

## The Fight of Faith: Our Prayers

Eph. 6:18-20

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*... praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. – Ephesians 6:18-20, ESV*

### Introduction: How Do We Fight?

Once a soldier is fully dressed and well-armed, what is he ready to do? Take a nap? Imagine a Roman soldier carefully inspecting his armor, piece-by-piece, strapping it on, taking up shield, helmet and sword, all solid and ready, and then deciding he's like to go for a nice meal or perhaps a round of golf. The purpose of armor is obvious – to get ready for battle!

Last week, we spoke about the armor of God. Taken piece-by-piece and then put all together, the armor of God represents our identity in Christ. We put on the full armor of God, just as we put on our new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. We put on the full armor of God, just as we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the armor of light and who is our sure defense against the enemy.

Jesus is the truth we bind around us, holding us together. He is our righteousness, guarding our hearts and our lives with His perfection. He is the substance of the Gospel of peace we believe and proclaim, for He Himself is our peace. He is the both the author and the object of our faith. We hide behind Him as our shield. He is our salvation, who keeps our minds. He is the word of God, the One who both is the Word and the One who speaks the Word.

The big lesson from last week is that we need Jesus. We need all of Him for all of life, and we get equipped for battle as we remember who He is and realize who we are in Him. Thus, the armor of God is really the application of all of Paul's teaching about being in Christ and all that we are and all that we receive in Him. Our only hope in the fight of faith is Jesus Himself – our truth, our righteousness, our peace, our faith, our salvation and our word.

But if Christ is the armor we wear in the battle, how do we fight? We know now – based on last week and the week before – who it is we're fighting and how we get equipped for the battle, but now what?

In 1987, when I was 13 years old and just discovering contemporary Christian music, Petra released an album called *This Means War!* One of their songs from the album was called, "Get On Your Knees and Fight Like a Man!" Once we are wearing our armor and ready for battle, it's time to go to war. In this war, every Christian fights best on His knees. Prayer is, in one sense, the final weapon Paul lists in explaining the armor of God to us. But it's not a piece of the armor, as much as it is how we use the armor in taking our stand against the evil one in the evil day.

There is a tight connection between the word of God and prayer in Paul's teaching. This is because the word of God not only reveals Christ to us, but it also guides us in how to pray, giving us models of prayer and words to pray. So, we take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the

Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

## I. The Importance of Prayer (v. 18)

A more literal translation of verse 18, that more closely reflects Paul's original Greek would be "*through all prayer and petition, praying at all times in the Spirit, and with this watching with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.*" So we see that Paul's call for the warfare of prayer is very urgent, using the word "all" four times in this verse – all prayer and petition, at all times, with all perseverance and petition, for all the saints. No time, no topic, no energy, no Christian is to be excluded from our prayer lives – if we understand that this is war.

### A. All Kinds of Prayer – "with all prayer and supplication"

The first thing Paul says about our warfare prayer is that it needs to include "all prayer and petition." The first word "prayer" is a general term and "all prayer" would include every kind of prayer. We might not think of every kind of prayer as vital to spiritual warfare, but Paul says it is – praise, thanksgiving, confession and intercession – are all needed in warfare.

If we understand the nature of this warfare and Satan's schemes, we will see this more clearly. The nature of this warfare is a battle for our faith and Satan's primary weapons are temptation, sin, shame and doubt. His goal is to get us so trapped in sin and shame that we give up our faith in God; we surrender to despair. In this battle, each of the kinds of prayer in the A.C.T.S. prayer acronym - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication – are vital.

Prayers of adoration, or praise, remind us of who God is and train our hearts in a great and glorious view of God. They strengthen our faith and ground it more firmly in God's character.

Prayers of confession break us away from our sin, helping us to see our sin for what it is. They bring us to the foot of the throne of grace where we find mercy for our sin and grace to help us in time of need against temptation.

Prayers of thanksgiving remind us of how dependent we are on God for every good and perfect gift – everything we have or need – and of how very good God has been to us.

Prayers of supplication are the kinds of prayers Paul focuses special attention on in this passage. He uses this word "supplication" twice – "all prayer and supplication" and "making supplication for all the saints." This word, which can also be translated petition, reflects our helplessness and utter dependency upon God and His goodness. We are recognizing and confessing that we have nothing, in and of ourselves, and we need God to supply all of our needs and all of the needs of all the saints. If we are to receive help, to find grace to help in time of need, we must find it from God.

### B. At All Times with All Perseverance

Not only is our warfare to be fought with all kinds of prayer, but we also need to pray at all times and with all perseverance. These two “all”s focus of the need for constancy and intensity in our prayers.

What does it mean to pray “at all times”? Both Jesus and Paul give us this same command several times. Luke introduces the Parable of the Persistent widow in Luke 18 by explaining Jesus’ purpose in the teaching the parable: “*And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*” (Luke 18:1) Seven times in five of his letters, Paul tells churches how He always prays for them, giving thanks for them and interceding for them constantly.

Then, we have 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: “*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*”

And Romans 12:12: “*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*”

These two are excellent to memorize and recite to yourself throughout the day as a reminder of what God wants you to do and as a prompt to be thankful, to rejoice, to be patient and to pray.

But how do we do this? How can we pray at all times, without ceasing, constantly, always? Well, these commands aren’t telling us that we need to sit at home and do nothing but pray all day long. I also don’t think that they simply mean that we are to be in “an attitude of prayer” throughout the day without really praying. I think they are a call to constancy in prayer. We should begin and end our days in prayer and pray regularly throughout the day, as the Holy Spirit prompts. A few dedicated minutes for prayer in the morning and again at night, with shorter prayers sprinkled throughout our daily lives can make our lives “constant in prayer.”

But these are not to be routine, sleepy, dull or disinterested prayers. We’re not to mumble memorized words like an empty recitation or pray half-awake. We are to “*keep alert with all perseverance.*” This means our prayers are to be earnest, intense and persistent. Jesus told His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, “*Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation.*” This is a war and we are in a state of constant danger, as are our comrades in arms, our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Soldiers should not fall asleep on duty.

Sometimes in the morning, I have to get up and walk around or kneel or do some jumping jacks or push-ups to wake myself up and to be able to better focus on prayer. Many times, sadly, I choose not to do these things and I struggle with sleepiness and distractedness in my prayer life.

In addition to praying at all times and keeping alert, God wants us to pray with all perseverance. This is one aspect of God as Father that I don’t really understand myself as a father. God delights in persistent prayer. Brian Borgman of Grace Community Church in Minden, Nevada, says that God wants us to nag Him and invites us to nag Him. I hate it when my children nag me, but it does show me that they really want what they’re asking for.

Persistence shapes our hearts, as we refine our desires. We learn to be patient, to trust God, and to wait for His perfect timing. Sometimes, as we persist in prayer, we realize that our prayers have been wrongly directed, especially if we are praying in the Spirit, but more on that later . . .

### **C. For All the Saints**

We are to persevere in supplication “for all the saints.” Like praying “at all times,” this request can be misunderstood in an impossibly literal way. We could understand “all the saints” to mean that we are to pray by name for every Christian in the world, in which case we would do nothing but pray and would never get through our list even once.

So, how can we pray “for all the saints” in a meaningful way? We can do so by praying for the church, locally and globally – praying for the local congregation, for other local churches, for missionaries, for the persecuted church worldwide, etc. Sometimes we can pray specifically by name and at other times we pray in a more global sense for God’s people who face persecution and hardship.

We can also pray for the saints we know, and not just for medical needs (although those are legitimate), but for spiritual needs. We can pray for protection from the attacks of the enemy and for preservation in the grace of God.

### **D. In the Spirit**

As we are praying all kinds of prayers at all times with all perseverance for all the saints, we must be doing so “in the Spirit.”

- Only if we pray in the Spirit will be able to always pray and not lose heart.
- Only if we pray in the Spirit will our prayers be spiritually effective and fruitful.
- Only if we pray in the Spirit will our prayers not be a legalistic duty performed in the strength of our flesh and leading us to self-righteousness but will rather be a true means of grace, to enrich our souls and bless others.
- Only if we pray in the Spirit will we have assurance that our prayers are aligned with God will and will be received before His throne.

But how do we pray in the Spirit? Is Paul talking about speaking in tongues here, praying in some mystical prayer language? Many Christians did speak in tongues in Paul’s day. But Paul doesn’t mean tongues-speaking, and we know that for a couple of reasons:

1. Paul says that all of our praying is to be “in the Spirit,” including prayers where we mention people by name and when we pray “for all the saints.” This is clearly beyond tongues.
2. Paul calls all Christians to pray in the Spirit, and all Christians were never gifted with tongues, as is clear in I Corinthians 12 & 14.

This is good news for us, because we, too, can pray in the Spirit in the same way that Paul called the Ephesians to pray. How?

We pray in the Spirit when we pray in the power, strength and intercession of the Holy Spirit. We can do so when we ask. Jesus said that God as a good Father delights to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Also, when we combine faith with the Word, we are intentionally seeking the intercession of the Holy Spirit, who is

the author of both. Thus, when our prayers are Biblical and trusting God for His promises in His word, we can have assurance that the Holy Spirit is lifting our prayers before God's throne.

But Paul gives us assurance in Romans 8 that, even when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words. So, when we are able, we ought to seek to have our prayers shaped by Scripture and offered up in faith, and when we are not able, we cast ourselves on the goodness of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

## **II. The Focus of Prayer (vv. 19-20)**

So, we have seen that our warfare is fought in prayer, where we are to pray all kinds of prayers at all times in the Spirit, keeping alert and making supplication for all the saints. Now, Paul is going to focus our attention on one kind of supplication, a very strategically vital supplication in our warfare. In verses 19-20, Paul says, *“and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”*

### **A. For the Advance of the Gospel**

Paul is a prisoner in Rome, an ambassador in chains, and as an ambassador, he is concerned with advancing the message of His king and the interests of His kingdom. That means, he is interested in advancing the gospel where he is. He doesn't see his chains as an obstacle for the gospel but as the means of allowing him to take the Gospel to a new audience, an audience to whom he would likely not have access apart from his imprisonment.

Honestly, I think if I were imprisoned for the Gospel, I would be thinking about how I could get out and get home to my family. My requests for prayer would be for my release from prison, for justice. Not Paul. He sees His chains as a badge of his ambassadorship and as an opportunity to take the Gospel to Rome and to the royal guard and the emperor's household.

We need to have this same strategic approach in our prayers, praying for the Gospel to advance and make ground against the enemy. We need to pray for those areas where the Gospel is penetrating the darkness and invading enemy territory.

### **B. For the Words of the Ambassadors**

It is interesting that Paul asks for prayer *“that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.”* Paul is an apostle, someone who has been given the very words of God. He is writing Scripture. He has just written a brilliant exposition of the Gospel and its application. Why would he need the Ephesians to pray for him, that words may be given him to proclaim the Gospel?

Paul was humble enough to know that he was always completely dependent on the Holy Spirit. He would never get to a point in his life when he could handle it on his own. Wisdom, discernment, the right choice

of words for the situation, knowing when to speak and when to be silent, what to say and not say – all of this requires the Holy Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit alone who makes any of our words effective for His glory, for eternal good in the lives of our hearers.

Paul asks for prayer not only for the right words but also for the ability to speak “boldly” as the ESV puts it. The word Paul uses means freedom in speech, which includes two things: clarity and boldness. I would ask that you pray these same things for me – for God to give me the words and for me to be empowered to speak freely, whenever I preach or teach. Pray this also for yourselves, whenever you have opportunity to share the Gospel with someone – Lord, give me the right words and make my speech clear and bold.

## **I. Clarity**

To speak with this kind of freedom is to speak clearly, to be well understood, to be plain, simple and frank. It is not to muddy or hide, not to overly complicate or needlessly obfuscate the Gospel. Sometimes we make things obscure because we’re afraid of being honest, ashamed of the Gospel. At other times, we have learned so much Christian jargon and church-ese that the simple clarity of the Gospel is hidden behind technical terms.

The Bible gives us a variety of terms, stories and illustrations we can use to make the Gospel clear – ransom, rescue, the good shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, the gracious king who freely adopts His conquered enemies, the declaration that we are not guilty of the crimes we’ve committed because Jesus has taken our penalty for us. Different explanations might be more appropriate for different people at different times. We need wisdom from God and clarity of speech.

## **3. Boldness**

But we also need to be bold, realizing that we have been given the words of eternal life by Jesus and that we must not be so cruel as to keep them from the ones we love. So we need to love people enough to tell them the truth – lovingly, gently, respectfully, patiently, prayerfully, but also very clearly and boldly.

## **Conclusion: This is War**

We are in a war. This war is both intensely personal – we wrestle in hand-to-hand combat – and global, as we fight the dark powers that hold this fallen world captive. In this war, we must remember who we are, we must stand in Christ, grounded in Him and clothed in Him, and we must get on our knees and fight in prayer – for the battle belongs to the Lord.