

In the year 161A.D, Christians came under persecution from Marcus Aurelius.

Brought before the tribunal and the crowd, Polycarp (an 86 year old Christian Bishop), refused to deny Christ, although the proconsul begged him to “Consider yourself and have pity on your great age. Reproach Christ and I will release you.”

Polycarp replied, “86 years I have served Him, and He never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?”

Threatened with wild beasts and fire, Polycarp stood his ground. “What are you waiting for? Do whatever you please.”

The crowd demanded Polycarp’s death, gathering wood for the fire and preparing to tie him to the stake.

“Leave me,” he said. He who will give me strength to sustain the fire will help me not to flinch from the pile.” So they bound him, but didn’t nail him to the stake. As soon as Polycarp finished his prayer, the fire was lit, but it leaped up around him, leaving him unburned, until the people convinced a soldier to plunge a sword into him. When he did, so much blood gushed out that the fire was immediately extinguished. The soldiers then placed his body into a fire and burned it to ashes, which some Christians later gathered up and buried properly¹.

Over the last few weeks, we’ve been learning about the Spiritual battle, and the armour of God. And today, we’re up to the shield of Faith. What is the shield of faith? “Did

Polycarp have faith? Or did he die because his faith wasn't strong enough?"

Here's a prayer request from Persecution.com (voice of the martyrs)

Pray for Khmu Believers

Laos

A group of 20 Khmu families have faced severe persecution over the past 10 years, and many are faltering in their faith. After helping build a new church in May 2004, three church leaders were arrested, and district authorities burned the church in an attempt to stamp out the "foreign" faith. Recently, church members attending a VOM-sponsored discipleship training event told VOM contacts that one of the church leaders had died in prison after being denied food for two weeks.

Eight of the families became so discouraged by the harassment that they renounced their faith. The 54 believers from the remaining 12 families continue to face hardships. Lek, 17, dropped out of school because his parents cannot pay his school fees, and some of his friends have tried to discourage his Christian faith. His 19-year-old sister, Ong, is in her last two years of secondary school said she wants to go to Bible school because "There is no next generation of leadership for the church."ⁱⁱ

Last week, we were urged to put on the shoes of readiness that comes from the Gospel of Peace. And Godly readiness, is to be so thankful for our change in status – so thankful that we,

who **were** far off from God, are now in an intimate relationship with Him – So thankful – that we would say “Yes, Lord. Even before I know what your order is, I’ve already said ‘Yes’”....

And for many Christians, throughout history, and in the world today, they say “Yes Lord, I will endure”. “No Lord, I will not deny you”. “Yes Lord, I will hold on to my faith”.... Even if I should die – I will never deny you....

Because we in the west, have it pretty good, way too often, we have a very **shallow** idea of faith.

And so some of us, when we think of the shield of faith, we think of faith as something that, if we believe hard enough, and don’t doubt, then we’ll have some kind of physical blessing, or physical prosperity

- If I have enough faith, then it’s going to rain, and I’m going to get a good crop, or it’ll break the drought.
- If I have enough faith, then God will take away this cancer
- If I have enough faith, I will be able to afford a nice home and a comfortable retirement
- If I have enough faith, my child will live

And we may even judge others – in their lack of faith:

- The reason you’re not being healed, is because you don’t have faith
- The reason you’re always struggling financially is because you don’t have enough faith
- If you just stood on your faith, that God will provide, instead of worrying about it and working for it yourself, then you’d prosper

Well, I'm here today, to tell you that that is **not** the shield of faith – that's a very shallow concept of faith.

If there's only one thing that you take away from today, I want you to remember this: The shield of faith is Christ-centred faith.

Now, hopefully you will recall that when I introduced the topic of the spiritual battle, and the armour of God, I said “This is not a new topic that Paul is bringing up.” What he's doing, is he's summing up the letter to the Ephesians. He's already addressed the topics of truth; the gospel; righteousness; salvation; the word of God; and faith. And what he's doing now, is he's summing up the letter, but he's also bringing out the spiritual significance of each of these things.

So, if we want to know what the shield of faith is about, what we need to do, is go back and see what he's already taught us about faith.

Ephesians 1:15 For this reason, because I have heard of your **faith in the Lord Jesus** and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,

Ephesians 2: ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through **faith**. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, **created in**

Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 3: ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in **Christ Jesus our Lord**, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence **through our faith in him**. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

Ephesians 3: ¹⁷ so that **Christ** may dwell in your hearts **through faith**—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the **love of Christ** that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 4: ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ **one Lord, one faith**, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4: ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain **to the**

unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

Every instance of faith that Paul has talked about, has been Christ-centred faith...

It's not faith that he wouldn't suffer – because He is suffering... It's not faith for an abundance, or even for health or well-being...

The shield of faith, is Christ-centred faith...

Any other kind of faith:

- Is shallow
- It's something that undervalues true, Christ-centred faith
- Any other kind of faith is carnal – it's worldly – it's a craving of the flesh, rather than the craving of the spirit
- Any other kind of faith is deceitful – it misleads us – it distracts us – it gives us false hopes and leads to unspiritual and empty prayers
- Ultimately, if our faith is not centred on the Lord Jesus Christ and His gospel, it will become a faith that disappoints, fades, and fails

So, what's the spiritual significance of faith? In this battle between God and His angels, and Satan and his demons – a battle in which we are involved – where does faith fit in?

Ephesians 6: 16 **In all circumstances take up the shield of faith,**

Alright – we need to take up the shield of faith in all circumstances – at all times. Not just sometimes. All the time. In all circumstances. When things are going good, hold onto your faith. When things are going bad, hold onto your faith. When you’re just stuck in the same old daily mundane of normality, hold on to your faith.

You know, some people seem to only have an active faith when things start to go bad. They get all desperate and they need something for God, and so they start to exercise a bit of faith, and they start praying... But then, when everything seems to be going ok again, God means nothing to them...

But then other people, when there’s been a tragedy in their life or in their family, they **lose** their faith in God – “I can’t believe in a God who could ever let this happen”, they might say....

And then, in that dark place – at the very time they need to hold on to their faith in God, it fails.

¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;

The very first piece of God’s armour, is the belt of truth. And when we discussed truth, we discovered that the belt is what holds all of the other pieces of armour together. And truth defines what the other pieces of armour are. A shield of faith, if it’s not based on truth, will be as useful as a sheet of cardboard, but a shield of faith, based on truth, will **extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;**

If your idea of faith, is that God will give you whatever you ask for, and answer all of your fervent prayers, I can tell you now, you're going to be disappointed. I can promise you that.

But another thing I can promise you, is that if your shield of faith is in Christ Jesus, your Lord and saviour, and if you hold to that faith at all times, you will stand strong against the evil one.

If your faith is centred around a hope that God will always give you good things in life:

- I can promise you, next drought, you're going to question whether God's even real, and the devil's going to have a victory
- When a loved one gets sick, you're going to wonder, "How could God let this happen?", and the devil's going to have another victory
- When you get old and frail, and can't do what you used to do...
- Or when the bills pile up and there seems to be no way forwards...
- Or when car breaks down and the house burns to the ground....

Your faith will be shaken, and perhaps even demolished.... The fiery darts are going to go straight through your shield, because it's just made of cardboard, or rice paper,.... It's not based on truth – it's not real faith.

Real faith is Christ-centred faith... Last week, we talked about the shoes of readiness, that comes from the gospel of peace... Our faith has to be based entirely on the Lord Jesus

Christ – and the hope that we have, because of the Gospel of Christ....

- So even when your farm falls into the grip of drought (and it will, because we live in South-Western Queensland – a land of droughts).... – so what??? It's just physical stuff (Land, livestock, history, heritage)... What's the worst thing that can happen??? If the drought goes on for 3 or 4 years, you could lose everything... So what'???? You can only keep it until you die anyway... Your hope is not in a farm, because your faith isn't in a farm... your faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ... And He will hold you secure, through this age and the age to come.
- When a loved one gets sick, Yes, we can (and should) pray for that person's healing.. but in the sovereignty of God, that person may never recover. But our faith will not be shaken, because our faith isn't in healing – our faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of salvation...
- You get the point, hey????

The spiritual battle, is that the devil wants you to lose your faith.... And he's going to hurl whatever he can at you, to try and get you to question your faith... What we have to do, is recognise what's going on. When circumstances cause me to question my faith – where's that coming from???? It's coming from the evil one.

So stand firm, with your faith in Christ – not faith that good things are going to happen – not faith that all is going to go well – because I can promise you now, everything isn't going to go well.

Jesus never promised us a bed of roses – He promised us a cross of nails.

And His call, is for the disciples of Jesus Christ, to endure, and to not lose faith.

In Revelation 13, terrible times are foretold. It's not long until Jesus returns, but Christians just have to hold on, and endure... They have to endure all sorts of things, that will destroy the faith of many, and many will be convinced to deny Christ.

These are times you and I have to be prepared for.

Revelation 13:5 ⁵ And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

¹⁰ If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes;

if anyone is to be slain with the sword,
with the sword must he be slain.

Alright, that's a way of saying, these things are going to be done to Christians... Accept it, and be prepared for it – there's no way around it... Christians **will** be imprisoned. Christians **will** be slain...

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

The shield of faith, is not that we will be spared these terrible times – the shield of faith, is to endure them.

No matter what happens, don't lose your faith in Christ. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Are you ready to answer that call? Or is your faith too shallow for that???

Many Christians, right throughout the world today, are already answering that call. *In North Korea alone, 50000-70000 Christians are imprisoned because they will not deny Jesus. And in a North Korean labour camp, life expectancy is very short.*

It's not a political battle – it's a spiritual battle. And it's not a battle with terror – it's a battle with the devil himself.

Four young Christians were brutally beheaded by ISIS in Iraq for refusing to convert to Islam, according to a British reverend forced to flee the country.

Canon Andrew White, known as the Vicar of Baghdad, told the horrifying story how of the youths, all under 15, were murdered for standing up to the jihadists.

..... he said ISIS had killed ‘huge numbers’ of believers in Jesus.

‘Islamic State turned up and said to the children, “you say the words that you will follow Mohammad”’

‘The children, all under 15, four of them, said “no, we love Yesua (Jesus); we have always loved Yesua; we have always followed Yesua; Yesua has always been with us”’.

‘They [ISIS] said, “Say the words.” They [the children] said, “No, we can’t”’.

‘They chopped all their heads off.’ⁱⁱⁱ

They held firm, the shield of faith – faith in the Lord Jesus Christ... - a faith which we share. They have entered into the hope that we hold onto.

Questions.

ⁱ Fox’s Christian martyrs of the word.

ⁱⁱ http://www.persecution.com/public/pray.aspx?prayerupdate_ID=%3d313738

ⁱⁱⁱ Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2871508/Four-young-Christians-brutally-beheaded-ISIS-Iraq-refusing-convert-Islam-says-Vicar-Baghdad-Canon-Andrew-White.html#ixzz3NRHdqTNX>