

October 18, 2020
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ephesians
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2020 David J. Whitcomb

THE NEED FOR PRAYER IN THE BATTLE Ephesians 6:18-24

We have spent a couple of weeks learning about our spiritual enemy who is incredibly powerful, incredibly wicked, and invisible. That kind of information would make for a good science fiction movie. But this fearful truth is not science and it is not fiction. It is the reality Christians must face every day. We have an invisible enemy who desires our failure, our downfall, our defeat by sin every day.

How are we supposed to combat such a formidable foe? God has plainly informed us that we must do everything necessary in order to stand our ground against him. More than that, along with the command to stand unmoved, God has graciously supplied us with the armor that keeps us safe and will allow us to enjoy victory in the spiritual battle.

The armor is not only sufficient, it is pretty amazing. All of it is found in the treasure chest we call the Bible. We have the belt of truth to keep us secured in battle. We have the breastplate of righteous principles found in the Bible. God has given us shoes that stand in peace we have with God because of the gospel. He gives us the shield of faith in His instruction and promises that extinguish Satan's flaming arrows of temptation. We have the helmet made from the promises of eternal salvation which protects our head. And we have the double-edged sword, God's Word, provided by the Holy Spirit. We have all the armor we need in order to fight the battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. But what do we do with it?

Imagine that you hire a man to build a storage building for you. He is new in the construction field, but shows much promise. So at the end of the first day, you show up and realize that he has not

accomplished nearly as much as you expected he would. That is when you notice that he is using a hammer for driving nails, a hand saw for cutting the boards, and an old brace and bit for drilling holes. You say to the guy, "Why are you using all those old-fashioned tools? Didn't you see that I bought you an air nailer, an electric saw, and a battery-operated drill?" He replies, "Well, yes, but I don't know how to use those things. My dad and my grandad always used these very tools and I feel comfortable with them."

You would no doubt be quite discouraged at such a response. I can't say that God feels discouraged, but He has to be disappointed with Christians who are continually victims and casualties in the spiritual battles because they refuse to use the armor He has provided. Maybe they don't know how to put it on or how to use it.

According to our text, prayer is a critical element of putting on and using the spiritual armor. On one hand, we clothe ourselves with the armor by reading the Bible, studying the Bible, memorizing the Bible, and talking about the Bible. Many of us have learned that it is most effective for us to start each day like that because the battle is imminent.

On the other hand, our text adds the important instruction of prayer in putting on the armor. John Bunyan, in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, included "all-prayer" as one of the weapons. It appears more likely from our text that we have instruction about using prayer in the process of equipping ourselves with the armor. Then following that instruction, we have an example of how to use that same tool of prayer to encourage others who are in the spiritual battle. Finally, the letter ends with a word of encouragement for the kind of people we pray for.

Prayer is the Means for Equipping (v.18)

God gives us a command to pray. In the immediate context of the description of spiritual armor, God had Paul write, *praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication (v.18a)*.

We are to pray always in the Spirit. That simply means that we are to be faithful and consistent in prayer. This is the same as praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The story of Jesus, told in the Gospel accounts, illustrates His consistency in communicating with

the Father. Jesus especially warned the disciples that serious prayer is necessary when crisis is pending. At the precipice of His arrest, Jesus told the disciples, “*Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*” (Matthew 26:41). They didn’t. They became casualties.

We are also to pray in the Spirit. That is not a reference to an emotional, out-of-control ecstasy while praying. It means that we are to pray consistent with the character of God the Holy Spirit. To pray in the Spirit is to pray according to what He has already taught us in His Word. It is to pray with the wisdom that He grants. It is to pray in the power that He provides. And very importantly, it is to pray depending on Him as sometimes He must interpret or give words that we cannot utter. *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words* (Romans 8:26).

And we are to pray with all kinds of prayer. That speaks of prayers of request, thanksgiving, praise, general conversation with God, supplications, intercession. It might refer also to long prayers, short prayers, crying out, rejoicing, and weeping. In the context, praying all kinds of prayers in the Spirit has to require that we pray about each piece of armor. That is to pray like, “Father, this particular truth from Your Word will help keep my flowing thoughts focused on You today” (the belt of truth). “Father, use this promise about eternal life to help me resist sin today” (helmet of salvation). Or “Father, remind me that I am your special child as I face testing today” (shoes of the gospel of peace).

Furthermore, as we arm ourselves with spiritual armor, we must pray alertly. *To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints* (v.18b). The instruction requires that we stay alert and persevere. When we do not stay alert, we are lulled into carelessness and unconcern about how sinful the darkness around us is. This is a matter of us determining to pray about an issue with perseverance. Like the persistent neighbor who strongly desired bread to feed a guest (Luke 11:5-13). Like the widow with the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). Determine to persevere without interruption as you pray. Jesus told us to go into a closet for good reason.

And we must pray for all saints. On one hand, it is very important for us to pray for ourselves to be faithful as we put on the

armor. On the other hand, we will show and develop love for others by praying for them as they put on the armor. If we love fellow Christians, we will desire for them to avoid becoming casualties on the spiritual battlefield. To that end, pray for each other to faithfully put on the armor.

An Example of the Need (vv.19-23).

Having written about the need for us to pray for others who are engaging in spiritual battle, Paul wrote that the Christians in Ephesus could begin to put that principle into practice by praying for him, the messenger. He desired for God to give him the words to speak, *and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly* (v.19a).

Are we surprised to read that Paul the “super-Christian” asked that prayer be made on his behalf? He requested prayer because he understood the weakness of his flesh. This is the same servant of the Lord who wrote, *For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate* (Romans 7:14-15). He understood the spiritual battle.

Paul also understood the need for God to provide opportunity to speak the gospel. He recognized that God opens these doors. To the Christians in Corinth Paul wrote, *But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries* (1 Corinthians 16:8-9). Therefore he desired prayer that God would continue the process. *At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison* (Colossians 4:3). Do we ask for prayer regarding open doors for the gospel? Do we pray that others will see and buy up these opportunities to speak?

Specifically, Paul desired that God would give him the right words to speak. That seems like an odd request from someone who knew the Old Testament Scriptures well and was inspired by God to write much of the New Testament. What more did the evangelist need to know? Like all of us who speak for Christ, Paul needed to know the right words to speak at the right time. He desired for God to give

to him the very message God would have him to speak according to promise for the early church.

Jesus gave His first “ambassadors” the promise that He would give them the words to speak when they were put in positions to testify about Him. *But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict (Luke 21:12-15).*

Having been given the right words, we should open our mouth boldly. Of course, God has already given to us in the Bible much to say. The word speaks of confidence, courage. The word can speak negatively of a fool who is bold to reveal his ignorance (Proverbs). Obviously, our prayer is that we will be fearless to speak the wonderful news of the mystery of the gospel (v.19b).

The mystery of the gospel is the once concealed, now revealed, truth of the gospel that Paul has already mentioned six times previously (1:9; 3:3,4,6,9; 5:32). It is the wonderful news that Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient to cover the confessed sins of Jews and Gentiles alike.

To that end, we are right to request, like Paul did, that others will pray that we would act like ambassadors. Because we too represent the gospel Paul preached, *for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (v.20)*. His request was for prayer that he would speak boldly. This is the same word found in verse nineteen where it refers to speaking out courageously. Here it is a verb by which Paul requests prayer that he will be courageous.

It is a bit difficult for me to imagine a man who bore such marks of bravery, asking for prayer to be brave. He had confessed that on five different occasions he had received thirty-nine lashes with a whip (2 Corinthians 11:24). What did his back look like? Did he not bear 195 scars, badges of honor for his bravery to speak the gospel boldly? Yet still he requested prayer to be brave. Surely we need greater prayer for courage than Paul requested.

Furthermore, Paul requested prayer that he would be able to endure persecution. That idea is implied when he spoke of being in chains which means he was in prison. It is instructive that Paul did not ask (at this point) the Christians to pray that he would be released from captivity. He was an ambassador wrongly imprisoned. This must have been a serious spiritual battle for Paul. If he had been the ambassador for a foreign king and was placed in a Roman prison, someone would have been called into account.

But, Paul was Christ’s ambassador. He represented Christ and His kingdom. He was a citizen of Christ’s kingdom and staying temporarily in the kingdoms of this world. He spoke the message of his King Jesus to everyone in this earthly kingdom when he had opportunity. The people of this earthly kingdom did not appreciate hearing the “good news” that this kingdom is doomed for destruction. So they persecuted the ambassador, put him in prison, and at times it seemed like King Jesus didn’t care. The ambassador just sat in a Roman prison for a couple of years during which time he wrote, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. I guess God left him in prison for a reason.

We, too, are Christ’s ambassadors. Therefore, we are to live out and declare freely the warning that God the Creator is going to end His grace one day and destroy this world and everyone in it who has rejected Him. We are to live out and proclaim the wonderful news that sinners in this world do not need to be judged with eternal punishment because of their sins.

But we often feel constrained, afraid to tell the good news. And we are not even threatened with imprisonment—yet. We are afraid we will not be acceptable to a sinful world if we talk about Jesus. We won’t be. We are afraid that if we live like Jesus we might lose our job. We might. We are afraid that if we focus on eternity, we will not be able to enjoy all the pleasures of life. We won’t. These tests and temptations are the zinging arrows, blows with the sword, and thrusts of the enemy’s spears. The powers of darkness keep us silent regarding our King’s offer of peace because we are not dressed with the spiritual armor our King gave us.

Then, Paul requested prayer that he would speak as he ought to. That simple phrase alone should convict us that we ought to speak freely and truthfully about the gospel. Paul asked for intercessory

prayer to this end. Did he struggle with the possibility of not doing this? Maybe he was tempted to be silent out of fear. Maybe he was tempted to get in the flesh and argue in human strength. Maybe he was tempted to exalt himself because of his incredible track record of selfless service.

Notice how Paul kept on the spiritual armor to AVOID that temptation. He confessed to the believers in Corinth, *Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated (2 Corinthians 12:6-7).*

The Christians' prayers must have strengthened Paul to speak freely which resulted in a huge encouragement to others to do the same. Listen to what Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi about being in prison for Christ. *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (Philippians 1:12-14).*

This illustrates how my willingness to speak freely and boldly about the gospel will encourage other ambassadors for Christ to do the same. Paul understood that none of us will speak for Christ the way we should apart from prayer. None of us will be armed for the battle without prayer. None of us will wield the sword of the Spirit effectively without prayer.

“Unless I am badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God’s children don’t have a significant life of prayer is not so much that we don’t want to, but that we don’t plan to. . . . Therefore, my simple exhortation is this: Let us take time this very day to rethink our priorities and how prayer fits in. Make some new resolve. Try some new venture with God. Set a time. Set a place. Choose a portion of the Scripture to guide you. Don’t be tyrannized by the press of busy days. We all need mid-course corrections. Make this a day of turning to prayer—for the glory of God and for the fullness of

your joy.” (John Piper, *Desiring God*, Portland: Multnomah, 1986, pp.150-151.)

Communication for Encouragement (vv.21-24).

Not to worry (vv.21-22). That is a neat little saying that should give us a bit of hope. Are you ever concerned about a servant of the Lord who you haven’t heard from in awhile? Communication is important. That is why Paul closed this letter by writing, *So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything (v.21).*

In a day without telephones, telegraph, email, or even snail mail nearly as effective as ours, Christians communicated. What could be better than a personal representative. Paul wanted the people in Ephesus to know the personal details about his health and well being (he was in prison). What is wrong with Christians who want to keep everything about their lives and ministries secret? No doubt there is fear or shame involved in many cases. But I don’t know too many Christians who had lived a life of chasing down, imprisoning, and consenting to the execution of believers like Paul had. Our subculture has done Christians a great disfavor by hinting that we are all on the verge of complete sanctification. We are not. We know we are not. They know we are not. Let’s pray! We know how to pray only when the need is communicated.

Communication says, “I care.” Paul cared and that is why he could write, *I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts (v.22).* Encouraging others flows out of a heart of concern for them. Failure to encourage others often reveals that I don’t care about you. I only care about me. So you be sure to encourage me.

In conclusion, we find here the saint’s desire for the other saints (vv.23-24). *Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible (vv.23-24).*

The blessings of this benediction are the desire for fellow Christians to experience the peace that comes from being right with God, the love that is realized only through faith in God, and the grace

that is the experience given by God. The source of this three-fold blessing is God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice that Paul listed each member of the Godhead separately but made no distinction between them. They are equal.

The recipients of this blessing are called brothers. That would certainly include “sisters in Christ” who are also part of the family of God having been brought in through faith in Christ alone for sins forgiven. People like that strive to love Christ purely, without corruption from this world.

The war is real. The battles are daily. How sad that many professing Christians are satisfied to lose the spiritual battles almost without exception. Those religious people have learned to be content to live in a defeated condition. They call it being “backslidden.” The real problem might well be that they have been schooled well in Bible truth but have never slid up to new life in Christ. True believers are aware of the spiritual armor that Christ our Captain has given to us. We are not only aware of it, but, being aware of the spiritual battle, we will see the need for it. If we really see the need, we should be spending time on our knees asking God to help ourselves and others to keep the armor on consistently for the glory of our Captain Jesus.