

Our Spiritual Warfare (9) - The Praying Soldier

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[0 : 00] Now to Ephesians chapter 6, I'm going to complete this short study of the armor of God by looking at verses 18 to 20. We can begin our reading again just to take in what we've seen before, beginning at verse 13.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand firm. I stand therefore having fastened on the belt of truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

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. But which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak.

[1 : 16] Well, we've seen the six parts of the armor, and noticed some of the ways in which they're closely associated or joined together. From verse 13 there, all the parts that are mentioned.

And we're coming now to the way that Paul himself rounds off this section, dealing with the armor of God, by an emphasis on prayer. You can imagine just how Paul would look at a Roman soldier and realize how necessary it was for these soldiers at all, as at all times soldiers, are required to be fit.

Required to be in good physical and mental condition as far as possible. Because you can have all the armor, and yet if the person isn't fit to actually carry it, wear it, or use it, he's not going to be much good.

And that follows through into what this is an image of, the Christian soldier, the Christian wearing the armor of God. We can have all the parts, and yet we need constantly to keep up our strengths.

Because we cannot wield the sword of the Spirit unless we have that energy through prayer that God gives us. Otherwise, we'll feel the sword rather heavy for our use.

[2 : 37] It's the word of God. But we need constantly to come before God to pray, as indeed for all the other aspects of the armor that we've seen and gone through as well. So it's only thus by prayer that we are able to actually use and utilize these aspects, these parts of the armor as they are intended by God to be used.

In other words, we really cannot use this armor effectively outside of a communion with God through prayer that we are required to keep up.

That's one of the reasons why the apostle elsewhere calls upon us to pray without ceasing, to go on constantly in prayer on a daily basis, and actually thereby, in this passage, be able to use the armor effectively.

So there are actually five points altogether, which may give the impression it's going to be a long sermon, but I hope it's not. It's just going to deal, hopefully, just with the parts that are in these two verses, and especially as they deal with prayer.

The first thing he says is, pray in the Spirit. Praying at all times in the Spirit. Every time we come to prayer, we are required to pray in the Spirit.

[3 : 55] But what does that mean? Because some people have an idea that this is somewhat beyond them, if they imagine that praying in the Spirit means praying with fervency, praying with a height of emotional input into what you're saying, what you're praying.

Well, there may indeed be an element of that, but that's not the primary meaning of praying in the Spirit. It is actually to do more with dependence on the Spirit than anything else.

When you come to pray, you don't depend upon your own insight. You don't depend even on your experience, or you can draw from your experience as a Christian and feed that into your praying.

Praying in the Spirit means you need to, and I need to, and we all need to together, pray in dependence on the Spirit. Praying, trusting that the Spirit will give us that insight, will lead us into the things that we are required to pray about.

That doesn't mean we don't have time, or we don't accept the idea of fervency, or liberty, or any of those things that sometimes we describe as affecting prayer, or being part of how we pray.

[5 : 01] But the emphasis on praying in the Spirit is really praying, being led by the Spirit, praying in such a way that we're depending on the Spirit of God, and not on anyone or anything else.

You remember how Paul, in writing to the Romans, in that wonderful chapter, chapter 8, among other things, it's a chapter 8 that deals so much with the role of the Spirit, especially in our sanctification.

But he says there at verse 26, Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. In other words, he's then, again, pointing to our need to depend on the Spirit for our strength, because he's bringing weakness, we're bringing our weakness to him.

Paul here is bringing the element of weakness to the fore, so that we will come in dependence on the Spirit's strength to pray. 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. The Spirit himself intercedes for us. We don't know what to pray for as we ought.

[6 : 13] You notice he's not saying we don't know how to pray. His chief concern is not so much how to pray, but what to pray for. Especially in regard to these great things that he's laying before us in Romans, chapter 8.

What he says, the Spirit himself makes intercession for us. Haven't we got a wonderful, wonderful position as Christians to have two intercessors?

You have Christ interceding at the right hand of God, presenting the worth of himself and of his work. And you have the Spirit interceding in you. You have the Spirit coming to bring things to your mind that you then bring before God in your praying.

So there's the first thing that Paul is saying about the praying soldier. Prayer in the Spirit. Praying at all times in the Spirit. At all times really covers every eventuality.

So that whenever we come to pray, and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves praying, we are to be conscious of our need of dependence upon the Spirit of God.

[7 : 21] That's the first thing. The second thing is praying with all prayer and supplication. Praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication.

To that end, keep alert with all perseverance. Watching prayerfully, but praying with all prayer and supplication.

The word prayer, most often as it's used here, actually means prayer in a general sense. You could say all aspects of prayer would be taken in by the meaning of that word.

It's just what we often refer, ourselves refer to as prayer. It doesn't really there in that word itself break up praying into the different components, components, into the different aspects or elements of prayer, such as thanksgiving or the next one that's mentioned there, supplication.

So prayer in the wider sense. In other words, Paul is really capturing by that word prayer that every element of prayer is to be included in our praying to God and in our praying for strength to use this armor effectively.

[8 : 30] But then he focuses more narrowly upon supplication. And supplication is something like what we found in Psalm 86 as we sang through it, where you find David there supplicating, appealing to the Lord.

Supplication is really in a more narrow sense, bringing things before the Lord that you earnestly entreat him for specifically. Where prayer is the general prayer that covers all types of prayer.

Supplication is when your heart is really entreating and requesting God over something specific very often. And so Paul is using these two words, I think, so that we can see that whatever aspect of prayer it is, we think about whether it's prayer, looking at all aspects of it in a general sense of prayer, or the specifics of it such as supplication.

All of that must come under the dependence that we have on the Spirit of God. Praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication.

So there's praying in the Spirit and there's also praying with all prayer and supplication. Thirdly, praying watchfully and perseveringly. All of these terms are so important as they're bound together in the Apostle's thought.

[9 : 54] Praying with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance. In other words, to the end that he's just mentioned there, which is praying in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication.

To that end, for this purpose, in order to actually achieve this, or reach towards achieving this, he is saying, keep alert with all perseverance.

You remember there in Matthew, the words that we have where Jesus came to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And in Matthew chapter 26 and verse 41, you have something very similar to this, where you find Jesus coming to them after praying himself in that agony of prayer in the Garden.

He came in, verse 40, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, so could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

[11 : 01] The Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. In other words, he's saying there, watch and pray. Be prayerful and watchful towards prayer.

Watchfulness like the soldier, if you like to think of the imagery there, of the Christian as a soldier, the Roman soldier, on sentry duty, on guard duty, looking out for the approach of the enemy.

That's exactly what you have in spiritual terms. Here, he's dealing with these powerful forces of darkness. We're not wrestling against flesh and blood. We're actually wrestling against these rulers and the cosmic powers over this present darkness.

Therefore, take up the whole armor of God and to that end pray. Pray with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance.

Imagine a soldier on sentry duty. One of the ways and strategies of an enemy would be to try and distract that soldier. So that especially in the olden days when sentry duty was very much a matter of just looking physically out for the approaching enemy, anything that would distract the soldier on sentry duty from that was a danger then to the whole company or the whole town.

- [12 : 19] And of course, that's what the devil is about. He wants to get in amongst the Lord's people, as he said to Peter there, as Jesus recognized, that Satan had desired to have you, that he might sift you all like wheat.

That was his intention. He wanted to get in amongst the disciples, amongst the believing people of God then, to sift them, to scatter them, to cause havoc amongst them. And of course, Jesus said, but I prayed for you, Peter, so that when you're recovered from your lapses, he meant strengthen your brethren.

In other words, we learn from our own lapses, because all of us have some lapses or other to confess before God. But learning from the lapses, we actually come to bear one another up and strengthen one another and encourage one another in terms of helping us, helping each other on the way that we walk spiritually.

So keep alert with all perseverance. Keep alert and make sure that you're watching out for the approaching enemy to distract you from prayer, to distract you especially from prayer.

William Cowper, the great poet, who himself, of course, was so much given to terrible wrestlings in his own life against depression and suicidal thoughts, and needed to be helped along the way by the likes of John Newton.

- [13 : 51] Well, he wrote this wonderful set of hymns that you can find and prayers amongst whom you find this. Restraining prayer, we cease to fight.

If we don't keep up watchfulness and praying with perseverance is what he means. Restraining prayer, we cease to fight. Prayer makes the Christians' armor bright.

And Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees. Wonderful words. Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees.

You don't have to have great theological tones in your praying. You don't have to actually have the ability that some have to have a wonderful theological knowledge and competence.

What Cowper realized was the weakest saint upon his knees causes Satan to tremble. The genuine, believing, trusting, dependent saint.

- [14 : 52] Dependent on the spirit of God. Even if they're just on their knees and can hardly utter a word in some of the times that they're straightened in praying. Still, that puts Satan to flight.

And that's how we gain our strength increasingly. Through our praying. So, there's praying in the spirit. Praying with all prayer and supplication.

Praying watchfully and perseveringly. And then, fourthly, praying for all the saints. And to the apostle, this was also really of critical importance.

That when we pray, we don't just pray for ourselves. Though, of course, we do that. But what he's saying here is making supplication for all the saints.

Making supplication for all the saints. God's people, wherever they are. You find Paul, of course, using the word saints, as we've seen before, to describe the confessing people of God in the world.

- [15 : 52] That's how he begins his epistle. An apostle of Jesus Christ to the saints who are at Ephesus and are faithful or the faithful in Christ Jesus.

That's who he's writing to. And now he's saying, praying for all the saints. Wherever the saints are to be found, you pray for them. Even if they're very different in their setting or in their outlook or in their practices to ourselves.

If they are the genuine people of God, and that will be made evident to us, even if there are things in which they differ from ourselves. But wherever they are, and of course, the wonderful thing about prayer is that you can go all the way around the world a number of times in your prayer.

And you're remembering the saints. And if you don't know them personally, you know of their circumstances, you know of the situation. You actually gain insight from that by the many ways in which information is given us about the saints elsewhere or the saints in our own nation.

It doesn't matter where they are. You find out the situation as far as possible. You read the information you're given from mission agencies or from the church. And you bring that into your prayers as you pray privately.

[17 : 05] You pray for all the saints. You pray publicly, joining like we are here tonight. You pray for all the saints. Locally, our own nation, abroad. It doesn't really matter. Remember, we're all soldiers in the same war.

It doesn't matter where the front lines are. Just think of the Second World War and the First World War. Look at the different locations in the Second World War where you had armed forces, whether soldiers, army or air, where you had them located throughout most of the known world.

And yet, for all the differences there, for all the variety of circumstances and conditions, they were all fighting the same cause. They were all together in the same cause.

That's how we are as Christians as well, praying and making supplication for all the saints. There are saints tonight everywhere as far as we're concerned in the world on different fronts.

And, you know, one of the devil's strategies, and he's very clever at it as well, is if he cannot actually stop you from praying, and usually he doesn't manage that, although sometimes in prayer you find yourself, as I do, sometimes feeling rather dry in your prayers, sometimes feeling just a kind of formalism creeping over you.

[18 : 29] Still, you manage to get words. You come to Scripture itself. You feed your mind maybe on some of the prayers in Scripture itself, and that helps you to bring things together and to set out your mind before God.

But you try and encompass all the saints, all those who are involved in engaging the enemy wherever, whether it's in Parliament, whether it's in mission agencies, whether it's in different churches, whether it's in places where it really is tough to be a Christian, as it is in many cases anyway, but there are places that have it much harder than we have.

The devil's strategy, if he can't stop you praying, he will try and make you privatize it. He will try and make you just focus on yourself, or focus only on your own immediate locality or family or whatever.

But Paul is saying praying for all the saints, praying for all the people of God, the confessing church of God. And there is so much for us to pray even in that.

The needs of God.

[20 : 04] What the chaos of church, and who are like helping us for, and what they are struggling with us? And in all, enjoy the mercy of God. So then the same thing we struggle with as Jesus came to someone, And so I think that's what we say from a■e. I would support you that are personally and love for on theitate. We, however, tend to stand up as I know your own party. on what is going on, what it is that have been currently debated, such as currently in the Scottish Parliament, where we have a move towards introducing euthanasia effectively, but assisted suicide.

And we're praying earnestly against that, using the information we get from the Christian Institute and others who are involved in keeping tabs and watching what's happening with that and writing to your MP or MSP in regard to that.

That's so important. It's part of supporting those who are actually praying as members of our parliaments and who are striving and struggling to maintain their Christian witness and their Christian impact in the very difficult conditions that they face.

Praying for all saints. Pray for those who are involved with others who struggle with various addictions. You find that locally, nationally.

Praying for those you know yourselves, involved with work such as pregnancy crisis, care. All of those things are local issues as well as national issues.

[21 : 28] And as you inform your mind, so you pray for the saints, the people of God, those who give up their time to engage with these difficulties. Those who are teaching our children.

Those who are involved in medical care. Those who are involved in dealing with people on a daily basis that struggle with various mental as well as physical conditions.

So all of that's coming into what he's saying here. Praying for all the saints. But finally, praying also, he says, 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.

He is imprisoned for the gospel here, as we see also with Philippians. But you notice, despite the conditions that that would involve, the hardships, the limitations that would be imposed upon him, he is not asking that they remember him for that.

[22 : 36] He's not asking that they pray that he be released. He's not asking that his conditions may be improved. Because his concern is not himself, or his own health, or his own comfort.

His concern is the gospel. His concern is the message that God has given to his people to proclaim to the world. That's what he's praying for me, he says.

That words may be given me in opening my mouth boldly. We heard that in prayer tonight here. That we seek from the Lord the boldness to declare, not just in preaching in pulpits, for you yourselves as well are engaged in the world.

And very often in the world, in ways in which we who preach the gospel are not. In many ways, you are at the front line of that fight with these forces that are against the gospel.

And he's saying, pray for me, he says, that I may open my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel. Well, it is there primarily, in this instance, the preaching of the gospel.

[23 : 38] But in principle, it extends to wherever the gospel is spoken about, spoken by you into that world as you meet people in it. That's his concern.

It's the gospel, not himself. That's Paul's priority. And you notice he's mentioning the word boldly there twice. That words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly, boldly, and then that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak.

That I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak. Now, boldly does not mean primarily that we speak out with any sense of arrogance or boldly just in the sense of blurting things out and without thinking about it or without tact and things like that.

What is concerned is, boldly really means not being afraid of the consequences of speaking up or speaking out for Christ. That's what he's saying. Give me, pray for me that I may open my mouth boldly, that I may not be intimidated by the thought of what a reaction might be.

And that's always one of the devil's strategies as well, isn't it? Will he say to you, well, you know, if you're going to do that and if you're going to speak to so-and-so, whether it's somebody at your work or somebody in your neighborhood, especially if it's somebody you know is antagonistic to the gospel, of course you speak with care and of course you assess the situation and you pray over it, but you pray that God will enable you to speak boldly not being afraid of the response and certainly not being put off speaking by the prospect perhaps of a very negative or hostile reaction.

[25 : 23] Because that's one of the ways that the devil can actually come to stifle the gospel in some ways by making God's people just take a step back and hold back from speaking with the boldness, with the clarity, with the conviction that they ought to have.

He can make the prospect of a bad reaction actually stand as a barrier to you speaking out. So there's the praying for the preacher as well, so that I may pray boldly as I ought to speak.

Now, of course, that's in principle, that follows through into every situation where preachers of the gospel preach in the name of Christ. We have it in our circumstances, I have it in my circumstances, far easier than the apostle had, far easier than many of my fellow preachers in the world today have it.

We don't have the discomfort, we don't have the out-and-out persecution that they face. That doesn't make it necessarily easy, but it's certainly easier than it was for them and for many others in the world, but whether it's in a situation of comfort or in a situation of great stress and persecution, the one thing that Paul has in his mind is what we have on our mind, to speak with boldness, to speak not being afraid of what the reaction might be, but to speak in a way that makes Christ clear and the claims of Christ clear in our generation too.

And of course, all of that is linked to what Paul called when he wrote to the Galatians as the offense of the cross. Galatians chapter 5, there in verse 11, but he said, if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

[27 : 15] In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. And what he means by the offense of the cross is that the cross really has priority, all such things as circumcision and secondary matters, especially if they've been moved on from the days of the Old Testament anyway, just what the case was with Galatians and many of the contexts in the New Testament.

But leave that aside, boldness for Christ means presenting the cross in the teaching of the Bible and the presentation of God's truth. That cross has to be central.

Christ crucified, Christ exclusively. Christ, the one who rules over the universe, the cross that dominates and must dominate our witness for Christ.

The offense of the cross is something Paul is very much aware of because every time he presents that cross, people are offended because they think this is not acceptable.

How can we possibly accept our lifestyle being threatened by this cross, by the terms of Christ, by the claims of Christ, rather than just live the way I want to live myself?

[28 : 29] See, there's the offense of the cross. As soon as you introduce Jesus, Jesus' claims, as soon as you introduce that, people inevitably are going to react in a way that, to some extent, at least is hostile because none of us wants that naturally.

It's a threat to our own self-authority, as we see it. And so he says, I am an ambassador, but I am an ambassador in chains.

And so for Paul, the task of witnessing to Christ and especially preaching Christ, the task is not about making the cross palatable. Making the cross for the world something that they're going to find acceptable.

The only way you can make the cross acceptable to the world in its worldliness is if you empty the cross of its offense. If you water down the gospel. If you take out the offensive terms.

And Paul is saying, that's not what you're going to pray for me, but that I may speak boldly, that I may present the cross in its fullness, but I may not hold back anything that God has actually placed in the message of the gospel.

[29 : 45] You know, the world's plea is very often the same plea as Jesus himself met with when he went to the cross.

For example, Mark chapter 15, and we can just close with this. Mark chapter 15, and at verse 32, the gospels, all have this to some extent, where you find the clamor of those who were watching and mocking Jesus.

And one of the ways in which they mocked was to claim that, to say that he claimed to be the son of God, but couldn't even save himself. Those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, aha, you would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.

Save yourself and come down from the cross. So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, he saved others. He cannot save himself.

Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe. Here's the words of the world. Let him come down from the cross.

[30 : 52] And if you do that, if you take away the offense of the cross, if you take away the demands of the crucified Jesus, then that's fine. We'll see and believe, but not while that's in place.

That's what you're facing. That's inevitably the way the world sees things. That's how you and I saw it, most of us, at least ourselves, when we came to realize that actually the cross is the centerpiece of our salvation.

So there you have how Paul rounds off his passage on the armor of God, praying in the spirit, praying with all prayer and supplication, praying watchfully and perseveringly, praying for all the saints, and praying for the preacher of the gospel, though that includes, really outwardly, those who witness to Christ in other ways as well.

So we trust that God, because we need this daily, whatever circumstances of providence we're in, we need, as we saw at the beginning, to take up the whole armor of God and put it on every day and use it every day, seeking that strength and dependence on the spirit that we will get from God to use the armor effectively.

Let's pray. Lord, our God, we thank you for prayer. We thank you that prayer is indicted of your spirit, that we do not invent words for ourselves with which to come before you.

[32 : 28] We thank you that in all our circumstances, we can depend upon your blessed spirit. We pray, O Lord, that your spirit will further teach us and lead us into avenues of prayer.

Lord, help us in all our circumstances, as we already heard in prayer this evening. Teach us to pray and teach us to continue perseveringly in prayer.

Teach us to pray for all the saints, wherever they are in the world. Teach us to pray watchfully, being watchful against our enemy. Teach us to pray, Lord, for the gospel, for the advance of the gospel, not for our own comforts, but rather to declare boldly what Jesus has done and what God is requiring of all human beings to repent and confess their sin and come to receive the life that Christ gives.

Bless us now, we pray, and continue with us, forgiving all our sin for Jesus' sake. Amen.