

How to Be Spiritually Strong Series

The Role of Prayer (Eph. 6:18)

By
Andy Davis

At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

The Role of Prayer

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Perspective on Prayer

1. All of us probably turn to God in prayer at one time or another. Usually, we go through a heartfelt season of prayer when we are facing something beyond us that is difficult. While this can be a good and healthy practice, there is a large danger connected to it as well.
2. I remember how painful it was when my eyes were opened and I took an honest look at my prayer life. When I began to understand from Scripture, what God wanted me to pray about and for, and compared what was important to God regarding prayer to what I was actually praying, I discovered an unpleasant reality. I found my prayer life did not look like it should.
3. While not experiencing many answered prayers, I never connected God's lack of responsiveness to my prayers to how and what I was praying for. There were even times when I questioned the value of prayer because I felt like I was talking to myself when I was praying. My prayers rarely, if ever, seemed to make a difference in the situations I faced.
4. I realized I was praying out of both sides of my mouth. On one hand, I earnestly wanted God's blessing and desired His help for my life and the challenges I faced. On the other hand, almost all I was focused on was me and the events that were going on in my life and the issues I was concerned with. I was asking God for help in school, success in sports, finding a job, getting into a good college, etc. My prayer life was almost completely made up of my life and earthly things.
5. I rarely, if ever, prayed for other people except when I knew they were sick, hurt, or facing some life difficulty. When I prayed about something related to my soul, I would be asking for forgiveness after confessing sin and asking to avoid the negative consequences that were created by my moral failures. I wasn't praying to be more like Jesus. I wasn't asking God to show me how He wanted to use me for His glory. I didn't ask for eyes to see the spiritual opportunities around me to impact others for Jesus. I never prayed for the work of the church to be effective. For a long time, I wasn't praying for what Jesus wanted for me, but what I wanted from Jesus. I was overwhelmingly praying for my comfort and not for Christ to dwell within me. With one hand I was trying to pull God closer, while with the other, I was attempting to push Him away.
6. As I evaluated my prayer life, I realized I fell into the danger regarding prayer that James mentioned: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures." (Jas. 4:3). I wanted to benefit from God, but selfishly, I never stopped to think about or ask how God could benefit from me. My priorities in prayer were completely upside down. When I understood this was how God viewed my prayer life, my heart (and ego) was broken.

- B. Here is a common problem when it comes to prayer: many people want God’s help, but don’t want to listen to what He says. We desire benefit without responsibility. This is the same problem the prophet Jeremiah faced in his day (Jer. 37:2-3). Tragically, it is easy to miss this problem and end up getting frustrated with God or think prayer doesn’t really work. The problem is not prayer or how it works, but our selfishness, lack of self-awareness, and poorly-focused prayers.
- C. If we want to experience a healthier prayer life, from which we benefit tremendously, it is helpful for us to understand what the apostle Paul teaches about prayer in Ephesians 6:18 and the role of prayer. In this passage, we will see a close connection between praying rightly and the spiritual armor, along with the strength that armor provides. Quality prayer and spiritual health are linked together.

II. Review

- A. Let’s look back over our shoulder and remind ourselves where we’ve been in this series. Life can be challenging, and sometimes God asks us to walk through a difficult situation or season for our own good. Some of us face some really difficult experiences. Plus, we need the ability to respond honorably when we have been wronged, deal patiently with disappointments, face temptation without giving in, overcome habitual sin that is damaging our lives, respond well to doubts and questions, and face fears when we wonder what God is doing. These challenges in the Christian life shouldn’t discourage us, but they should help us have a realistic outlook on what it means to follow Jesus.
- B. When life presses in on us, it is critical for us to have already developed our soul’s ability to operate from a place of spiritual strength. The type of strength we need to remain faithful to God in any circumstances comes from God Himself. It is His divine strength at work in us. Our strength will fail, but His never does. The apostle Paul encourages all disciples to regularly and continually be strengthened by God in their souls by the Holy Spirit: “¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.” (Eph. 6:10).
- C. This process of internal strengthening is accomplished by pursuing and using the resources God makes available to His spiritually adopted children: “¹³ Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” (Eph. 6:13). The reason God provides these resources is to help those who are following Jesus to have the strength they need to remain faithful, even in the face of the enemy’s opposition. Obedience and faithful living is only possible when disciples are living in and effectively using the strength of God.
- D. Next, Paul gives us a list of resources that God provides that, when used properly, will result in spiritual strength for faithful living. A knowledge of the truth, the ability to recognize and discern truth, as well as the capacity to live in harmony with the truth, provides spiritual strength. While truth includes an understanding of the Bible, it is not limited to it. Following truth is righteousness. Disciples adopt and develop the ability to live their lives by God’s moral standards. In fact, they learn to love what God says is good. Those who pursue and carry out what God says is good will grow in spiritual strength.

- E. Paul also mentions the resource of the gospel. Those who truly understand the message of Jesus and apply it to themselves will increase their spiritual strength. Those who recognize and embrace the benefits provided by Jesus and use them regularly become strong disciples. Faith is yet another divine resource. Faith is a firm trust in God, based on knowledge; a person who has it will stay closely attached to God no matter what. Those who go through life with a personal conviction of faith will possess strength that others don't.
- F. Having an assurance of salvation is the next resource that results in spiritual strength. When a person is convinced they belong to God and are secure in their identity and standing with God, they will have tremendous strength with which to live their lives. The final spiritual resource given by God to empower a life of strength is the Word of God. The more a person understands and lives according to the Bible, the more of God's strength will be available to them. The Word of God transforms a person from the inside out so the characteristics they need for spiritual strength are developed. Each of these six resources provide strength. When all six are present and working together, a person's internal strength greatly increases.

III. The Role of Prayer

- A. Now that we've been reminded of the ground that has been covered so far, we are better positioned to look at another element of growing in spiritual strength. While the next element is not a piece of spiritual armor, it is closely connected to the armor.¹ Paul finishes his teaching on spiritual strength this way:

¹⁸ With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, (Eph. 6:18)

- B. Notice how Paul connects verse 18 with the rest of the spiritual armor, "With all prayer and petition".² In Paul's thinking, prayer is connected to the armor, even if it's not part of it. Prayer is a critical tool in the Christian life. It is possible that prayer is the means of putting on each piece of spiritual armor as James says, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures." (Jas. 4:2-3).³ If we never ask God to help us grow and use the resources He provides, we may not benefit from them. Prayer could also be the way the armor is used.⁴

- C. All different types of prayers can be used in connection with the spiritual armor ("With all prayer" v. 18). When the Scriptures are examined carefully, it will be observed that there are a variety of ways to pray. In another writing of Paul, he mentions four different types of prayers that can be offered to God:

¹ First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. (1 Tim. 2:1-2)⁵

¹ Francis Foulkes, [Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 182. Some think that prayer is a seventh piece of armor.

² Glenn Graham, [An Exegetical Summary of Ephesians](#), 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 570–572.

³ Francis Foulkes, [Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 182.

⁴ Lynn H. Cohick, [Ephesians](#), New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 158.

⁵ Paul also refers to supplications (Phil. 4:6), intercession "for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18),

- D. The types of prayer include “entreaties,” which are prayers that reflect an urgent or earnest request to God.⁶ When an issue is important to us and we care deeply about a topic that is on our mind and heart, we can pray with a greater sense of urgency and passion. Entreaties apply to our highest priorities. When situations arise in our lives that are significant and need an immediate response, we can pray a prayer of entreaty before God. We often ask others to join us when there is a significant and urgent situation in which we want to see God intervene on our behalf. The driving motivation behind prayers of entreaty is need.⁷ “Prayers” refers generally to communication with God, typically thought of as talking to God.⁸ Disciples don’t only communicate with God when urgent needs arise. They talk to God frequently about many different subjects in order to stay connected to Him.
- E. While talking to God, it is common to ask God to do something for us or on our behalf. Anytime we ask God for something (when we make a request of Him), it is called a “petition”. Disciples need to be very careful that these petitionary prayers don’t become the only type of prayer they pray, or that this type of prayer takes up too large a part of their overall prayer life. It is easy to let petitions cause our prayer life to become unbalanced as we pray selfishly. We must guard ourselves against this danger in prayer. A greater balance in prayer comes when we intentionally incorporate “thanksgivings” into our prayer life. A prayer of thanksgiving is anything that expresses gratitude or appreciation to God for something He has done.⁹ While these four types of prayers are only scratching the surface of the different types of prayers mentioned in the Bible, this list at least gives us an idea of the types of prayers Paul has in mind when he mentions different types of prayer.
- F. The wonderful flexibility available in prayer allows us to be able to pray in the midst of different situations, thoughts, and feelings, “at all times” (v. 18). There is a type of prayer that corresponds to each situation that we might find ourselves in. For example, if life is good and we are rejoicing in the goodness of God toward us, we can offer a prayer of thanksgiving when we are feeling grateful. If we are facing a situation that causes us to feel anxious, we can petition God asking for His help. If we are experiencing a sense of loss due to health, job, relationships, or something else, we can pray a lament to God. For every circumstance or season of life, there is a type of prayer that is appropriate for each occasion.
- G. In every kind of situation and in everything we do, we need prayer.¹⁰ Consistent prayer is the recommended course of action for the disciple who wants to be spiritually strong, to the point that prayer becomes a natural habit of their life. Talking to God in a variety of ways should become a deep-seated practice in the life of every disciple. Communication with God is to be native and natural to us. Prayer can become our default response to the situations of life. Prayer is to become a central habit of the Christian life and a natural response to life in general.

⁶ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on 1 Timothy 2:1 “entreaties”

⁷ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 3rd ed. fully rev. and updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 63.

⁸ Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 84.

⁹ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on 1 Timothy 2:1 “thanksgivings”

¹⁰ Grant R. Osborne, *Ephesians: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 235.

It is a tragedy when prayer only happens when we are in a crisis or need something from God. Instead, prayer should be occurring throughout our lives, even when things are good.¹¹

- H. As the disciple devotes themselves to prayer, not just any prayer will do. Effective God-pleasing prayer is done “in the Spirit” (v. 18). What does it mean to pray in the Spirit? Paul doesn’t elaborate or give us a definition. However, based on Paul’s other writings, we can speculate.¹² A text that is helpful here is Romans 8:26-27

²⁶ In the same way the Spirit helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;

²⁷ and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to *the will of God*.

- I. The Holy Spirit helps disciples pray when their good desires or knowledge don’t line up with the will of God (because there is much about God’s plan that He does not reveal to us). Answered prayer requires us to pray according to the will of God (1 Jn. 5:14-15). The Holy Spirit knows what to pray for in all circumstances since He fully knows our hearts and the mind of God.¹³ To pray “in the Spirit” likely primarily means to pray consistently and in harmony with the will of God.¹⁴ These types of prayers will only be possible if a person is “in the Spirit” in the sense of having the Holy Spirit living in them as a spiritually adopted child of God (Rm. 8:9). Praying “in the Spirit” will involve praying for what is consistent with a person’s new identity in Jesus (1 Cor. 6:11, Jas. 4:3). The Spirit is the general atmosphere of the Christians’ lives.¹⁵ These prayers will ask for the very things the Spirit desires for us (Eph. 1:18-19, 4:30-32). These are prayers that are prayed in belief (Mt. 21:22, Jas. 1:6-8). Praying “in the Spirit” will offer prayers conformed to Scripture (Eph. 3:5). These prayers will depend on the power of God instead of the self (Phil. 3:3). These prayers can include prayers that are spoken in tongues by those who have that gift (1 Cor. 14:14). To pray “in the Spirit” is to pray under the influence and motivation of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ These prayers will emphasize the same as that which Jesus promoted (Jn. 16:13-14). A primary focus of prayers “in the Spirit” will be the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our lives, and the lives of others, which transforms us to be like Jesus (2 Thess. 2:13, Gal. 5:16). A good way to learn more about this is to examine the prayers of Paul found in his letters.
- J. Prayer is to be participated in with a specific mindset (“with this in view, be on the alert” v. 18). As we pray in every circumstance with various types of prayers, disciples should have an

¹¹ William Barclay, [The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians](#), The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 212.

¹² Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6

¹³ Richard J. Erickson, “[Ephesians](#),” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 1032–1033.

¹⁴ It may also include praying with a clean conscience and a sincere faith. M. J. Edwards, ed., [Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians](#), Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 213. Along with living an overall morally pure life with an unpoluted mind.

¹⁵ Francis Foulkes, [Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 183, S. M. Baugh, [Ephesians: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary](#), ed. Wayne H. House, Hall W. Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 558.

¹⁶ Glenn Graham, [An Exegetical Summary of Ephesians](#), 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 573.

attentive outlook about their prayers. Prayer matters and it makes a difference. As we pray rightly, we should expect God to show up and work. God is responsive to the prayers of those who belong to Him. Disciples also look for opportunities to pray by actively finding situations for which to pray.¹⁷ In these words, the apostle Paul echoes the words of Jesus to the disciples, “watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Mt. 26:41) and “But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Lk. 21:36).¹⁸ Neither Jesus nor Paul want disciples to be praying on autopilot.

- K. Even though God is responsive to our prayers, there will also be times when He won’t answer right, or God’s responses may take time, which is why disciples should also pray “with all perseverance” (v. 18). We may have to pray for the same request repeatedly over time. We must continue in our prayers without giving up (Lk. 18:1-8). Prayer is not a one and done. Rather, there will be times when we need to stick with our prayers and keep praying for the same topics. The Bible repeatedly refers to the attitude of the disciples as being “devoted to” prayer (Ac. 1:4, 2:42, 6:4, Rm. 12:12, Col. 4:2).
- L. Our prayer life should not merely be about ourselves, our needs, and our desires, as we should “petition for all the saints” (v. 18). As we pray for spiritual strength for ourselves and the different pieces of armor to be developed in our own lives, we should offer the same prayers for the rest of the church. All disciples should have the same main objective for which they are praying: spiritual strength in order to be like Jesus and live faithful lives before God. The people of God want to “Stand firm” against the enemy forces that oppose us.
- M. It is not a coincidence that Jesus lived faithfully toward the Father in every circumstance (Jn. 8:29), even the most difficult ones, and He had a consistent and deep prayer life at the same time. There were even times when Jesus spent the whole night in prayer (Lk. 6:12). Jesus was so busy sometimes that He did not even have time to eat, yet He MADE time for prayer. Jesus is the ultimate and best example of what it looks like to pray and be spiritually strong. It is prayer that links the believer with the strength of God.¹⁹

IV. How to Pray

- A. Now that we’ve examined and explained the role of prayer in relation to the spiritual armor, we are ready to look at what to do with what we’ve learned. How do we put the instructions found in Ephesians 6:18 into action? Responding to the role of prayer in the Christian life can be done in the following ways:
- B. First, be intentional about what you ask for. A regular part of a disciple’s prayer is to ask God for each piece of the spiritual armor and the strength that comes with them for their own personal growth. Our prayer life should largely incorporate prayers connected to our individual soul development and progress. Disciples should ask the Spirit to give them the ability to stand firm

¹⁷ Glenn Graham, *An Exegetical Summary of Ephesians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 574.

¹⁸ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 358, Grant R. Osborne, *Ephesians: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 235.

¹⁹ George G. Findlay, “[The Epistle to the Ephesians](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible: Ephesians to Revelation*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, vol. 6, Expositor’s Bible (Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton Co., 1903), 104.

against the schemes and attacks of the enemy in general and in the moment when we are under attack. Petition God to give us a determined attitude that will stand firm while under pressure and temptation. We can specifically mention each piece of armor: knowledge and understanding of the truth, righteous character, applying the gospel to ourselves and our circumstances with the resulting peace, a well-developed trust in God, assurance of our salvation through the forgiveness of our sins along with our firm standing before God, and a Biblically informed mind that applies a true understanding of things to the way we understand the world. Each piece of armor can be prayed about. We can ask God to increase our soul's strength through the development of these qualities.

- C. Second, we can seek eyes to see the moral virtues of Jesus and how they enable His faithful living so that we can follow His example through prayer. Jesus and His life is so rich that we can spend our entire lifetime learning from Him and still not observe everything there is to see. Ask God to open our eyes to see and appreciate how wondrous and wonderful Jesus is. Then we can ask God to give us the ability to follow His example and live like Him as best we can.
- D. Third, the ideas and prayer principles found in verse 18 can be used to evaluate the nature and content of our current prayer life. The harsh reality is that a large portion of our prayers are not prayed "in the Spirit" because we don't pray for the will of God for our lives. When my eyes were opened to this truth, it was very painful. Do the qualities of this verse make up your prayer life?
- E. Fourth, we need to be careful not to forget, even with the spiritual armor and the strength it provides, our need for God's assistance.²⁰ The strongest disciples remain humbly dependent on God's help to live faithfully and fight successfully in their spiritual battles. No matter how spiritually mature we become, how much God uses us, or how many years we've been following Jesus, we never outgrow our dependence on Him. We never get mature enough or strong enough to live the Christian life on our own without His help. As soon as we start trying to stand on our own, it will only be a short time before we stumble.
- F. Fifth, as disciples, we need to learn how to develop a continuous and ongoing prayer life that doesn't grow tired, even when our prayers aren't answered right away or they are never answered the way we were hoping for. Learning to go through life with a devotion to and focus on prayer is not easy and it doesn't happen on its own. We must be intentional to develop the type of prayer life Paul is talking about here. It will take practice and it happens step by step.

V. Conclusion

- A. My hope is for our church to follow the example of the apostles, who after Jesus left earth, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer" (Ac. 1:14). The apostle Paul is telling the Ephesian church to be devoted to prayer for their own spiritual good and be united in it together as they pray for the spiritual well being of one another. This is very wise advice given the environment in which the church lives—being in enemy territory.

²⁰ William Gurnall and John Campbell, [*The Christian in Complete Armour*](#) (London: Thomas Tegg, 1845), 623.

- B. Prayer is not something we should engage in only when things get rough or as an add-on when we have time and it is convenient. Kingdom-focused prayer is a critical component of the Christian life, and it is needed for every disciple in every situation.

VI. Questions for Further Thought

- A. What has been your experience with prayer? What challenges have you faced?
- B. How did Jesus model how to pray for the disciples (Mt. 5:9-13)? What did He want the disciples to focus on in their prayers?
- C. What are the different types of prayer you have observed in the Bible or experienced in the Christian life?
- D. What are the motivating factors that help us pray more regularly, passionately, and spiritually?
- E. What has helped you develop a deeper prayer life?