make a "negative confession" and he would be healed. Well he wasn't healed. He died. Undaunted they even held a resurrection service for the boy rather than a funeral. He's still dead. The moral of the story is that a flawed concept of faith leads not just to a faulty theology but sometimes to tragic unintended consequences.

So what is true biblical faith? Biblical faith consists of three experiences. The first is **knowledge**. To be more specific, knowledge about God and God's character. Listen to the description of faith in Heb. 11. "Now faith is the assurance (substance) of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." Faith begins with the knowledge that all visible things were created by an invisible God.

But faith is also believing that God's character is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Heb. 1:1-3

We can know what God is like by looking at Jesus. When we look at Jesus we discover that the God of the universe is not drunk with power like the Greek gods, not unfeeling and vindictive like the Muslim god and not conniving and capricious like the Germanic gods. He is a servant who is found washing feet and touching the untouchable while He Himself is touched by the cruelty and cunning of the evil one. But He overcomes evil with good, hatred with love and demonstrates power through weakness. Most importantly, He loves us and will not give up on us. In Christ, "God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Remember this: **Nothing touches you that doesn't first pass through the hands of a loving God.** Everything God does or allows is for our ultimate good. That's easy to say but hard to accept when we experience tragedy and heartache. It leads to doubts about God. And that's the goal of the evil one - to cause you to doubt the goodness of God. In fact, the world is in the condition it is because of just that kind of assault launched on Adam and Eve in the beginning. It wasn't a "fiery dart" or a flaming missile that brought down the human race. It was an atomic bomb in the form of a simple question, "Did God actually say you shall not eat from any tree of the Garden?" This was not a question but an accusation. "God doesn't love you. He is a selfish ego maniac who doesn't want you to be like Him so He is going to place unreasonable restrictions upon you." And Eve doubted God. And so do we.

We don't like to admit that we doubt God but it is inevitable if you are a thinking person. But there is an important difference between doubting God's character and doubting God's methods. God's methods don't always make sense to me. They didn't make sense to the people in the Bible either. Abraham doubted God's methodology. Moses wondered. Mary and Joseph had a few questions. But all these were commended for their faith because they trusted in God's character in spite of God's methods. In fact, they were justified because of their faith. Four times in the Bible, OT and NT we are told, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Hab. 2:4, Ro. 1:17, Gal. 3:1, Hb. 10:38).

Faith begins with knowledge but to be effective it must be followed by **agreement**. That's the second ingredient in faith. Did you know truth does not set you free? It is the truth YOU KNOW that sets you free. "You shall KNOW the truth and the truth shall make you free." That's what I love about Juneteenth. Do you know what that is? The Emancipation Proclamation was signed by President Lincoln in January of 1863. The slaves in Texas were not told until June 19th, 1865. They were free they just didn't know it. Once they found out the celebration began and continues to this day. God has set you free but you don't accept His freedom you won't live free.

There is one more ingredient to faith. We can know something and even agree with it but it isn't until we **obey** that we truly believe. This is the Achilles' heel of American Christianity. Many believe in God and might even agree that every word of God is true but they continue to live however they want to live. That's dangerous. It's like me telling you that a candy bar laced with cyanide will poison anyone who eats it. You now have knowledge, you may even nod your head in agreement and then proceed to take a big bite out of that candy bar. Your actions prove that you have no faith in what I told you.

Faith is transferring my trust putting the whole weight of my devotion on Jesus Christ. When missionary John Payton was translating the scriptures for the South Sea islanders he found there was no word in their vocabulary for "faith." There was no word for "trust" or "believe." So he struggled to find a word that would convey this concept. One day as he was translating an islander came running up to his porch and settled into a chair exhausted. He said to Payton, "It is so good to rest my whole weight on this chair." Payton said, "I had my word; faith is resting your whole weight on God." That became the word he entered into the translation of the Bible that brought many of those people to faith in Christ. Faith is putting the full weight of your devotion on Jesus Christ. True faith will support your weight like that three-legged stool.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever declared your allegiance to Christ? Do it today.

Everyone has faith. Everyone believes in something. All of us place the full weight of our devotion somewhere. Where are you putting yours? Be careful what you put your faith in. In 1997 a group of high school seniors learned this lesson the hard way. They were finishing up the school year and took a class trip to a water park. 32 of them tried to form a human chain on one of the slides. They were four stories off the ground when the unthinkable happened. The slide broke and they all tumbled to the ground. What should have been one of the happiest days of their lives turned into a nightmare as one student was killed and all 31 of the other suffered various injuries, some of them life altering. An investigation was launched. Do you know what it found? It found that the slide was not designed to bear the weight of 32 high school seniors. Nothing in this world was designed to bear the full weight of your devotion apart from Jesus Christ. So I close with this warning:

Caution
**Putting the weight of your devotion
on anything other than Jesus
will cause injury and even death.**