

Prayer: The Air That Christian Soldiers Breathe Ephesians 6:10-20

Mark Vroegop

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 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. 14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 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, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph 6:10-20 ESV)

Can you name the pieces of the armor of God? Let's try:

- Belt of truth
- Breastplate of righteousness
- Shoes of the gospel of peace
- Shield of faith
- Helmet of salvation
- Sword of the Spirit

However, what is amazing to me is how often we neglect the importance of verse 18 to the armor of God list. Part of the problem is the fact that the verse is difficult to translate, and therefore you have the following differences in each translation:

NIV: "which is the word of God. 18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."

NASB: "which is the word of God. 18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit..."

RSV: which is the word of God. 18 Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication."

NKJV: "which is the word of God; 18 praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit,"

ESV: "which is the word of God, 18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication."

The issue is more than just a matter of punctuation; it is a bigger question. Namely, "How is prayer related to the armor of God?" Does Paul pick up a new subject in verse 18 (thus a period)? Does he continue the thought with a new thought (thus a semi colon)? Or is verse 18 directly connected to verse 17 (thus a comma)? Do you see why studying grammar is so important?

Now from my title you can deduce my answer. I think that the ESV brings out the meaning the best. Prayer is not another weapon; it is the how we are to use the armor of God. Think of it as the air the Christian soldiers breathe. Prayer is to be the atmosphere in which we wage the warfare.

This becomes a very important subject for us to consider, especially at the start of a new year for two reasons: First, 2009 could be filled with some great opportunities for ministry and growth. And if that is the case, then you are going to need to learn how to make prayer like oxygen for your soul. Second, 2009 could be filled with great difficulties and trials. You will need to know the way in which God wants you to fight.

Prayer is the air that Christian soldiers breathe. It is how we soar and how we fight. It is a lifestyle saturated by Spirit-controlled, persevering prayer. As we make the turn into 2009 and launch into prayer week, I want to call you to a renewed commitment to all-encompassing prayer. I want you to use this message and the prayer week events listed in the bulletin as an opportunity to increase the vitality of your prayer life.

Paul's Final Word: Be Strong in Lord, not yourself

The broader context of verse 18 is extremely important so we need to briefly look at it to get the sense of what Paul is driving at. After addressing important doctrinal truths in chapters 1-3, and addressing how believers are to walk in chapter 4, Paul gets very practical in chapter 5. Being filled by the Spirit (5:18) results in direct application to wives (5:22), husbands (5:25), children (6:1), fathers (6:4), bondservants (6:5), and to masters (6:9).

Then we come to 6:10. It is designed to be a literary capstone or a conclusion that Paul is drawing. His conclusion sounds like this: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might." Notice the focal point because it is very important: The filling by the Spirit of wives, husbands, children, fathers, bondservants, and masters is designed to make all of them more dependent on God's strength and power. This is important for two reasons.

1. Spiritual maturity is marked by more dependence not less

This is opposite of how we naturally think of maturity. Typically maturity means more independence, not less. In High School, we used to throw around statements like this: “Who picked out that shirt for you? Your mom?” It is cutting because growing older is supposed to mean more decisions on your own.

Now, when it comes to your walk with Christ, it is exactly the opposite. As you grow up you become more dependent not less. You have often heard me quote Dallas Willard by saying, “It is the godly who consume the most grace. Grace to them is like breath.” So the more you know about God and His Word, the more dependent you become.

How does this connect to prayer? There is no clearer statement of your understanding of your dependency on God than prayer. You’ve heard me say this before, but it is worth repeating for a lifetime: “Prayerlessness is my declaration of independence from God.”

2. Spiritual battles are won by trust and reliance not will-power and ingenuity

This is even more important when you consider the kind of battle that we are in. Paul is pointing us to God and to the armor of God because he wants us to stand against the schemes of the devil. Verse 12 is especially important in that it tells us that we do not see the battle as clearly as we think we do. Our real battle is more than the people, circumstances, and difficulties that we face. There are evil rulers and authorities in the unseen world. There are mighty powers of darkness and wicked spirits in heavenly realms¹.

Further, our weaponry is spiritual. It is the belt of **truth**, the breastplate of **righteousness**, shoes of the **gospel of peace**, the shield of **faith**, the sword of the **Spirit**. It is not the belt of knowledge, the breastplate of achievement, shoes of likability, shield of creativity, the sword of will power.

The beauty of the armor of God and its connection to prayer is the utter dependency that both create. Independency is the death of prayer and the defeat of spiritual warfare.

Daniel Henderson, his book [Fresh Encounters](#), captured this with a comparison between a speed boat and a sail boat:

In my high school years I lived on a lake. During those years I enjoyed many days of boating and skiing. I loved to take our old outboard and speed across the lake with the wind in my face, blowing my hair.

Perhaps that is why one day my heart was gripped as I flew from California to Pennsylvania to speak at a pastor’s conference. I will never forget being in that crowded airplane looking out the window with tears streaming down my face. I had just finished

¹ See the New Living Translation

reading a book on leadership and was reflecting honestly about my journey in ministry. I confessed:

Lord, for so many years I've wanted to be a powerboat for you. As a pastor, I've kept my hand on the throttle of a man-made machine, enjoying the exhilaration of impressive speed. I've sliced through the choppy waters of church life impressing people with my dynamic ability to navigate and steer.

I continued with a broken heart: "Please give me the grace to learn to be a simply sailboat. Let this be the true attitude of my heart. Let me set my sails everyday through prayer and the Word and wait for the wind of Your Spirit to blow."

I learned that a powerboat is impressive, but its mark of distinction is human creativity and effort. A simple sailboat is average and only able to move by an unseen supernatural force. A powerboat advances on a predictable journey at the hands of a driver, propelled by man-made fuel. A sailboat is at the mercy of an unpredictable force and magnifies the beauty and energy of the wind."²

Christian soldiers understand the beauty and power of strength in the Lord not in themselves.

A Lifestyle Saturated by Spirit-controlled, Persevering Prayer

What exactly does Paul mean when he says, "...praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication?" How does a Christian soldier breathe prayer? Essentially he means that we embrace a life that is saturated by Spirit-controlled, persevering prayer.

1. A Lifestyle

Notice how many times Paul uses the word "all" in verse 18. He uses it four times, and I think that his point is rather obvious: Paul wants prayer to be something that saturates our lives. Or in this immediate context, prayer is to saturate the battlefield of Christian warfare.

You will notice two words listed for prayer in verse 18 (prayer and supplication). The distinction between the words is simply one between general praying and specific praying. Or you could think of it as a distinction between conversation and requests. Paul is calling for both, and he is calling for a lot of them.

Paul point here is that there is a lifestyle of prayerful dependence. You see this clearly in life of Jesus as he often slips away to pray (Matt 26:36). You see this in the early church as they continually give themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42). And you see it as Paul urges various churches to give themselves to prayer (Rom. 12:12). We see Paul telling us not to worry, but to take it out in prayer (Phil 4:6).

6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which

² Daniel Henderson. Fresh Encounters. Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2004. p. 48

surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:6-7)

Now there is a very important thought for some of us! Rather than worrying or getting anxious, we ought to pray. Is that your first response? Or is your first response to talk to somebody? Or buy a book? Or check the Internet? Or attend a seminar? God wants us tapping into Him. That is why you have the armor. Use it!

Prayer is the way in which we connect to our ultimate source of power and strength. It is the one piece that makes everything else work. Two years ago I taught my boys how to use our small snow blower. I showed them how to turn it on, push the primer eight times, and pull out the choke. But the greatest feature of the snow blower is if you plug in automatic start cord and push a little red button, it starts on its own. It is empowered to run. Now imagine I come home and I see my kids pushing the snow blower up and down the driveway and it isn't running. Big piles of snow are mounding on the front, and they are struggling to push it. Imagine them saying, "Check it out, Dad! We're using the snow blower!" You might think that to be ridiculous, but I wonder how many full armed Christians God sees just like that. God wants prayer to be a lifestyle commitment.

2. Spirit-controlled

Our connectedness to God is not only possible because of Christ; the Spirit of God also facilitates it. We are told to pray in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. What does this mean?

In one sense it surely means that the Spirit helps our praying by praying for us, conforming our prayer to the will of God. We see this in Romans:

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 with groanings too deep for words. 27 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 (Rom 8:26-27).

But it also means something that is vital to our present faith and even keeping ourselves in close communion with God:

20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit;
21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life (Jude 20-21).

Praying in the Spirit means that “the Holy Spirit directs the prayer, creates the prayer within us, and empowers us to offer it and to pray it... He does this in us, He gives the petition, He orders our minds, He gives the prayer, He directs it, {and} He empowers it.”³

Does your prayer life look or sound like that? Could you describe your prayer life as powerful, alive with the presence of the Spirit, sensing His leading, and participating in His work? If your answer is “No” (which I fear is the case for many of us), where do you start? Here a few suggestions:

- Confess any level of quenching the Spirit in your life (sins, neglect, wrong attitudes, etc.) (1 Thess 5:19)
- Ask for a fresh filling of the Spirit (Eph 5:18)
- Pray the Bible (Heb 4:12)
- Pray with others (Matt 18:19-20)

For some of you that is why this week is so important! You must deal a death blow to powerless, inconsistent, and impotent praying. How? By praying. For you prayer week is not just an event, it is a strategy for resuscitating your soul.

3. Persevering

Have you notice all the exercise equipment for sale? Have you noticed all the diet books that are released on January 1? Here is a good word for those who are prone to make New Year's resolutions or maybe we'd better call them January resolutions. The battle that Paul has in mind is a long one. So he calls us to keep alert with all perseverance.

The words “keep alert” mean to not be asleep. It means that person is awake because he is looking for something or perhaps on guard. Jesus used it in the Gospels when he said, “Watch and pray” (see Mark 13:33 and Luke 21:36). The word “perseverance” means to continue in something and give care to it without giving up. Put these two together and you get the sense that Paul wanted their praying to be something that lasted.

Martin Lloyd-Jones put it this way: “Keep on at it; always, at every time, on every occasion, at all seasons...not now and again, not simply when we are in trouble, not only when things are going wrong. Always! Always watching! Don't fall asleep, keep awake, be attentive, be vigilant, never be listless, rouse yourself, don't be slack. If you are neglecting prayer take yourself to task...keep on at it, do not do it by fits and starts, do not have spasms of praying...never quit, never cease praying.”⁴

4. For Ourselves and Others

³ Martin Lloyd-Jones. The Christian Solider – Ephesians 6:10-20. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1977. p. 347.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, p. 349.

Paul calls us to pray with perseverance for all the saints. Paul switches from “we” in verse 12 to “you” in verse 14 and now back to “we”. It is almost as though he wants to remind us that individually armed soldiers are part of a vast army, bigger than themselves.

Paul wants us to pray for all the saints. We are to pray that we would all use the spiritual armor that God has given us and that we would stand up under the attack of the enemy. We are called here to not only be concerned about our own battle, but also the battle of our fellow brothers and sisters.

A God-honoring Christian soldier is not just concerned for himself. He or she is fully aware that others are battling too and so he prays for God’s empowerment in their life.

Is that what your life looks like? Or is your prayer life really a mirror of your concerns, needs, and problems? Think of what could happen if we started really praying for God’s empowerment for the battle. Think what could happen if we regularly lifted each other up and asked God to help our fellow brothers and sisters to be strong in the Lord and the power of his might. What could College Park be like in 2009 if we prayed on the armor of God for each other, not just ourselves?

Paul’s aim is to call us to a lifestyle of Spirit-controlled, persevering prayer for ourselves and others. My invitation today is three fold:

1. **I invite you to turn from independent living.** For some of you the first step needs to be turning from self and truly placing your trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Hell is going to be filled with independent people. Perhaps today is the day that God is calling you to open your heart to him.
2. **I invite you to repent of prayerlessness.** I invite you to come and confess before God and this people that too often your life is characterized by self-sufficiency and not God sufficiency. I invite you to say, “On this first day of 2009, I renew my commitment to be strong IN YOU!”
3. **I invite you to make prayer a priority this week.** Give up a meal. Gather your family together for a few special times of prayer. Organize your prayer life. Attend a few of our prayer gatherings. Come for prayer all day on Tuesday.

College Park let’s be strong in the Lord in 2009 by being strong in prayer. Let’s commit ourselves cultivating a lifestyle saturated by Spirit-controlled, persevering prayer.

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