

THE BATTLE CRY OF THE SAINTS

Ephesians 6:18-20 (No. 50)

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

As we've seen in the last three weeks, we Christians are engaged in a spiritual war against the devil and his hosts. The devil and his hosts attack us with flaming arrows of temptation that are designed to weaken our faith and soil our testimony before others. Since we're in a battle, we need strength from the Lord to stand strong against the enemy. And God hasn't left us to fight this battle alone. He has given us spiritual armor to put on in order to stand strong against the devil's attacks. The armor consists of six pieces:

1. The belt of truth
2. The breastplate of righteousness
3. The shoes of the gospel
4. The shield of faith
5. The helmet of salvation
6. The sword of the Spirit.

These six pieces of spiritual armor are designed by God to thwart the attacks of the enemy so that he can hold the line and not give in. We studied each of these six pieces in depth in the last two sermons. But something is still missing for the Christian soldier. One thing yet remains. Let's see what that is by beginning our reading Ephesians 6:16 and we'll focus in on vv. 18-20

Eph 6:16-20 ¹⁶In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸praying 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, ¹⁹and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

So we are to put on all these pieces of armor and we are to do so while doing something else.

v. 18: "praying. . ."

As we put on the armor of God in order to stand against our spiritual enemies and fight against temptation, we must also be engaged in prayer. Without prayer, we will not stand. Without prayer, we will not be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. So here is the call to pray in the midst of the spiritual war that all Christians are engaged in. Prayer is the battle cry of the saints of God.

We put up all the armor pieces and stand our ground with a battle cry in our mouths. And the battle cry is prayer to our strong Father. So in vv. 18-20, we learn the kind of prayer that is battle-ready prayer. The kind of prayer that will actually help you when temptations come your way. Specifically, we see the five characteristics of battle-ready prayer.

Now back on January 3rd, I preached a sermon to encourage us to make 2016 a year of prayer. In that sermon, I covered the first three of these characteristics. But many of you weren't part of our church at that time. And, even if you were, you probably don't remember the first three characteristics. So I want to remind us of the first three characteristics *briefly*—I won't go into the detail that I did before—and spend the most time on the last two.

So let's jump in. The first characteristic of battle-ready prayer is that it's unceasing.

I. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS UNCEASING

18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance,

At all times, we are to be praying. We are to be constant in prayer—unceasing in prayer. The word “times” comes from the Gk work *kairo,j*. The same root word appears in 5:16, where Paul says we should make “the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”

As I said when we studied that verse, *kairo,j* differs from another word for time *cro,noj*. *cro,noj* was the general word for clock time. But *kairo,j* meant “a fixed, measured season” or “a special moment or season.” It's time viewed as an opportunity. So the idea here in v. 18 isn't that we do nothing but pray. But that in all opportunities, we pray. That is, we redeem the time prayerfully. We make the most of the days by praying.

What we do in life should be done prayerfully. In that regard, prayer is like spiritual breath. So we're to pray:

- As we're making decisions
- As we're preparing to talk to someone, even while talking with someone
- In the whitespaces of our day—when our minds would otherwise be in neutral—driving or showering or brushing our teeth or doing dishes or taking out the trash.
- And not just in the whitespaces, but also dedicated times too. Times that you've set aside.
- In times of crisis and in times of calm.
- We're to pray in the morning and in the evening and throughout the day.
- We're to pray with people and alone.

The reason we are to pray at all times is because the spiritual battle is ongoing. Prayer is unceasing because war is unceasing.

So make efforts to make prayer the thread that ties your life together. Your day—from when you wake to when you go to sleep— should be sown together by the thread of prayer. Battle-ready prayer is unceasing. Secondly. . .

II. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS SPIRIT-EMPOWERED

18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance,

To pray “in the Spirit” is a similar concept to “being filled with the Spirit” (5:18). Being filled with the Spirit is to be so influenced by, dominated by, controlled by the Spirit—that his will is your will. So to pray “in the Spirit” means that your prayers line up with his will. Not some secret will that mystically must descend on you. Not some prompting that the Lord told you. But to pray in the will of the Spirit as given in the sword of the Spirit—the word of God.

The better you know the word of God, the better you know the Spirit’s will. To know the Scriptures little is to know the Spirit’s will little. So we pray in the Spirit when we are praying lined up with the Spirit’s will as revealed in the word of God.

Additionally, praying in the Spirit means to pray dependent on the Spirit. It’s like ‘praying in Jesus’ name.’ What does that mean? To pray in Jesus’ name certainly means to pray lined up with Jesus’ will. But it also means to pray dependent on Jesus, who gave us access to the Father because of his death on the cross. We pray on the basis of his sacrifice.

In a similar way, we pray dependently on the Spirit. That means we are to trust him even as we pray. We are to trust the Spirit to help us pray in our weakness. When temptations are flying our way and the atmosphere is filled with lies and doubts and discouragements, we trust the Spirit to help us in our weakness as it says in Romans 8:26: “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. . . .” When you don’t know what to pray, you know that the Spirit knows what to pray and he intercedes for you. So battle-ready prayer is prayer in line with the Spirit’s will and trusting him in our weakness even as we pray.

Third. . .

III. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS DIVERSE

18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance,

“All prayer and supplication” points to the need for a diversity of prayers. There are many forms of attack, so there must be many forms of prayer.

- Short prayers. Long prayers
- Morning prayers. Evening prayers.
- Scheduled prayers. Spontaneous prayers.
- Prayers alone. Prayers with people.
- Silent prayers. Out loud prayers.
- Prayers of asking. Prayers of confession.
- Prayers of praise. Prayers of thanksgiving.
- Prayers for us. Prayers for others.

And on and on. Prayer should be as diverse as our days are diverse. Prayers that always fit the occasion.

So we now come to the fourth characteristic of battle-ready prayer. And this is new for us.

IV. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS PERSERVERING

18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance.

“To that end” refers to prayer as the goal. In other words, we are to keep alert with all perseverance with the aim of unceasing, Spirit-empowered prayer. “Keep alert” means to watch for possible threats. Older usages of the word meant to “lie awake at night.” You are to be on watch for incoming threats to your soul. Paul tells Timothy: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16). “Keep a close watch” is the same idea as “keep alert.”

Particularly, we are to be on the lookout for temptations. Things that would lead us to sin. We should also be alert to things that would dull our sensitivity to godliness.

Paul writes in Phil 4:8: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

So we are to stay on alert and beware of things that are false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, not lovely, not commendable, not excellent.

Other threats come in the form of distraction from spiritual priorities. I once read a book about how to write fiction stories. And the author described the ideal writing environment as one that had no other books in it—not even a dictionary or a thesaurus. Because invariably, when you get to a difficult part in your writing, you’ll be tempted to read the dictionary. In the same way, it’s easy for us to lose our sense of priorities. We can become distracted. So we are to be on alert for the sake of prayer. If we *don’t* recognize the attack, we won’t pray.

But if we *do* recognize the attack, then we don't go it alone, but instead call out to our Father in heaven, who the Bible says "will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). We are to live on alert because the tempter is always ready to tempt us.

I've been listening to the autobiography of President George W. Bush called Decision Points. In one of the more fascinating parts of the book, he describes from his vantage point, the events of 9/11 and the aftermath. Because he viewed 9/11 as an act of war, he ordered the military readiness level to DefCon Three, a state of alert that he says "heightened security precautions and prepared [the military] to respond immediately to further orders."

We Christians are to live at the highest state of alert because we are always at war. And it's for this reason that keeping alert and praying often go together in the NT: In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before Jesus was arrested, he pleaded with the disciples, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt 26:41; Mk 14:38). As we wait for Jesus' return, he tells us, "[S]tay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36). Colossians 4:2: Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. So we need to cultivate a prepared state of alert so that we're ready to pray at all times.

We often stop praying in two situations: (1) when we are weary in the battle of temptation; or (2) when are at ease when we don't believe there are any threats. But Paul says we are to keep on alert and praying "with all perseverance." The word has the idea of a relentless pursuit. This is the only time in the NT that this noun is used, but the verb is used many times in relation to prayer.

Romans 12:12: Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

Acts 1:14: [the disciples] with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer. . .

Acts 2:42: [the early church] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 6:4: [the apostles said] we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

This is a call to endure in your prayer life. "Praying at all times" or unceasing prayer (that we discussed before) has the idea of being constant in your prayers throughout the day. But persevering in your prayers has the idea of enduring hardships. Not stopping on account of difficulty or seemingly unanswered prayer. So again, we know that temptations easily come our way, so we must endure in prayer—persevere in prayer. We pray despite hardships.

The final trait of battle-ready prayer is intercessory prayer.

V. BATTLE-READY PRAYER IS INTERCESSORY

v. 18c-20: 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

We not only pray for ourselves, but for each other. We aren't merely in private spiritual battles, but we are in this together. I can't put on your breastplate of righteousness. And you can't put on my shield of faith. But what we can do for each other is to pray for each other. Spiritual warfare is fought by the whole church, linked by prayer for each other. And our prayers should be for "all" the saints. Not only those who are in crisis, but also for those who aren't. Not only for those in our church, but also those in other churches. Not only those whom we know, but also those whom we don't know.

Paul's words in v. 19-20 are similar to what he wrote (at about the same time) to the church in Colossae:

Colossians 4:2-4: Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Verses 19-20 are specific prayer requests of Paul. He says at the end of v. 18 "pray for all the saints" and then in v. 19, specifically, "also [pray] for me. . ." and here's the request.

"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."

Two times he asks them to pray for boldness. Boldness doesn't mean brashness. It's plain that boldness doesn't mean brashness because in 3:12 Paul writes that Christians go to God in prayer with "boldness and access with confidence." He doesn't mean we pray to God with brashness. Boldness means to speak freely. To speak freely as you would with a close friend—to speak openly, disclosing the truth. The Greek word combines the idea of speaking with courage and clarity. Courage and clarity: that's how you pray for a preacher!

Courage so that he doesn't shrink back from the truth in the face of opposition! He calls himself "an ambassador in chains." He spoke the truth about the gospel to Jews and they had him arrested and imprisoned. Ambassadors were people who carried the prestige and honor of the empire as they brought an official message from the emperor. High ranking men, like ambassadors, often wore around their necks gold chains to signify their riches, power, and importance. To imprison an ambassador would be to insult both the ambassador and the one who sent him. Yet Paul, an ambassador for the King of kings was imprisoned for four years and wore not the chains of wealth but the chains of a criminal.

He was courageous, but he knew his feeble heart and asked for prayer that he would continue to be bold.

And boldness also has the idea of **clarity**. Paul wants to be clear. Nothing fuzzy. Nothing ambiguous. Never straddling both sides of an issue to win friends. Always being clear in the truth. This is a day when we need courage and clear preachers. And what's good for Paul and preachers is good for all Christians in the face of opposition. We need courageous and clear Christians.

What kills courageousness for many Christians is a desire to be liked by the world. People pleasing and the desire to be esteemed and to be thought well of and not to be considered by the world to be backward or bigoted has muzzled the church. People pleasing is serious because it plays right into Satan's hands who blinds the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ. The desire to be esteemed by the world keeps the light of the truth from shining on the people who live in darkness.

One of the most haunting statements uttered by Jesus for our generation is:

John 5:44: How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

Receiving "glory from one another" is called people-pleasing. And Jesus asks, "How can you believe" when you're a people-pleaser? And Christians need to be clear about what they believe. Clarity comes through thinking. In order to be clear, you have to have thought about the issue at hand. What could God do through you, if you spoke the truth of God with courage and clarity?

It's easy to see why he would ask for prayers for boldness after describing spiritual armor. We can become intimidated when faced with spiritual opposition. So he asks for boldness. And this is how we should pray for each other as we battle alongside each other.

CONCLUSION

Recap: So battle-ready prayer is:

- Unceasing
- Spirit-empowered
- Diverse
- Persevering
- Intercessory

Because we are in the spiritual battle, we must always be in communication with our Commander-in-Chief. Christians don't fight prayerless battles. Rather, as one pastor has said, "The Christian soldier fights on his knees" (Hughes).