

Praying in Battle: Ephesians 6:18-24
Ben Reaoch, THREE RIVERS GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

This is our final week in the book of Ephesians. This morning I want to focus on 6:18-20 and see how Paul concludes the section on spiritual warfare with an emphasis on prayer. I want to talk about prayer this morning. And then I want to conclude by going back and reminding us of a few of the major points that we've learned in this book of the Bible, so that when you think of Ephesians you'll be able to call to mind at least a few of the particular issues that Paul deals with in this letter.

I. Prayer (vv. 18-20)

In 6:10 Paul transitions to the last section of the letter, which is about spiritual warfare. Last week we looked at the various pieces of God's armor that we are to put on. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that are the readiness given by the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. This is the spiritual armor that we must use in our spiritual battle. It's not against flesh and blood, but our enemy is Satan and his evil forces in the heavenly places. And as Paul emphasizes, we have to fight in the Lord's strength. In verse 10 he writes, "be strong *in the Lord* and in the strength *of his might*." And then he instructs us to put on the whole armor *of God*. On our own, we don't stand a chance against the evil one, but in the Lord we cannot lose. Our Lord reigns, and when He returns He will defeat the devil once and for all. And if we're on the Lord's side, that means we, too, will be triumphant in the end. Therefore we can fight this spiritual battle knowing that we have victory. We cannot be defeated ultimately. But it's not in our own strength, it's in the Lord's strength.

And now in verse 18 Paul continues to communicate the various aspects of spiritual warfare, but he no longer uses the analogy of a soldier. Now he 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. And 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. 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.

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. Because as we've learned in this letter of Ephesians, God is in control of everything. He's even in control of who is saved and who isn't. Chapter 1:11 says 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?

First of all, I think we need to acknowledge that this question (that many of us have wondered about) is really based on a man-centered view of the universe. We want to think that we can choose to pray about a particular thing, and that choice should have the power to change God's plans. That's how our man-centered nature wants to think about prayer. If I pray hard enough, if I pray fervently enough, if I pray with eloquent words and sincerity and 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! Does prayer change God? Absolutely not. Our prayers do not change God in any way, and our prayers do not change His 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.

To illustrate this, think about planning a trip for you and your family. You know the destination, but you also have to plan the details of how to get there. Are you going to fly or drive? If you drive, you need to put gas in the car, and figure out where and when you're going to eat along the way. Where will you stay when you get there? There's the end, the goal, the destination. But there's also the means, the details along the way. And God has planned both!

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), and 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. 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.

Another important aspect of prayer 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 are helpless and weak and needy, and we're crying out to Him. It's a humbling thing to ask for help, isn't it? That's why we hesitate to stop and ask for directions. I'll figure it out myself. And we're sometimes reluctant to ask

friends for help, because we want to appear self-sufficient. I remember a friend of mine when we lived in Minneapolis, and he told me he had a really hard time asking anyone for anything. He just felt like he would be bothering and pestering that person, and he told me that affected his prayer life because he felt like he was pestering God. But God wants us to ask Him for things. He wants us to cry out in desperation to Him, because that demonstrates our dependence on Him.

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). Doesn’t that 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. 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 (and we long for Him to do even more so), 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.

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.” Prayer should be a scheduled habit in our lives, and it should also be spontaneous and continuous throughout each day.

Secondly, we should pray in the Spirit. 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.

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. Here’s another way we can use our fighter verses. This week it was 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.” And we can pray to God, asking Him to show us what is helpful and what will build up those around us. And asking Him to give us the grace to seek the good of our neighbor. I loved the quote on our worship folder last week from G. K. Chesterton, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.” And we need God’s grace to enable us to obey these commands. God, help me love my enemies. Help me love my neighbor and seek their good.

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.

Thirdly, we should keep alert with all perseverance. We need to pray at all times. 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. That is a dangerous trap to fall into. We need to keep alert. We need to keep our armor on and persevere in fighting this spiritual battle.

Fourth, we should pray for all the saints. This starts, obviously, with the family of believers here in our own congregation. We need to praying for each other on a regular basis, and we have some great tools to help us do this. We have a worship folder that is filled with specific prayer requests (spiritual needs, and health needs, and specific leaders and ministries to pray for). We have a prayer meeting each Wednesday evening at 7:15pm, and we spend time praying for these needs and praying for our church as a whole. We also have a church directory, that you could use as a prayer guide. Let’s spend time in prayer for each other, and God will use those prayers to sanctify us and to lead us and to provide for us and to heal us. And I also think as we pray for each other it will increase our love for each other and the bond of unity that we’re blessed with.

Fifth, we should pray for boldness in proclaiming the Gospel. This is what Paul asks for, and I think we can apply this to missionaries and evangelists whom we know and support, and also to everyone of us. 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.” 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.

II. Final Greetings (vv. 21-24)

In the closing of his letter, Paul first tells his readers that he's sending Tychicus to tell them more details of his well-being. And then Paul's final words in the letter are a beautiful benediction incorporating themes from the entire letter: peace, love, faith, grace.

III. Summary of Ephesians

I want to close this sermon, and this sermon series, with a brief review of Ephesians. We've been studying this book since June, and I just want to draw our attention again to four key truths that we've learned. There are certainly more, but if a year from now someone were to ask you what Ephesians is about, here are four things I would hope you might remember.

First, the glory of God. Paul mentions this three times in the opening of his letter, and the message is that God's goal in predestining us, His goal in choosing us in him before the foundation of the world, His goal in blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, the goal is the praise of His glory. In verse 6, "to the praise of his glorious grace." In verse 12, "to the praise of his glory." And again in verse 14, "to the praise of his glory." It delights God to show off His power by saving wretched sinners like us. He pours out His grace and lavishes His grace upon us. And He does this in order that we will delight in His grace and His greatness. It's all about Him. Salvation is all about God. It's God-centered, not man-centered. He doesn't save us so we can admire ourselves and make much of ourselves. That would get old fast. But He saves us to enjoy something that is infinitely beautiful and wonderful. He saves us to enjoy and to praise Him! He turns us to Himself, so that we can experience a relationship with the only Being who can satisfy us forever. We get the benefit of that salvation, and He gets the glory. He gets the praise. It is all about Him!

Secondly, we see in Ephesians 2 a clear presentation of the truth that we are saved by grace through faith alone. This is summarized in 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." This is the Gospel. This is such good news, because if I had to work to earn my salvation, I would never be saved. Because of our sin, because of our total depravity, because we were "dead in our trespasses," we don't do anything good apart from God's grace. We can't do any good works that would earn God's favor. Rather, salvation is a gift. It's something God gives us by grace. It is unmerited. It is not earned. There's nothing we did to deserve it. It's not by works, so that no one may boast. If it were by works, we could boast. We could say, Look what I did. I'm so good I earned a reward from God. In God's plan to save sinners, He eliminates human pride and boasting, and He puts all the focus on Himself. It's about Him and His glory. And so we are not saved by anything we do, but we're saved by faith. We're saved through trusting in Christ as the One who took the punishment for our sin. We must come to the end of ourselves and realize that we cannot save ourselves. And then faith is casting ourselves on God's grace and acknowledging that Christ is our only hope. What a glorious hope this is!

Thirdly, we see in Ephesians an emphasis on church unity. In 4:1-3 Paul writes, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing

with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” At the beginning of chapter 4 Paul makes a significant shift in his letter, because he transitions from truth about God and sin and salvation, to a focus on application. In chapters 1-3 Paul is rejoicing in these profound truths, and in chapters 4-6 he is instructing us how to live in light of these truths. And he begins this application section by emphasizing the unity of believers. He instructs us to have humility and gentleness and patience, and to bear with one another in love. I certainly see these characteristics in our congregation, and I praise God for it! And we can pray that God will continue to strengthen the unity here, that He will make us more humble and gentle and patient and loving, and that as a result God will be glorified. God is the One who causes this unity, and His power and beauty are seen when a group of sinful human beings, who all have their own plan and agenda, are transformed into a group of humble, gentle, patient, loving individuals who are radically united around the Gospel. This is a beautiful thing to behold.

Finally, in chapter 5 Paul speaks of marriage, and he demonstrates how the husband-wife relationship is designed to be a picture, a parable, of Christ’s relationship to the church. He tells wives, “submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” And he tells husbands, “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” God designed marriage for His glory, and in doing so He created men and women differently. He created us to complement each other, and in the marriage relationship He intends for the husband to be a sacrificial leader in the home, and He intends for the wife to graciously submit to her husband and support him and respect him. Many people rebel against this beautiful plan that God has designed, but we should humble ourselves and pray that our marriages will testify to Christ’s love for the church and the church’s submission to Christ. And in doing so, I believe we’ll find greater joy and delight in our marriages as husbands and wives fulfill the specific roles God has designed for us.

If you remember one thing from Ephesians, think of God’s glory. The whole Bible is about God’s glory, but we find here, especially in chapter 1, a clear emphasis that it’s all to his glory. Also think of salvation by grace through faith alone, and think of church unity, and think of God’s design for marriage. I hope that Ephesians will be a book of the Bible that you go back to again and again to rejoice in the greatness and grace of God, and to learn from the practical instruction for how our lives ought to reflect the greatness and grace of God.