

Praying At All Times

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Turn with me to Ephesians chapter 6. Ephesians chapter 6.

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[1 : 55] I ought to speak. This is the word of the Lord. Please be seated.

Well, last year, my oldest son got a ball python snake named Charlie, and several weeks ago, Charlie got out of his cage. Now, let me be clear. I don't like snakes. I can bear witness with Indiana Jones when he says, I hate snakes. But thankfully, I wasn't home. Kim was home.

While preparing for bed that evening, my youngest son noticed that the clips locking the cage lid shut were gone, out of place. Upon closer investigation, he noticed that Charlie was gone too.

The cage was empty. The snake was loose. He could have been anywhere, and Kim was frantic, desperately trying to find Charlie, no doubt aware that bedtime was only moments away.

And without locating Charlie, Charlie could be slithering anywhere through the dark house, into any nook and cranny, into any dark spot, perhaps even in between the sheets of our bed.

[3 : 53] Fortunately, with the help of YouTube, Charlie was quickly found right underneath his cage in the top drawer so he could still feel the warmth of the heating pad. Unfortunately, the criminal who removed the clips has been yet to be located. We've all but waterboarded the children.

We'll keep you informed on the investigation, but it still continues. But let's get back to Kim. Can you imagine preparing to go to bed knowing a three-foot snake was on the loose? Anywhere.

Everywhere you might imagine he could be. Over the past several weeks, we've learned that a more serious enemy is on the loose. We've learned that the Christian life is a battle that we must fight. You know, the greatest troubles often befall the church when we forget that we are at war.

When we assume that we are at peacetime when we're actually at wartime. When we assume all is at peace, all is well. Great troubles fall upon the church of Jesus Christ. We've learned that we have a real enemy, the devil himself. Now, biblically, we know that Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death and defeated the devil. We know that Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, triumphing over them and putting them to open shame. We know that through the gospel, people are called from darkness to light, from captivity to Satan, to captivity and relationship to God. But we also know biblically, the devil is still at work. Biblically, we know that there's a God of this world blinding the minds of unbelievers. You ever tried to share the gospel with someone and feel like the penny won't drop?

Well, the penny won't drop because there's an enemy that blinds them into ignorance and an unwillingness to hear. We know that he's still at work and believers tempting us and accusing us. Christopher Ash says in his commentary on Job, he says, every day, I wonder if this is right next to the alarm clock in our houses. Every day we ought to wake up and say to ourselves, there is a vicious, dark, spiritual battle being waged over me today. That's the reality. If we could pull back the veil, there's a dark, spiritual battle being waged over me today. Satan is very busy. Wherever on earth, there is a believer walking with God in loving fear. There's a battle. There's an enemy. Wonderfully, there's armor that's fit for the fight. We saw that last week. God is with us. God has always been with his people, but more importantly, Christ is with us. He clothes us with himself, with his armor, with his strength to stand and the strength of his might and to stand against the schemes of the devil. In these final three verses of the spiritual armor passage of Ephesians 6, the Apostle

Paul tells us prayer is how the armor is deployed. You know, after detailing each piece of armor, the belt, the breastplate, the shield, the Apostle Paul turns to prayer. Prayer is not another piece in the armor. The Apostle Paul abandons the metaphor of armor and instead focuses very explicitly on prayer, very specifically on prayer. It's not another piece in the armor. It's the way the armor is brought into effect. It's the way it's deployed. The command repeated, as Taylor pointed out, and I did the previous week, is stand.

To put on this armor, to stand up. Well, the way you stand biblically, and Ephesians 6 says, is through prayer. The way to obey that command is through prayer. And where we're going is, pray at all times for yourself and for one another to stand in the strength of God's saving might. Pray at all times for yourself and one another to stand in the strength of God's saving might. I'm going to break this out in three declarative statements. The first is, to fail to pray is to fail to treat the battle as real. To fail to pray is to fail to treat the battle as real. Now, verses 18 through 20 teaches us how to stand in the strength of God's saving might. How to put on this armor. And so, the praying is in reference to all that's going on in this passage. If you look down there, verse 18 again, you notice it begins praying, a gerund. It begins, it's attached to something. It needs a modifier here. But it's not talking about praying just because we need a shield of fate or a helmet of salvation. I think, and more importantly, smart guys agree with me, that I think the praying is in reference to stand in verse 14. So look up there. Stand therefore, having fastened on all of these things. Well, how do you fasten them all on?

Praying. And so, how do you stand against the devil? How do you stand in the strength of God's might through prayer? Specifically, through praying continually. The emphasis upon praying continually is very obvious. Look in verse 18. Praying at all times. That's similar to what the apostle said in 1 Thessalonians when he said, pray without ceasing. Colossians 4 continues steadfastly. [9:52] Similar to what he said at the opening of this letter, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. The Christian life is to be one in which we're taking up every opportunity for prayer. Every opportunity we see.

But it's not just praying at all times. The emphasis continues when he says, praying with all prayer and supplication. You see that? Look in verse 18. With all prayer and supplication.

There's a distinction between these words. Praying here, with all prayer, is referenced generally to prayer. Supplication is a reference to making specific petitions, intercession. We see that in Philippians 4 when the apostle says, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. So, there is a distinction between the two. The idea seems to be, the apostle Paul is saying, sees every opportunity for prayer and also every form of prayer. Don't narrow it down just to intercession. The idea is every type of prayer we should take up. Planned prayer and spontaneous prayer. Long prayer and short burst of prayer. We should take up private prayer and public prayer. Thought out prayer and prayers that appear to be almost just a sigh. You know, you're walking through things going on in your mind, praying as you're in a meeting. As I'm often doing, praying, Lord, intervene, help, give grace, give help. The idea is not that we're always to be in the act of prayer, as if the Christian life should boil down to an international house of prayer. That's not the main point here. The idea is that we're always to be in a state of prayer, always living before the face of God, always bringing up our cares to God, always living in His presence, casting our cares to Him, making our requests known to Him. A striking example several years ago, in 2023, American teenage player Coco Gauff won her first Grand Slam after winning the

U.S. Open, and she immediately got down on her knees on her bench where all her rackets are, and began to pray. Now ESPN says, headline, Goff took a moment to soak it all in.

No, Goff did not take a moment to soak it all in. She took a moment to pray, but I just love that.

That's the Christian life. What do I want to do before I go talk to all these reporters and my family?

[12:43] I want to pray to my God. We're to live in a state of prayer. Where do we go when we're happy? Where do we go when we're afraid? Where do we go when we're perplexed? Where do we go when we're angry?

There's this lifeline that's to be continually accessed. Right now, in this life, until we see Him face to face, our expression of living in the presence of God is through prayer.

But it becomes even more clear when the Apostle says we're to be praying at all times in the Spirit. You see that, right? Praying at all times in the Spirit.

Now what does it mean to be praying in the Spirit? Some of our more charismatic friends would say this is praying in tongues.

Now, I support the exercise of praying in tongues, but I don't think that's what this is a reference to. Other people say praying in the Spirit. Here is a reference to praying with passion, you know?

[13:45] We want light and heat. We want truth and passion, but I don't think that's the main emphasis here either. Rather, the emphasis is on praying in such a way that we're led by, directed by, and helped by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The idea is the Holy Spirit and the idea of living in the Holy Spirit, living life by the power of the Spirit. Something that's run through this letter, if you remember that. He said, you're being built together. There's a new temple being built.

It's the saints being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Ephesians 2, later in Ephesians 3, he said, the Spirit comes to put Christ in your inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith.

Later, he said, you must be continually filled with the Spirit. So what he's helping us see is a Christian life is a Spirit-filled life. It's not a life of do's and don'ts.

It's not a life of minding your P's and Q's. It's not a life of checking off the list. It's not a book of manners or any of these things. A Christian life is a life powered by the Spirit of God.

[14:52] Led by the Spirit of God. Walking in step with the Spirit of God. Sowing to the Spirit, Galatians 5 and 6 say.

Bearing the fruit of the Spirit. You remember what Jesus said? We studied it last year. I am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I am, he it is that bears much fruit.

How do you bear much fruit? The same life-giving power that raised Jesus from the dead is to be in your life, leading you, guiding you.

So we see the Christian life is a totally different life. A life lived in the Spirit. And so pray continually, not to check a box, but to walk in fellowship by the Spirit.

Now we need this warning because there's few areas of our lives where we're more prone to become rote or formulaic than in prayer. Several months ago at the Gospel Coalition Conference, John Piper went viral when he asked ChatGPT to compose a prayer for him.

[16:10] He typed in, Please compose a 30-second prayer to God in the spirit and theology of Don Carson, who helped start the Gospel Coalition, in praise to the glory of God's grace.

Piper said three seconds later he was given this prayer, Gracious Father, we bow before you, the sovereign Lord of history and redemption. From eternity past, you purposed to lavish grace upon undeserving sinners through the blood of your beloved Son.

We praise you for the glory of your mercy, unearned, unmeasured, made manifest in Christ, crucified and risen. May our lives be redeemed and sanctified by your Spirit, be vessels of praise to the riches of your grace.

To you be glory forever and ever. Amen. Pretty good prayer from a machine. And Piper said, That's not praise.

Right? You could recite that without your heart being engaged. AI doesn't have a heart that's engaging with God in that moment.

[17:22] But the truth is, we don't need chat GPT to begin offering prayers we don't mean. I remember as a kid, noticing that my grandfather ended every prayer by saying, Bless the food and the hands that prepared it.

Nourish us with this food and us to your service. I just thought, either he's really committed to blessing his wife's hands for making the food, or this is just rope.

I mean, the good news is, you knew the prayer was ending. You know, because that was a downhill slide. And you knew, all right, you know, dinner was no longer going to get cold. We're about to eat. But it gets, but I do the same thing.

So often, just begin to pray without little thought, and begin to recite things that I don't mean.

And the goal, my goal, is not to smack your hand. I want you to see that Christ died to give you more than rote formulaic prayers. Christ died to give you a prayer life, more of a prayer life than one you try to get in and out of without it getting awkward.

[18:31] Christ died so that you could be friends with God, that you could have communion with him. He knows what you need before you ask, so you don't need to be worried about all the requests.

He's inviting you to come to him freely as a son or daughter comes to the Father. God inviting you to come to him, to have fellowship with him, to get a sense of his presence. And that's what it means to pray in the Spirit, to pray with a sense of his presence. There's nothing better than when the requests seem to fall away, and you're caught up in the presence of God. I remember a couple weeks ago, I was praying. I always take time to walk and pray on Sunday mornings. I'm aware of my need, and I want to get in that desperate place, in that dependent space. And I was just so blown away that I was a Christian. I wanted to start knocking on doors and say, I'm a Christian. If you knew me the way I knew me, I'm just so flabbergasted that the Lord saved me. [19 : 37] And that's what I just said. I had a sense of his presence, a sense of awe and amazement of all the people in this world that he could save. He saved me, and it was wonderful freedom, because where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And that's what I want to invite to you. And so if we could put it all together, you sleep, but your enemy never does. That's what's going on here. He's always prowling along. So to fail to pray is to fail to treat the battle as real. It's to tune down, to lull yourself to sleep. It's to be a sitting duck for the enemy. To fail to pray, in one sense, is to be dead. No longer walking in step with the Spirit, no longer living. And so the Lord says you need power. Now, and I just want to give you a little thing. I hope I'm not running out of time. But how do you pray like that? Here's my theory. I love to hike. And you've known that about me. I talk about that. I am very different hiking on a trail that I've never been on. [20 : 44] Now, I'm on a trail that I've never been on. I'm watching markers. Blazes. If you're a hiker, you're watching for those markers where you're going. I'm watching the GPS.

I'm watching switchbacks to make sure I don't miss one. But life is very different when I'm on a trail, I know. I'm not thinking about anything. I hear the birds. You know, I see. I don't care about the vistas. I'm just trying to make sure I don't get lost when I'm on a trail. I don't know. But when I'm on a trail, I know suddenly everything opens up. Prayers like that. You're going to start blazing a trail. I want to challenge you to do one thing this week. I want to challenge you to take an hour for some long wandering prayer. I just want to encourage you. Take a few things. Take a note card. You know, sometimes I'll walk around with my Bible, look like this insane guy in the early morning dawn, darkness, you know, walking around.

[21 : 43] But take a note card. Write down three or four things that are on your mind and heart. Maybe write on the other side a passage that's on your mind. Take it and pray through it and just wander around.

And ask God to meet with you in prayer. And so it just liberates you. For me, I got to get outside. I hate sitting inside the house. I want to pray. I want to walk. I want to be with the Lord. Obviously, he's in the house too. But I want to commune with him. And it helps me to get outside. Some of you guys don't like the outdoors and I'll pray for you after the service. But take a moment to do that. Take an hour. I want to challenge you. Take an hour. Power down the phone. And pray. Be with the Lord. That's what he died to give you. Life of him. And so to fail to pray is to fail to treat the battle as real. To fail to pray, point two, is to fail to treat God as all-powerful. To fail to pray is to fail to treat God as all-powerful. [22 : 46] He's teaching us how to stand in the strength of God, saving mighty. He began by calling us to pray continually because the battle is real. Now he calls us to pray persistently, I believe, because God is all-powerful.

He continues. We're still in that same verse. He continues. To that end, keep alert. Keep alert. This is the same word used in the Olivet Discourse. So in Mark 13 or Matthew 24, I believe, he's saying, be on guard. Be alert. What are the last days? What's your posture to be? Be on guard. Be alert. Stay awake. Just as the Lord said on the night that he was betrayed, watch and pray lest you fall into temptation. Stay awake. Your enemy never sleeps, so you must stay alert. That's the idea. So keep alert. Then he adds, with all perseverance. Look down there. Keep alert with all perseverance.

[23 : 42] So it's another all. All times, all prayer and supplication, all perseverance. Perseverance means to be faithful. Even more, it means to persist in something despite opposition and obstacle.

And one of my favorite parables about prayer that the Lord, or Luke told us that the Lord shared so that they would pray and never give up. Jesus tells about a widow who would not be denied.

She lived in a city with an ungodly judge who didn't fear God, didn't respect men, but she kept coming for justice. You've got to understand in that culture, a widow, no one was more unworthy of justice than a widow.

And a patriarchal culture like that. So she didn't have a man to go into the courtroom and demand proper payment and proper treatment. But she kept coming.

Banging on the door for justice. She said, give me justice. And the Lord in the parable, he says, the judge said to himself, though I neither fear God nor respect men, I will give her justice because she has beat me down by her continual coming.

[24 : 54] And so the Lord says, pray like that. Pray. But wonderfully, God is not like that unrighteous judge, that ungodly judge. He knows what you need before you ask.

He hears your prayers. He listens. He's eager to give grace and mercy in your time of need. I love it when the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt and they said they were offering their groanings and cries.

They went all the way up to the King of Kings. And that's where your prayers go. They go, they're the prayers of the saints that go into the throne room of God above.

And so when you persist in prayer, you're not overcoming His reluctance. You're persisting in prayer because your enemy is real and you know God is eager to intervene.

I love the way Colossians 4 says it continues steadfastly in prayer with thanksgiving, or with watchfulness and thanksgiving. The idea is you're continuing steadfastly not just because God's eager to give good requests and powerful but because He will soon intervene.

[25 : 58] And so I would say though your spouse's memory is too far gone, persist. Though your child continues to stray and harm himself or herself, persist.

Though it seems like God has chosen not to open your womb, persist. Though your neighbor continues to show no desire for spiritual things, persist.

Though your marriage is tearing at the seams, persist. Though it seems the darkness of your heartache will never lift, persist. God is not like the unrighteous and ungodly judge.

He hears your prayers and is eager to give grace and mercy in your time of need. So the reality is that we're to be watchful in prayer because of our enemy, right?

Because He's prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. But wonderfully, we're to be watchful in prayer because of our God. Because greater is He who is in us and He who is in the world.

[27 : 05] And so we're watching. We're continuing steadfastly in prayer with watchfulness and with thanksgiving because God is eager. To fail to pray is to fail to treat God as all-powerful.

To fail to pray is to fail to treat God as God. To fail to pray is to treat God as if His arm is too short. His power is too small.

But I've seen mountains fall. I'm going to pray. I would encourage you. You know, you do the long-wandering prayer but I'd encourage you to make notes of when God answers prayer too.

When He answered a prayer. I wrote it. I was thanking Him this morning. He answered a prayer this week for Grayson Wooden. He delivered that little boy. He's been on my mind all week and God delivered him.

He had mercy. God's seen doors open and marriages healed and rescued. I love this. I love this passage, you know.

[28 : 09] And this focus on spiritual warfare. It doesn't focus on tactics, techniques, or strategies. It doesn't focus on power encounters or bondage. It doesn't focus on lives of the enemy.

It focuses on God. It focuses on Him who is greater. Him who is exalted above every rule and authority and power and dominion. It doesn't help you stand against Satan on your own.

It helps you stand against Satan in Christ alone. That's what it's going after. That's the Christian life standing in Christ alone as if the Lord wants to open our eyes to see.

One of my favorite prayer stories is Elisha when he's surrounded by the horses and chariots of Syria and his servant responds, what should we do? You know, our back is against the wall.

So we read the Old Testament to find out what God's like when our back's against the wall because he has a resume and his resume is he delivers the needy.

[29 : 12] That's his resume. And so, Elisha says, don't be afraid. There are more with us than there are with them.

And I'm sure his servant's like, what in the world are you talking about? And he prayed, O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see. So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man and he saw and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around him.

And he realized, if God is for us, who can be against us? What he's saying is, I know you can reckon a few men for the king of Syria and all these horses and chariots, but how many are you going to reckon for the Lord?

How many are you going to count on your side if the Lord is on your side? How many deliverances does he have in his belt? What's he capable of? I love that. We need it. And so prayer is how we stand.

Prayer is how we stand in his strength. How does it work? The Lord is the rock and we hide in the cleft of the rock by prayer. The Lord is the fortress. We find safety from all our enemies through prayer.

[30 : 18] The Lord is the shield. We find protection from all the fiery darts through prayer. For me, it works like this. Let's consider discouragement. Are you perplexed by life's twists and turns?

Are you frustrated? Feeling like you were cheated? Like you weren't given the chance you wanted or the chance you deserved? The career you wanted or the life you wanted?

Are you discouraged by your sins and weaknesses and how they've hurt others and made life harder for the people you love? I'm so discouraged sometimes.

Are you disappointed by how aspects of your life turned out? Is this where the devil comes to get at you? Is this where the devil accuses you?

Is this where he says you couldn't have done anything better? Your life was destined for failure. Is this where the devil says you're just like your mom? You're just like your dad.

[31 : 18] Another chip off the old block. You thought you were different. Does he say this is what you should have expected? Does he say is your faith even real?

I guess he does. And what do you do in that moment? You've got to learn to run to the rock. You've got to learn to hide underneath the shadow of his wings.

Hide in his wisdom. Your life is not, despite what the devil may tell you, spinning out of control. Oh, the depth and riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.

How unsearchable his judgments and inscrutable his ways. Who has known the mind of the Lord?

The devil doesn't know the mind of the Lord. Man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his step.

You are fearfully, wonderfully made. In his book, we're written every single day of your life before there was a single one. And so that's how you run to the Lord and hide under his wisdom and his care.

[32 : 18] because he loves you. He's not served by human hands as though he needed anything. He gives to all humankind life and breath and everything.

Having determined the allotted periods of their lives and the boundaries of their dwelling place, all that you call your life was designed by him.

That's how you run to the Lord in prayer. And so we've got to do it. We run to the rock. When we're guilty, we run to him. When we're weak, we run to him. When we're needy, we run to him. And prayer's the way.

He's marshaled into the fight. He covers us with his strength. And so to fail to pray is to fail to treat God as all-powerful. Sometimes we say, well, I'm just going to pray about it now.

Well, let's don't do that. That's not helpful. Because the truth of the matter is prayer is the only thing we can do to bring about a result. We're going to pray before we do what we must do and obey.

[33 : 19] We're going to pray that it's effective. We're going to pray that God makes it more effective than we could ever ask or imagine. And so to fail to pray is to fail to treat God. It's all-powerful. Point three, to fail to pray is to fail to treat others as fellow saints.

To fail to pray is to fail to treat others as fellow saints. The apostle Paul began by calling us to pray continually because the battle is real.

Pray persistently because God is all-powerful. Now he calls us to pray broadly because we are fellow saints. Look in verse 18, the last clause of this verse.

He says, making supplication for all the saints. For all the saints. That's the fourth all. All times, all prayer and supplication, all perseverance, all the saints. Paul's helping us to see the Christian life. It is a battle that we must wage, but it's a battle we must wage together. [34 : 29] So all the saints, you know, saints is a word that has been so misused in the history of the church by the Catholics and by others.

It does not refer to a super spiritual Christian or a super active Christian. It refers simply to a Christian. The roots of this word saint are in the Old Testament when he says, I delivered you from eagle's wings so that you might be a people to me, my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

And so, all throughout this letter, though, he applies this word saints to those who've come to faith in Jesus Christ. He says, you've been set apart in another way. You weren't delivered through the Red Sea.

You were delivered from sin and death and sealed with my Holy Spirit and set apart for me. And so, we've seen it throughout the letter, this reference to saints to refer to all those who are in Christ who follow the Lord and have been set apart for Him.

So he says, pray for all the saints. What God is doing, He's doing, not just in your life, wonderfully macro-focused. He's doing this globally focused all throughout the world.

[35 : 42] It's bearing fruit all throughout the world. So he says, pray for all the saints. I love this. The apostle says, and also for me, verse 19. Do you remember, he's in prison. So he says, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth to proclaim the mystery of the gospel for which I'm an ambassador in chains that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak.

And so, even the apostle Paul needs prayer. And so too, do all of us. Pray for all the saints. You're not the only one in the battle. You're not alone.

There are saints throughout the world. You all are saints. You're all ambassadors for Christ. So to fail to pray is to fail to treat others as fellow saints. Now, so much of the time, we live like we are on our own.

We are self-focused by nature. You know, sin has a way of turning us in on ourselves. So we think about ourselves. We meditate on ourselves. We're anxious about ourselves.

But we live in an extremely self-focused culture as well that just encourages that love of self. You know, generation me is what one person calls our generation.

[36 : 54] This idea, everything's curated to self in our culture. But that's no way to live. One of the greatest blessings in the local church, in life in the local church, are the troubles of others.

One of the greatest blessings in the local church are the troubles of others. Now, how can it be a gift, the troubles of others? Because it takes your eyes off you.

If you remember, 9-11, I was thinking about this this morning. A lot of you weren't even born yet. But 9-11, when our country was attacked.

Now, at World Trade Center, two towers go down. Suddenly, so many other things didn't matter. Right? Didn't really matter what you're having for dinner.

didn't really matter how that relationship was going or whatever. Well, the needs of others are like that in the local church. They wonderfully deliver us from ourself.

[38 : 03] And suddenly, they relativize. They bring things into perspective. Grayson Wooten has done that for me this week. Here I am, complaining about gosh knows what every day.

there's a little boy getting open heart surgery. I will pray for him. So here's my question. Do you know the troubles of the saints in this church?

Do you know what keeps them up at night? Could you stand up here and pray for 10 people in specific ways?

Are you close enough? Are you around enough? Are you available enough? If not, you have some happy work to do.

You want to do this work. You need to do this work. Go to your brother or sister and ask them, how can I pray for you? And when someone asks, how can I pray for you, you don't talk about your Aunt Susie or your hurt knee.

[39 : 13] You know, we don't want to hear about those things. You know, sometimes you learn more about biology in a prayer meeting than you do at the doctor. You know, let's stop talking about Aunt Susie.

