

Main Idea: Our prayers ought to be gospel-centered. Specifically, according to Ephesians 6:18-20, gospel-centered praying involves praying in light of two critical realities.

I. Pray in light of the provision of Christ (18).

- A. We have His armor (10-17).
- B. We have His Spirit (18).
  - 1. Praying in the Spirit means to pray in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.
  - 2. Praying in the Spirit means to pray in agreement with the Word He has given.
  - 3. Praying in the Spirit is the same thing as praying in the name of Christ.

II. Pray in light of the purposes of Christ (19-20).

- A. Paul asked for words.
  - 1. I was saved by the work of another.
  - 2. I belong to another.
  - 3. I represent another.
  - 4. I will give account to another.
- B. Paul asked for courage.

Key: “Until you know that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for.”  
(John Piper)
- C. Paul asked for help in making the most of God-sent, gospel-opportunities.
  - 1. Our tendency is to want to avoid or escape suffering.
  - 2. Our need is to view our suffering as a platform for the gospel.

Make It Personal: As you take inventory...

- 1. Take an honest look at what you have.
- 2. Take an honest look at what you are doing with what you have.
- 3. Take an honest look at what God wants to change today, by His grace.

Through the summer months we invited the apostle Paul to tutor us in the area of prayer and examined one by one the prayers he prayed as recorded in his epistles. And so we pondered his prayers for the churches at Thessalonica, Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colosse, as well as his prayers for two individuals, Philemon and Timothy. I announced that last week’s message, our eleventh, would be our final in the series, for we had exhausted the recorded prayers of Paul.

But I had second thoughts this week when I considered there remained a related facet to the topic that deserved further attention. Paul’s letters show us what he was praying *for others*, as we’ve seen, but they also show us something else, namely, what Paul asked others to pray *for him*. There are at least five passages in which Paul requests prayer for himself (Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:2-4; 1 Thes. 5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1-5), and each shares this common thread. When Paul requested prayer for himself, what he asked for was *gospel-centered praying*.

Quite frankly, if we have been saved by the gospel of Jesus Christ, then our prayers, both for others and for ourselves, ought to be gospel-centered. But are they? Specifically, do we have the gospel in mind when we’re bringing our requests to God, about our kids’ frustrations, our tough job situation, and our migraine headaches?

I remember several years ago the challenge of seeing one of my girls try out for a ball team, make the team but then sit the bench. For that matter, I remember experiencing the same thing myself in my junior high days. What kind of praying does God want to hear from us when that happens? “Lord, open the coach’s eyes! My child’s hurting and needs a chance to play!” Now I understand that parents hurt when their kids hurt, but when we’re praying with the gospel in mind, will we not be talking to God about something much more significant than our bruised egos and kid’s playing time? Will we not realize that there are unsaved coaches and players and family members watching us closely to see if this “Jesus” we say we believe in makes us respond any differently than they would to life’s challenges?

I hope that by now you’re thinking, “What exactly is gospel-centered praying, and how can I learn to make it more of a reality in my life?” To answer that, I’d like to devote one final message to our prayer series and take a look at one of Paul’s prayer-request-texts just mentioned. It’s the request that Paul asked the church at Ephesus to bring to God in his behalf.

He was in chains when he made the request, incarcerated for a crime he hadn’t committed, due to caustic attacks of

jealous opponents and injustice in the legal system. Yet as we'll see, Paul doesn't request that the church assemble a prayer chain to call on God for justice in his trial, nor for his release from prison, as valid as both petitions would have been. Instead, he calls for gospel-centered praying.

Let me give you the big idea, and then we'll develop it. In Ephesians 6:18-20 we discover that gospel-centered praying involves praying in light of two critical realities.

### I. Pray in light of the provision of Christ (18).

Our provision in Christ is what the first half of the letter is all about. God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing (1:3). When we were dead in our sins He made us alive with Christ by His grace (2:4). We have been saved by His grace through faith, and this not from ourselves, it is the gift of God (2:8-9).

If you do not know Christ as your Savior, then you're reading someone else's mail right now. But if God has saved you, then be assured He has given you an amazing provision in His Son that He intends to affect every aspect of your life, as Paul explains in the second half of his letter.

He declares in 4:1, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." In other words, live in light of the provision of Christ. And Paul gets quite specific. Let it affect your view of the world (4:17). Let it affect your view of work and money (4:28). Let it affect the way you talk to and about people (4:29-32). Let it affect your view of sex (5:3-5), your view of wine (5:18), your view of music (5:19), your view of your marriage role (5:22-33), your view of your parents (6:1-3), your view of your children (6:4), your view of your job (6:5-9), even your view of *prayer*.

Notice what Paul says in verse 18, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Please note that the verse begins with the connective word "and" which takes our attention back to the preceding verses in the paragraph. He's been talking there about the wonderful provision God has given His people in the person of Jesus Christ, and he calls it *armor*. Verses 10-11—"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."

**A. We have His armor (10-17).** Perhaps as Paul penned those words, he was chained to a Roman soldier and thought, "There's a fitting picture of what we have in Christ. A soldier needs a belt and we have one, the belt of truth. He needs protection for his heart, and we have that too, the breastplate of righteousness. And good boots for sure footing, which we have as well in the gospel of peace. And a shield to knock down enemy arrows—we have the shield of faith. And a helmet to protect our heads—we have the helmet of salvation. And a sword for offensive purposes—we have the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

To say that we have armor is simply to say that in Christ we have complete protection. Christ is the truth. Christ is our righteousness. Christ is our peace. Faith in Christ is the shield that protects us from the flaming arrows of the evil one. Christ is the salvation that protects our heads. Christ's word is our sword. Our Savior has not left us deficient. We have His armor. And to put on this armor means that we daily live, not in our own strength, but with the recognition of what we have in Christ.

But why do we need His armor anyway? The reason, of course, is because we are at war, as Paul explains in verses 12-13, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God..."

Beloved, we are at war. There is an enemy called the devil who hates Christ and hates us because we belong to Christ, and he will do whatever he can to discredit Christ in our lives. He cannot destroy us, for in Christ we are secure, yet still the evil one mobilizes his wicked forces to discourage us, distract us, and derail us from our gospel mission.

One of the reasons we don't pray as we ought is because we forget that we're at war. I've been greatly challenged by a perspective on prayer that John Piper shares in his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*. Piper writes: "Life is war. That's not all it is. But it is always that. Our weakness in prayer is owing largely to our neglect of this truth. Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den. God has given us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie so that we can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world. Prayer gives *us* the significance of front-line forces, and gives *God* the glory of a limitless Provider. The one who gives the power gets the glory."<sup>[1]</sup>

I'll return to Piper in a moment, but fix your thoughts on this image. *God has given us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie*, not as a *domestic intercom*. Yet what causes us to lose our perspective on prayer? When does prayer

stop being a wartime walkie-talkie and start becoming a domestic intercom? The simple answer is that it happens when we forget we're at war.

If your prayer life isn't marked by gospel-centered fervency, it's probably because you've lost sight of the fact that we are at war against an enemy that's too strong for us to handle on our own. So get your perspective in order. Affirm the reality that we are at war, and likewise affirm the wonderful, hope-giving reality that in Christ we have all we need to stand in this warfare. We have His *armor*.

**B. We have His Spirit (18).** Verse 18 begins, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."

That raises a couple of important questions. First of all, is Paul saying that prayer is another piece of armor? I don't think so. It's more than that. Yes, prayer works in connection with the armor, but it's not something that we add to the armor. In a sense, it must accompany every piece of armor.

In the original text the word "pray" is a participle (lit. "praying"). It modifies the verb "stand" back in verse 14. We stand by putting on our armor, yes, but we also stand *by praying*.

In his book *The Fight*, John White writes, "Hell's legions are terrified of prayer. Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees." Prayer is how we claim what we have in Christ. Prayer is how we stand. It's ironic, yet true. We stand against the evil one by falling on our faces before God.

Another question. What does it mean to "pray in the Spirit"? Some see this as suggesting a sort of mystical, mind-neutralized experience, that if you're going to pray "in the Spirit" you need to become passive, stop thinking, and give way to whatever feeling may come over you. There's no biblical basis for such a notion. In my estimation, when biblically understood, praying in the Spirit means three things.

1. *Praying in the Spirit means to pray in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.* Paul is talking about a person here, the person the Bible calls God the Holy Spirit, and this isn't the first time he's mentioned this person in his letter. Back in 1:13 he says that when we heard the gospel of our salvation and believed in Christ, we were marked in Christ with a seal, "the promised Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Triune Godhead, the person the Son of God promised to send to indwell His followers after His resurrection and return to heaven. Paul says in 1:14 that the Holy Spirit is a "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance." In 1:18 Paul indicates that the Spirit is the One who enables us to know God better. In 2:22 we learn that the Spirit lives in us who are in Christ. In 3:5 Paul says that the Spirit has revealed the mystery of the gospel to the apostles and prophets, the mystery that God is now forming one body for His dwelling comprised of Jews and Gentiles alike who know Christ. According to 3:16 the Holy Spirit is the One who uses His power to clean us up on the inside so Christ can be at home there. He's also the One who produces unity in the church (4:3) and who can be grieved by our sin (4:30). It's our responsibility, says 5:18, to reject all other controlling substances, like wine, and let the Holy Spirit fill and control us, and that when He is controlling us His presence will manifest itself by our Christ-centered singing, thanksgiving, and submissive relationships with each other (5:19-21).

When Paul says we are to "pray in the Spirit," he is telling us to pray in cooperation with God the Holy Spirit, yielding our will to His and valuing what He thinks rather than depending on our own wisdom. We might put it this way...

2. *Praying in the Spirit means to pray in agreement with the Word He has given.* Remember, the Holy Spirit is the One who inspired and gave to us the inerrant book we call the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16). He worked through more than fifty human authors over a fifteen hundred year period of time to produce this book. If you want to know the mind of the Spirit, don't shift it into neutral. Engage it and fill it with the truth of the Scriptures. Beloved, praying in the Spirit does not mean speaking in tongues, as some suggest. It means to pray in agreement with the written revelation He has already given.

When a person who lacks biblical grounds yet says they're going to divorce their spouse, justifying it by saying they have prayed about it, you can be sure that person is not "praying in the Spirit," for the Holy Spirit will never lead a person to violate the Word He has given to us.

When a Christian young person announces they have prayed about it and are going to marry someone who's not a Christian, you can be sure they have not prayed "in the Spirit," for they are going against the very revelation the Spirit Himself put in His Word (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14). Praying in the Spirit means to pray in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, as well as in agreement with the Word He has given.

3. *Praying in the Spirit is the same thing as praying in the name of Christ.* "When He comes," said Jesus speaking of the Holy Spirit, "He will bring glory to me (John 16:13-14)." Praying in the Spirit is simply making my prayers consistent with the mind and will of the Holy Spirit. And since it's the mind and will of the Holy Spirit to bring glory to Christ, what we pray should always be consistent with who Christ is and what His will is. To pray in

the Spirit, then, is to pray for those things which will please Christ, and not merely ourselves. It also involves praying in dependence upon the power of the Spirit, and not our own, for it's the Spirit alone who can enable us to please Christ. And since the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, He has helped God's people to do those things that are Christ-like and Christ-honoring. That includes praying.<sup>[2]</sup>

So gospel-centered praying means, first of all, that we pray in light of the provision of Christ. We have His armor, and we have His Spirit, both of which make gospel-centered praying possible. Now a second reality...

## II. Pray in light of the purposes of Christ (19-20).

What does that mean? Paul shows us in his prayer requests in verses 19-20, "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should."

What would you ask for if you were locked away in prison? Paul asked for three things.

**A. Paul asked for words.** "Pray for me, that whenever I open my mouth, *words may be given me.*" Paul, the man that wrote half the New Testament books, said he needed *words*! If anybody, humanly speaking, could "wing it," Paul could have, but he refused to do so. The stakes were too high, and he knew it. "Whenever I open my mouth," he confesses, I need the right words, when I'm talking with the soldiers chained to me, and the fellow prisoners I meet, and when I stand before Caesar my judge on my day in court, pray that God will give me words!

What kind of words did Paul want to come out of his mouth? He says, "Pray for me that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me *so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.*" Those are the words Paul wanted to speak, words that told the story of the gospel. He calls it a "mystery," not because the gospel is mysterious but because it's yet unknown to those who haven't heard it. In his parallel request written to the Colossian church he calls it "the mystery of Christ, for which I'm in chains" (Col 4:3).

Why was Paul so burdened to make that gospel message known? In verse 20 he tells us, "for which I am an *ambassador in chains.*" An ambassador, of course, is a person who represents the leader of a country in his dealings with those living in another country. Paul saw himself as an ambassador. By using that term he was acknowledging the following facts, facts that are true of us if we know Christ.

1. *I was saved by the work of another.* That's the gospel message. Christ died for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day (1 Cor. 15:3). That's the good news. I was heading for eternal hell, but God pardoned me. He accepted His Son's payment, gave me His Son's righteousness, and adopted me into His family. I did nothing to deserve or earn this. It was a gift received by simple faith. I was saved by the work of another.

2. *I belong to another.* He is the *Lord* Jesus Christ, my master and owner. "You are not your own," says Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, "you were bought at a price."

3. *I represent another.* I am the ambassador of the One who saved me and to whom I now belong. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

But not only was I saved by the work of another, belong to another, and represent another...

4. *I will give account to another.* The day is coming, my friend, as Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

No wonder he asked for words! We're going to be judged for the words we speak, and for the words we *failed* to speak, too.

Do you remember what God told the prophet Ezekiel? Listen to this sobering charge in Ezekiel 3:17-18, "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood."

Think about your unsaved family members, your neighbors, the people with whom you work and go to school. Think even about your worst enemy. If they die without Christ, they will perish forever. Have you warned them? Have you presented Christ to them with your gospel-saturated life and words? Is it hard to be a faithful witness for our Savior? Yes! That's why even the apostle Paul himself prayed for words. What's more...

**B. Paul asked for courage.** "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will *fearlessly* make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it *fearlessly*, as I should." The fact that Paul repeated the word *fearlessly* twice would indicate that one of our greatest foes as a gospel witness is *fear*. And the fact that he requested specific prayer for the courage to speak would indicate

that through prayer we can overcome our fear.

I must say it again. I'm convinced that one of the main reasons we fail to pray as we ought is because we really don't believe we are at war. Listen to John Piper again:

"Most people show by their priorities and their casual approach to spiritual things that they believe we are at peacetime not wartime.

"In wartime the newspapers carry headlines about how the troops are doing. In wartime families talk about the sons and daughters on the front lines and write to them and pray for them with heart-wrenching concern for their safety. In wartime we are on the alert. We are armed. We are vigilant. In wartime we spend money differently—there is austerity, not for its own sake, but because there are more strategic ways to spend money than on new tires at home. The war effort touches everybody. We all cut back. The luxury liner becomes a troop carrier.

"Very few people think that we are in a war that is greater than World War II, or any imaginable nuclear war. Few reckon that Satan is a much worse enemy than any earthly foe, or realize that the conflict is not restricted to any one global theater, but is in every town and city in the world. Who considers that the casualties of this war do not merely lose an arm or an eye or an earthly life, but lose everything, even their own soul and enter a hell of everlasting torment?" [3]

If we really believe we're at war, we'll be alert and pray. I can't say it any more clearly than Piper. Let these words sink in:

"*Until you know that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for* [my italics]. Prayer is for the accomplishing of a wartime mission. It is as though the field commander (Jesus) called in the troops, gave them a crucial mission (go and bear fruit), handed each of them a personal transmitter coded to the frequency of the General's headquarters, and said, 'Comrades, the general has a mission for you. He aims to see it accomplished. And to that end he has authorized me to give each of you personal access to him through these transmitters. If you stay true to his mission and seek his victory first, he will always be as close as your transmitter, to give tactical advice and to send air cover when you need it.'

"But what have millions of Christians done? We have stopped believing that we are in a war. No urgency, no watching, no vigilance. No strategic planning. Just easy peace and prosperity. And what did we do with the walkie talkie? We tried to rig it up as an intercom in our houses and cabins and boats and cars—not to call in fire power for conflict with a mortal enemy, but to ask for more comforts in the den." [4]

I don't doubt that you pray. Most people I talk to say they pray, at least to some degree. My question is, "For what?" For what are you asking God, the "stuff" of this world, or that which will matter for eternity? Paul asked God for words and for courage. We could sum it up by saying that...

**C. Paul asked for help in making the most of God-sent, gospel-opportunities.** I chose those words carefully. Paul saw his prison stay as being *God-sent*, for he believed as he elsewhere taught, that "God works all things together for good" (Rom. 8:28). Had he been falsely accused? Yes. But he knew that ultimately he would not be chained to a Roman guard had not God purposed it.

Yet in addition to seeing this as God-sent, Paul also saw it as *gospel-opportunity*. Because he was in prison Paul knew that God had opened up opportunities for the gospel to touch many lives that previously were untouched. He actually put it this way in Philippians 1:12-14, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."

Let's be honest...

1. *Our tendency is to want to avoid or escape suffering.* Paul was no different. He struggled with the same tendency to want the easy road. But he asked for prayer. Why? Because he knew that...

2. *Our need is to view our suffering as a platform for the gospel.*

All of us who know Christ are His ambassadors. We're supposed to be speaking in His behalf in this world. And He's given all of us a tailor-made platform from which to speak. He gave you job aptitudes, so your job can be your platform. He gave you a house which is a platform from which to reach your neighborhood. Has He given you a love for sports, or music, or gardening? Then use it as a platform.

Yet sometimes He grants us a special platform so the onlooking world can see and hear us more clearly. The platform is *suffering*.

About eight years ago God saved Terry Salyers, and since then our brother has been praying for others he cares about to come to know Christ. Last month God gave our brother a platform, didn't He? It came in the form of triple-bypass heart surgery.

Cancer. A blown business venture. A pink slip. An unjust prison sentence. They're all potential platforms. How should we pray when such enters into the lives of our brothers and sisters? We tend to pray, "Lord, heal their body. Don't let their business go bankrupt. Get them out of prison." There's nothing wrong with asking for those things, for our Heavenly Father loves to give good things to His children. But I wonder if, at times, we're not asking Him to take away prematurely the very platform He has sent into our lives, so that we might know Him better and help others come to know Him.

MacArthur offers this challenge, "We also need to get past physical needs. We pray for someone's rheumatism, heart problems, broken leg, and surgery. We need to pray for those things, but they are near the bottom of my prayer list. I'm more concerned about the spiritual battle. Are the believers winning the battle? The physical is immaterial by comparison. What gets my heart anxious is someone who is not seeing victory in their life and seeing God do His mighty work. I am praying for the advancement of the kingdom of God in the lives of His people. I am praying for souls to be won to Jesus Christ...I pray for people's physical needs, but more than that I pray that God will give them victory in the battle against the enemy. I don't really care what happens to my physical body as long as I gain victory for the glory of God."<sup>[5]</sup>

Paul asked people to pray for him because he knew he needed prayer. But he requested gospel-centered prayers, prayers in light of the provision of Christ and in light of the purposes of Christ. Can you imagine what would happen to our church if we started praying fervently for each other the following prayer?

"Heavenly Father, please open up doors for us to talk to people at school, at work, in our community about Jesus. And when you do open the doors, give us the courage to walk out on that platform, and stay on it until You're done using it. Don't let us be intimidated and afraid of people's reaction. Fill us with words and boldness so we can initiate conversations and spread the good news about Your Son."

### Make It Personal: As you take inventory...take an honest look at three things.

1. *Take an honest look at what you have.* Do you have Christ as your Savior? If you do, then you have a home in heaven reserved for you, and until then you have His armor and His Spirit to protect and sustain you.

But look further. What else has the Sovereign Christ, the One who said "all authority is given to me in heaven and earth," placed in your life? For Paul it was chains, an unjust prison experience. For you it may well be a health problem, or a vengeful neighbor, or a hard-to-love family member, or a hard to please coach. That's what you *have*, by God's design, and be assured it is by His sovereign design. He could have prevented it, but for gospel-purposes He has allowed it and intends to use it.

And what else do you have? Maybe for you it's not chains, or a tough boss, or a health challenge. In fact, maybe this season of life is really good for you and full of abundance. Then acknowledge it, thank God for it, and consider *why* it's so. Why has God blessed you with abundance? Look at what you have. Then...

2. *Take an honest look at what you are doing with what you have.* Perhaps you're wasting the abundance He's given you on self-centered, trivial pursuits. There are ministries that could benefit from your time and resources, but you're squandering them on toys and pursuits that will rust, spoil, and fade.

Perhaps you're wasting the suffering He's given you, wishing, even *praying* it would go away. He's given you a platform for gospel purposes, but you, in effect, are wanting to rip those two-by-fours down and get off the platform.

You say, "But I'm too weak! I don't have the strength to stay on the platform." Be encouraged, for neither did Paul! He was weak, too, and that's why he asked for prayer, for gospel-centered prayer. Why don't you do the same? It's our privilege as a church to pray for you. Why not ask?

3. *Take an honest look at what God wants to change today, by His grace.* There are changes God desires to make in all our lives. Will you submit to His purposes for you?

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 41.

[2] Here are some related texts in which Paul elaborates: Romans 8:15-16; Romans 8:26-27; Galatians 4:6.

[3] John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 44.

[4] John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 46.

[5] J. MacArthur, *The Believer's Armor*, p. 198-9.