

Prayer and the Fight of Faith: Ephesians 6:10-20
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We've spent the month of January focusing on the Word of God and prayer. God talks to us. We talk to Him. These are vital components of the Christian life. The first sermon in this short, beginning of the year, series was from Genesis 1-3 where we considered the power of God's Word (in creation) and also the interplay of temptation and the Word of God, as the serpent tempted Eve by manipulating God's Word. The second sermon was from Psalm 1: delighting in the Word of God.

Last Sunday we looked at the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, and we saw some amazing things in the way that Jesus instructed us to pray. First of all, we have the great privilege of coming before the Almighty God of the universe and calling Him our Father. He is our Father in heaven. For those who receive His Son and are forgiven of our sin through repentance and faith, we are adopted as God's children. We become part of His family. And thus we pray to our Father.

We also saw in the first three petitions of the Lord's prayer that our prayers are to be radically God-centered. In our prayers we plead with God for Him to glorify His Name. "Hallowed be your name." We ask for Him to manifest His power by advancing His kingdom and causing His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are to make these requests concerning God's glory.

And then, finally, we are also to make requests concerning our needs. We ask for the tangible necessities of life. "Give us this day our daily bread." We ask to be forgiven for our sins. "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." And we ask for help in the fight of faith. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

What I want to do this morning is talk further about the role of prayer in the fight of faith, and we can learn some important things about this from Paul's instructions in Ephesians 6. I want us to be a praying people. Prayer is such a powerful thing. It is such a privilege. And it is so often neglected. It's my hope that these passage will awaken in all of us a deep desire to pray—to pray continuously and consistently, to pray in the Spirit, to pray fervently and humbly, to pray for all the saints. The God of the universe is offering to us and commanding us to talk to Him, and so often we think we have better things to do. Let's read this passage, and then pray that God will do a work in our hearts to teach us about prayer and motivate us to pray.

Paul is coming to the close of this letter to the Ephesian church. He has written about some deep and profound theological truths in the first part of the letter, and he has given many needed exhortations in the latter half of the letter. And now as he comes to the end, he has one more important matter to discuss, and that is spiritual warfare. This passage is about battle. It's about standing firm against the enemy.

Notice that Paul states this four times in these verses. In verse 11, "that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." In verse 13, "that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm." And then verse 14, "Stand therefore." This passage is about resisting the enemy. It's about persevering in the spiritual battle that we are in the midst of.

Be Strong in the Lord

The first thing to notice about this fight of faith, this spiritual warfare, is that we do battle in the strength of the Lord. It is all by the Lord's power! Do you see how this is emphasized in verse 10? "Finally, be strong *in the Lord* and in the strength *of his might*." Isn't that a wonderful encouragement to us! The Lord is our strength. He is our might. It would be like stepping into a wrestling match with an Olympic champion and being rightly intimidated by your opponent. You know that on your own there's no way you can win. But then you're told that you're going to be given infinite strength and agility and ability to win the match. There's no way you can lose.

By God's grace, He has shown us that we cannot fight sin in our own power. And we cannot fight the devil or his demons in our own power. We're weak and frail, and we don't have a chance against the devil. That is, we don't have a chance in our own strength. But in His strength. That's a different story. And that's why we need to be strong *in Him* and in the strength *of His might*. And we need to put on *God's* armor. Verse 11 commands us to "put on the whole armor of God," and verse 14 commands us to "take up the whole armor of God." If we're going to stand firm against this evil enemy, we need to defend ourselves and wage war with God's armor. We need to dress ourselves in the spiritual armor that God has provided for us. Paul lists these for us in verses 14-17, and he likens the spiritual armor to the actual, physical armor that a Roman soldier would have used. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes which are the readiness of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

Then in verse 18 Paul continues to communicate the various aspects of spiritual warfare, and he now turns to the all-important issue of prayer. And I think the instruction here is

connected to the command in verse 14, “Stand therefore.” That’s the main point of this whole section, to be strong and to stand firm against the enemy. In verses 14-17 Paul listed the pieces of armor that are needed to stand, and now in verse 18 he adds another crucial practice that is needed. Do you see how emphatic he is in verse 18? He uses the word “prayer” or “supplication” 4 times, and he uses the word “all” 4 times. “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.” This is extremely important! Prayer is a foundational part of our spiritual battle. And Paul wants us to be vigilant, to keep alert and persevere in prayer.

God’s Sovereignty and Prayer

Before we go further I want to raise the question that may be on some of your minds. The question of God’s sovereignty and prayer. We know that God is in control of everything. God is sovereign over suffering. God is also in control of who is saved and who is not saved. Right here in the book of Ephesians, Paul writes in 1:11 that we have been “predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” So the question arises, If God works all things according to the counsel of his will, if every minute detail of the universe is already planned out by God, then what can my prayers do? What’s the purpose of prayer? Do my prayers change anything? Can they make any difference? Obviously Paul thinks prayer is important, but how does that fit with God’s complete sovereignty over all things?

One approach to this would be to minimize God’s sovereignty and assume that our prayers can somehow manipulate God into doing what we want Him to do. This would be a man-centered perspective on prayer. If I pray hard enough, if I pray fervently enough, if I pray with eloquent words and enough persistence, then God will change His plans and conform His will to my will. But that is not what prayer is. Prayer does not change God.

Does prayer make a difference? Does prayer change things? Absolutely! It does! Prayer is powerful and effective. But do our prayers change God’s eternal plans? No, they don’t. God is not waiting up in heaven, wondering what He should do next, and waiting to decide until He finds out how His people are going to pray, and how much. Our prayers do not change God’s sovereign plans.

But in God’s goodness and in His providence, He has ordained to use our prayers in mighty ways to accomplish His purposes. He uses our prayers to change the hearts of unbelievers.

He uses our prayers to change our own hearts, as He sanctifies us. He uses our prayers to minister to the needs of the saints. And what a wonderful thing this is! God works all things according to the purpose of His will, and one of the ways He has chosen to do that is through the prayers of His people. God works through our prayers. He ordains the ends, and also the means. In other words, He plans what He wants to happen, and He also plans how those things will come about. And one of the means that He uses, and uses powerfully, is prayer.

Arthur Pink, in his book *The Sovereignty of God*, has a chapter entitled “God’s Sovereignty and Prayer,” and he writes, “the same God who has decreed the end has also decreed that His end shall be reached through His appointed means, and one of these means is prayer. The God who has determined to grant a blessing also gives a spirit of supplication which first seeks the blessing.”

So, for instance, God has chosen to save certain individuals, and He has chosen to save people from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 5:9). He has also decided how that plan will come about. He has ordained the missionaries, and the evangelists, and the Gospel tracts, and He has also ordained the prayers that He will use to turn the hard hearts of sinners toward Himself.

God has also planned to sanctify those whom He saves. He makes us more and more like Christ, and He will use our prayers in accomplishing this too. He will use our prayers to foster unity in our congregation, and He will use our prayers to give us greater boldness in proclaiming the Gospel. He may use our prayers to heal and to encourage and to provide for practical needs. God is powerful, and He is active, and through prayer we get to be part of what He’s doing.

Our Dependence on God

Another important aspect of prayer, which we talked about some last week, is how it reminds us of our dependence on God. It is an expression of our need for Him. We are asking Him to do something, we are asking Him to meet our need, we are asking Him to change hearts, we are asking Him. Because we can’t do it. We have to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, and a significant part of fighting the battle in this way is prayer. We are helpless and weak and needy, and we’re crying out to Him.

It’s a humbling thing to ask for help. And often we’re reluctant to ask for help in so many areas of life. We don’t want to ask friends for help, because we want to appear self-sufficient. We don’t want to go to biblical counseling because we think it’s just for the people who are really messed up. We don’t want to humble

ourselves and ask for advice from the brothers and sisters around us because we don't want them to think we're stupid or immature. Those same inclinations hinder our prayers to God because we don't think we need His help. But how foolish that is! We do need His help, more than we can even comprehend. We desperately need Him, and He wants us to ask Him for things. He is not bothered or annoyed when we come to Him seeking His help. He wants us to cry out in desperation to Him, because that demonstrates our dependence on Him, and it demonstrates His all-sufficiency.

Notice that as Paul exhorts us to prayer in verse 18, he uses the word "supplication" two times as a synonym for prayer. Supplication is making a request. It's asking for something. We ask God to make us more like Christ. We ask God to save sinners. We ask God to build up His church. We ask God to give us a bold witness in this city and around the world. We ask God to heal the sick, and meet the practical needs of those around us. And as we ask God for all these things it reminds us of our complete dependence on Him, and He is glorified as the all-sufficient giver of all good things. The giver gets the glory!

Jonathan Edwards, who was used by God in a mighty way in the Great Awakening in this country in the 1730s and 40s, said this about prayer and its role in revival (and this is very similar to Arthur Pink's quote, which was published in 1930): "When God has something very great to accomplish for his church, it is his will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of his people." And then he goes on to write, "When [God] is about to bestow some great blessing on his church, it is often his manner, in the first place, so to order things in his providence, as to show his church their great need of it, and to bring them into distress for want of it, and so to put them upon crying earnestly to him for it" (*Thoughts on the Revival*, Vol. 1, Works, pg. 426).

This is so exciting to me as I pray for revival in my life and in this church and in this city and for the global church. Doesn't this put a fire in your bones to pray, and to pray earnestly, and to pray consistently, and to pray with other believers! Let's pray, brothers and sisters. And let's pray for things that are humanly impossible. Let's pray big prayers. And then when God pours out blessings, as He so often does, then we will know that it's His work, it's His blessing. It's not something we did, but something we had the privilege and joy of watching God do through us.

Why do we pray? Is it so we can manipulate God and conform His will to ours? No. It's so our will can be conformed to His and so we can experience the joy and excitement of being involved in what He is doing. God has a plan to make His glory and His grace known throughout the earth, and I can't imagine a

more thrilling mission to be a part of. God is so good to us to hear our prayers and to respond to our prayers with love and grace and kindness. He may not always give us the particular thing we ask for, but if we are in Him, He will give us what is best for us.

Pray at All Times

The next question, then, is How should we pray? This text gives us at least five pointers. First of all, we should pray at all times (v. 18). The spiritual battle against evil is continuous, and therefore our prayers should be continuous as well. You don't have to be in a church building to pray. You don't always have to close your eyes to pray. You don't have to pray out loud. You can pray in your heart to God anytime anywhere. It might be driving in the car, or sitting on the bus. It might be in the midst of a conversation with someone else, and in your mind you simply say, "Help me, Lord." Like Nehemiah did in middle of his conversation with King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah says a prayer right in the midst of his conversation with the King. He says in 2:4, "Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." Did you catch that? Right in the middle of this conversation, after the King's question and before Nehemiah's response, he prayed. And I don't think in this context he knelt down, closed his eyes, and prayed out loud to God. I think it was a brief, silent prayer in his heart, saying to God, "Help me."

I believe this is the kind of attitude that constitutes praying at all times. We ought to live in a spirit of prayer. We won't be consciously voicing prayers to God at every moment throughout our lives. But we do need to be living in conscious dependence on Him at all times, and lifting up these petitions to Him again and again throughout every day. And I think what will foster this attitude and this practice in our lives is developing the discipline of consistent times of Bible study and prayer. Some of you might say, I don't really set aside time to sit down and meditate on Scripture and pray. I'm too busy for that. But I just kind of pray at various points throughout the day, whenever the mood strikes me.

Let me suggest to you that it's the scheduled habit of prayer in our lives that will produce the spontaneous and continuous prayer throughout the day. And if we're not spending the time in the Word and in regular times of personal prayer, then what will our spontaneous prayers be like? We each need to develop the discipline of meditating on God's Word and praying to Him according to His Word.

I would encourage you to write out a prayer list of some kind, on a piece of paper, or on your phone. Or use an app like PrayerMate that organizes things you want to pray for and gives you those prompts each day. You could write out certain things that you want to pray for in your personal life—sins that you need God’s grace to overcome, decisions for which you need God’s wisdom, virtues in which you want to grow, praying for family members and the church and missions. So I encourage you to plan for prayer. Write out a prayer list, *and use it*. Plan to read God’s Word and pray. This is the bread and butter of the Christian life. We need to be listening to God as He speaks to us through His Word, and we need to be talking to Him in prayer. We need to be praying at all times, which I think begins with the discipline of setting aside time daily for focused prayer, and that will then produce spontaneous prayers throughout the day.

Pray in the Spirit

Secondly, we should pray in the Spirit, as Paul writes in the second phrase in verse 18. In Romans 8:26-27, Paul writes, “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. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” So in our prayers we not only express our dependence on God, but even the prayer itself is dependent on God. Sometimes we come before the Lord, and we’re not even sure what to ask for. And the Spirit guides us. So as I encourage you to have a prayer list I also encourage you not to be constrained by that list. Kent Hughes said that after studying this passage he wrote at the top of his prayer guide, “in the Spirit.” He wanted to be reminded each day that he should not only pray for the things he had planned to pray about, but also be open to praying about whatever the Spirit laid on his heart.

I think there’s also a connection here between verses 17-18. In verse 17 the word of God is called the sword of the Spirit, and then in verse 18 we’re to pray “at all times in the Spirit.” I think a clear implication of this is that our prayers should be in line with biblical truth. We should be praying the Bible. Again, this is why the disciplines of Bible study and prayer are so important, and why they must go together. So we pray in the Spirit by acknowledging our need for Him to show us even how we should pray, and by looking to the Bible, the sword of the Spirit, to guide our prayers.

Keep Alert

Thirdly, we should keep alert with all perseverance. We need to pray at all times, and in the Spirit. And we need to be careful never to let our guard down. There may be times in life when we think everything's going pretty well, and maybe we feel less urgency in prayer. In times when our needs are very apparent we may find ourselves praying more diligently—when there's a financial hardship or health problems or a marital conflict or a weighty decision to be made. In those times we may pray because we see the need so clearly before us. But what about the times when needs like that are not staring us in the face? Does that mean there's nothing to pray about? Does that mean we can ignore prayer for awhile? That is a dangerous trap to fall into. Because even if certain things in life seem to be going well, the devil is always looking for ways to attack us, and many of those attacks will come in very subtle ways. We need to keep alert. We need to keep our armor on and persevere in fighting this spiritual battle. This is how the context of this passage informs our understanding of prayer. We are in a war, and our only hope is to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Therefore we need to be constantly going to Him to ask for help. We need to be alert to the battle going on around us and within us so that we are asking for help in all of the different attacks that will come against us. We need to persevere in this battle and in seeking the help we need.

Pray for All the Saints

Fourth, we should pray for all the saints (end of verse 18). That's us, believers. We should be praying for other Christians. We should pray for one another in this congregation. We should pray for other believers and other churches in this city, and throughout our country, and all around the world. We should pray for the persecuted church. And, of course, there are so many individuals and churches and situations that there's no way we can pray for each matter specifically. But we should be praying for the things we are aware of, and trying to learn about other things to pray about as well. Like learning about various unreached people groups of the world, and how we can pray for the missionaries who are seeking to reach those people groups with the Gospel.

Prayer is conforming my will to God's will and praying about the things that He is passionate about. And He is certainly passionate about His people. He loves the saints. He loves His children whom He has adopted. And therefore we, also, should be passionate to pray for the good of God's people and pray that God will be glorified in us.

Pray for Boldness

Fifth, we should pray for boldness in proclaiming the Gospel. This is what Paul asks for in verse 19, and I think we can apply this to missionaries and evangelists whom we know and support, and also to every one of us. Pray that God will give us words to say in opening our mouths boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel. May God give all of us opportunities to share the Gospel, and may He give us the words to say and the courage to say them.

It's interesting to notice here that Paul is in jail, he is an ambassador in chains (v. 20), but he doesn't ask them to pray for his release. He doesn't say, "Pray for me that they'll set me free." That wouldn't be a wrong prayer to pray. But that's not his focus here. He says, Pray for me, "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel." What a focus and passion he had for the Gospel. Whether he was free or in chains, his desire was to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

He wanted people to know the Gospel. He wanted people to be convicted of their sins and realize that God's wrath stands against sinners and that our only hope is to be forgiven through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. This is the greatest news of the universe, that God's own Son was sent into this fallen world to redeem a people for Himself. And Paul was painfully aware that there exists in this world and in the spiritual realm a very intense opposition to this message. It is good news, and Satan hates it. It is good news, and our sin resists it. It is good news, and the world rejects it.

Because of the opposition to the message, we are quick to wimp out and keep our mouths shut. They're not going to listen, why bother. They'll think I'm a freak. They'll criticize me or persecute me. I'll just shut my mouth. But Paul, knowing the spiritual battle that is involved and knowing the power of prayer, says, pray "also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the gospel."

Let's pray that, and act on that, and seek to bring sinners into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. I pray that we'll see this happen here in our church gatherings as unbelievers come and hear the Word taught and preached, and as they see a community of believers worshipping God and rejoicing in the Gospel. And I also pray that in our various spheres of influence, in our families and neighborhoods and workplaces and schools, that God will be working in our hearts to cause us to open our mouths boldly to proclaim the Gospel.

To summarize, then, we are instructed in this passage to pray at all times, to pray in the Spirit, to keep alert, to pray for all

the saints, and to pray for boldness in proclaiming the Gospel. Maybe you've been listening to all of this and you're thinking, I don't really pray at all and you've given me a laundry list of things to pray about. I don't think I can do that. I don't think I have the discipline to set aside time each day for prayer. I don't think I can focus my mind in that way to pray for these things.

And you're exactly right. You don't have it within you to do any of these things, and neither do I. But remember the beginning of this passage. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. This is how we will fight this spiritual battle. This is how we will continue day after day in the fight of faith. This is how we will grow in a life of prayer. We need to depend on God and on His Spirit. To grow in prayer will begin with prayer, asking like Jesus' disciples did, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).