

MESSAGE FOR SEPTEMBER 13, 2026, ON PRAYER AS SPIRITUAL WARFARE FROM EPHESIANS 6:18-20

Because we begin a new ministry year this morning, we want to step back from our series of messages from Galatians to focus on **the foundational ministry that underlies and empowers all other ministries of this and any church**. That is, we want to focus this morning on **prayer**. My goal has been to preach one message per year on prayer. While I haven't met that goal every year, there are good reasons for having it as a goal. The main reason is the same reason that **the first new ministry team formed in our church nine years ago was the Prayer Ministry Team**. That was the first new team recruited and organized because the scripture is transparently clear **on the priority of the ministry of prayer individually and as a church**.

As we've seen before from the gospels, **the gospel writers portray Jesus as a man who did zero ministry without prayer** and if the sinless Son of God is radical in his dependence on God through prayer, how much more should his church be? We all know intuitively what you really care about, you pray about. What you desperately want God's guidance and direction; you pray about that. When you long to see the power of Christ in your life, your family, your ministry or your church, **THE means that God has provided to inject his power is...prayer**. That implies, no prayer, no power.

Church history only reinforces that truth. Samuel Chadwick, a pastor from the 1800's speaks for many church leaders in church history. He is *only slightly* overstating things when he said, *"The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."*¹

If people aren't praying about a ministry, then God is not much empowering it. And if that is the case, nothing much of eternal good will come of it irrespective of how outwardly impressive it may be. The ministries that Paul compares to wood, hay and stubble in First Corinthians chapter three that will not pass through the fire of God's testing, are ministries, (among their other failings) that have little or no prayer behind them.

I've seen this truth of the priority of prayer borne out repeatedly as a pastor. The city where I pastored before coming here was well-known in satanist circles as a center of occult and satanic activity. The radical sect of satanists known as Luciferians believed that Satan had his North American throne out over Lake Superior and Duluth was a population center at the tip of one end of the lake.

Whether that's true or not, I don't know and I don't care much. The point is that **this and other factors meant that the Duluth area had a much higher percentage of satanists in residence than other places and they regularly attached themselves to local gospel-preaching churches to try to bring them down**. A nationally ranked Luciferian was sent to our church to wreak havoc and after a while, by God's grace, she ended up getting converted. But it was no accident that **the first thing she did when she began attending our church as a Satan worshipper was to make a bee line for our prayer ministry**. The prayer ministry had been growing, and we had multiple prayer groups and meetings.

¹ <https://wmpl.org/quote/the-one-concern-of-the-devil/>

She began attending the group with the most seasoned and fervent intercessors. Within a few months of her beginning to pray with these women, she had managed to exploit some of the areas of spiritual vulnerability in the group. The group ended up dividing and soon stopped meeting altogether. After she was saved, this now *former* satanist and bride of Satan began telling us what she'd been doing. She reported to the leadership how she'd learned from her former husband the truth of the earlier quote from Samuel Chadwick about Satan laughing at prayerless ministry.

I share that spiritual warfare story only because this morning we want to focus on prayer as **a crucial, indeed, central element of faithfully warring against sin and Satan and living biblically as a believer with what's been called a wartime mentality.** John Piper is right when he says, *"we cannot know what prayer is for until we know that life is war... 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 a war-time walkie-talkie, not a domestic intercom for ringing up the butler to change the thermostat. It is a war-time walkie-talkie to call in firepower because the enemy is greater than we are. If you try to turn this into a domestic intercom to bring another pillow, it malfunctions, and you wonder why. It's not made to be an intercom. ... Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of the darkness and unbelief."*²

Because we're looking at prayer through the lens of spiritual warfare, the best place in Scripture to find pertinent truth is Ephesians chapter six. As you may know, Ephesus, to which Paul directed this letter, was "occult central" in the Ancient Near East. There were probably more demons per square foot in and around Ephesus than anywhere else in the Roman Empire. The pagan temple of Diana or Artemis was famous throughout the empire, and it was the spiritual hub around which that city revolved. Ephesus was a haven for demonic activity, and that's surely why Paul gave his most concentrated treatment on spiritual warfare to the believers in Ephesus who were surrounded daily by its uniquely concentrated demonic influences.

The entire section from 6:10-6:20 that Chuck read gives us our context. The well-known, central truth is in verse 12 where Paul writes, "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." Paul is saying that though we live in **this material realm that you can see, hear, smell and touch**, there is also an *unseen* spiritual realm that exists alongside the material realm which motivates, inspires and empowers fierce resistance and opposition to the gospel. This dark, unseen realm wars incessantly against genuinely redeemed believers and the church of Christ. That is THE spiritual reality we all encounter every day whether we're aware of it or not.

In this section, Paul uses the image of armor—which was very much a part of that ancient culture—to describe **the ways believers are to live in a spiritually hostile world if we're to stand firm and successfully resist these** "**spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**" Paul gives us the pieces of our spiritual armor—the **belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes for the readiness given by the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.** Paul uses these elements of armor as **metaphors** in the sense that believers obviously do not physically wear a shield and a sword.

But **they are very much real spiritual weapons that believers must deploy if we're to successfully resist or "stand firm" in the midst of the sometimes-fierce satanic opposition that**

² This is not a single quotation, but it is a combination of multiple quotes. They accurately depict Piper's thinking on prayer.

any sincere believer will face. If you're not sincerely seeking after God, Satan probably won't bother you as much because you pose no real threat to him. And based on the information given to me by the former satanist I mentioned, he doesn't worry much about churches or believers who are not committed to prayer and whose ministries are not fueled by prayer. **But far more importantly, prayerless lives and ministries don't much exalt or magnify Christ because they're done in dependence of our own strength. That means they are done in the flesh, and the apostle John tells us, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all..."** Another translation says "the flesh profits nothing" [John 6:63]. Flesh empowered, prayerless ministry profits NOTHING.

We want to focus our attention this morning beginning with verse 18 **where Paul addresses prayer in this context of spiritual warfare.** This text made a renewed impression on me several weeks ago when it was our Fighter Verse for the week. As some of you know, when you memorize a Fighter Verse, you're more likely to think deeply about and be transformed by it. That's one reason we recommend that you memorize your Fighter Verses each week. Paul says this about prayer in this context beginning with verse 18. "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."

Some scholars believe that **because Paul doesn't assign a specific piece of armor to prayer**, that means that Paul is separating out prayer from this militant context of spiritual warfare. That is, because Paul doesn't refer to prayer as, for instance, "the sling of prayer" or "the arrow of prayer" these scholars claim that prayer isn't part of this spiritual warfare section of this letter. This is wrong for at least two reasons. First, because **though prayer IS different than all the other weapons**, that does NOT mean that prayer is not a crucial component of our spiritual warfare. In fact, *prayer is uniquely powerful as a part of a believer's spiritual arsenal* because, unlike the other weapons, **God can use prayer to actually prevent Satan from attacking in the first place.**

The other pieces of armor that Paul highlights are all assumed to be used in the heat of the battle when Satan is raging against us. But prayer is unique among our spiritual arsenal because, based on what Jesus teaches about prayer, **prayer can spare us from some (not all) spiritual opposition.** When Jesus was in Gethsemane, he told his disciples in Mark 14:38, "³⁸ Watch and *pray that you may not enter into temptation.* The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Jesus says that God uniquely uses prayer (to use an Old Testament word) to put a "hedge" or a wall of protection around you **to keep you from even experiencing the temptation.** In the Lord's prayer, Jesus teaches us **to pray** that God would, "¹³...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" [Matt. 6:13]. That is just as easily translated, "deliver us from *the evil one.*" That tells us that **God can and does use prayer at times to keep us from Satan and his spiritual assaults.** Because that function of prayer seems unique compared to the other pieces of armor, **it makes sense for Paul NOT to treat it in the same way he does the other weapons.**

Another reason Paul doesn't assign prayer a specific piece of armor like the other weapons is because **all the other weapons are in some way dependent upon prayer to be successfully deployed. Prayer is essential for the other weapons to be effective.** If you want to live and think righteously and in so doing wear the breastplate of righteousness to fend off sinful temptations, **prayer is essential to live an increasingly holy life.** If you want to trust in God's promise through faith and, in so doing, take up the shield of faith, **you may need to pray for more faith because faith is a gift of God.** The word of God as a weapon has power in and of itself, but **it's in response**

to prayer that God will typically bring *the most appropriate and effective* Scriptures to mind as we wield the sword of the Spirit.

Prayer is also necessary **to supercharge each of the pieces of armor with the power of God.** The Scripture says in multiple places that “God gives grace to the humble.” He gives his power to those who humble themselves and ask for his spiritual power through prayer. This is implied when you compare prayer to battlefield walkie talkies.

They didn’t have walkie-talkies in the first century but if you’re in a war and you’re being battered with enemy artillery fire, you “take up” your walkie-talkie and call in air support which brings in the F-16’s to take out the artillery that’s shredding you. If you’re in a firefight, outgunned by the enemy, you take up your walkie-talkie and call in more support. If you’re taking heavy casualties, you call in more medics. In our spiritual warfare, **it’s the walkie-talkie of prayer that enables God’s army to call on the supernatural resources we need to stand against the assault.**

In any military assault, the first priority of any armed enemy is **to attempt to eliminate the communication network you’ve established between those in command and their warriors.** This is because if you are not able to command your fighters what to do, that can paralyze your efforts on the battlefield. Without adequate communication between those on the battlefield and those in command and support roles, the battle will be a brief one. Satan knows that too! That’s why that satanist I mentioned earlier *began* Satan’s assault against our church by attacking our prayer meetings. The fact that prayer doesn’t correlate to a specific piece of armor simply means that **prayer as a weapon simply cannot be illustrated that way.**

Paul gives five qualities of prayer as spiritual warfare. Verse 18 says, “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.” Paul uses the word “all” four times in one verse. Do you see the connection with our Fighter Verse for this morning from 2 Corinthians chapter nine? “⁸ And God is able to make *all* grace abound to you, so that having *all* sufficiency in *all* things at *all* times, you may abound in every good work.” When a biblical author does that rapid-fire repetition with a word like “all” that’s not an accident. In the case of Ephesians 6:18, Paul is piling up all these “all’s” to communicate **the intensity of the prayer he intends here in this militant context.** This prayer is to be all out, petal-to-the-metal praying.

The intensity in prayer that Paul calls for here implies **what should be a self-evident truth to believers.** That is, when you are under some level of satanic opposition, you’re experiencing spiritual **warfare**. And according to Jesus, Satan’s aim in this war is to “steal, kill and destroy” you [John 10:10]. In First Peter 5:8, Peter says, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil *prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*” The spiritual forces of darkness arrayed against Christ’s church are not playing games. They are blood earnest in their seething hatred of the church of Christ.

All of that to say, when Paul says that this prayer must be “^{at all times}...” this means that the lines of communication must be always open. This is what Paul is getting at in First Thessalonians 5:17 when he says we are to “¹⁷ pray without ceasing.” There is NO TIME when the channel of communication between us as spiritual warriors and our Commander and King should be tuned to another frequency. In a hostile spiritual environment like this dark world we live in, **believers must always be able to send an urgent message to the Lord of hosts as we engage against the**

onslaught of the Adversary. This describes a believer who is in a constant state of dependency upon God.

Second, Paul specifies this kind of praying as praying **“in the Spirit.”** We must be careful here. Some people equate praying “in the Spirit” with some sort of almost trance-like state where they are in some kind of transcendent, mystical communion with God. What Paul is speaking of here is NOT the same experience of the apostle John in the Revelation when he was **“in the Spirit on the Lord’s day”** [Rev. 1:10]. Praying **“in the Spirit”** is NOT experiencing a supernatural vision from God.

Paul helps us with what he means here in Romans 8:26. There, he says **“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.”** The Spirit of God attends these prayers with his power. He leads and directs our prayers. He even prays through us. Gordon Fee says, *“Prayer is not simply our cry of desperation or our grocery list or request that we bring our heavenly Abba; ...It is God siding with his people and, by his empowering presence, **the Spirit of God himself brings forth prayer that is in keeping with God’s will and his ways.**”* This is prayer that is touched, directed and empowered by God for the purpose of bringing down from heaven whatever spiritual resources are required to resist the devil.

Third, Paul says our praying is to be **alert**. He says, **“...keep alert...”** in verse 18. The verb in the original literally means to *“lie awake and pass sleepless nights.”* Paul is not calling us to be insomniacs, but he is saying that **our praying should be the kind where we’re always ready to engage in prayer**. If your enemy is a roaring lion seeking to devour you and your loved ones, remaining alert in prayer should be self-evident.

Fourth, our prayers are to be **“with all perseverance.”** This is related to being alert because **this describes the intensity of our alertness in terms of its duration.** This is **the kind of zeal we should bring to our praying**. I had a professor in college once say about writing papers, *“Write with wine, revise with caffeine.”* I could add to that as it relates to prayer, *“pray with Holy Spirit Red Bull!”* We should be energetic and willing to suspend any activity when the Spirit is prompting us to prayer.

This is the kind of praying done by someone who realizes that prayer is warfare and that they’re on the front lines taking fire. Many saints can testify to being awakened during the night with a burden to pray for some particular person or need. That is just one example of this kind of zeal. Beyond that, to **“persevere”** means to remain faithful and, by God’s grace, stick it out when you’re exhausted and feel like giving up.

Finally, Paul says our praying should be **“for all the saints.”** The more mature we grow in the Lord (and if you don’t have a vital prayer life, you’re not very mature in the Lord), the more our prayers will be focused on the needs of others. This does NOT mean that praying for our own needs is of secondary importance. It simply means that as we grow in the Lord, our love for other believers grows and as our love for them grows, we’ll seek to help them and bless them and often the best way to do that is to pray for them.

As if to give the believers in Ephesus a chance to apply his teaching on the militant nature of prayer, Paul concludes with verses 19-20 with a personal prayer request. He says, **“¹⁹ and [pray] 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.”**

Paul asks for prayer that he would proclaim boldly *the mystery* of the gospel. **He has revealed in this letter what the mystery of the gospel is** and it's NOT the same thing as the gospel. He says in 3:6, "*6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" As we saw in Acts, most people at this time saw the early church as a sect of Judaism and that was understandable. Jesus and the apostles were Jews, and they taught from the Old Testament. But Paul is implying here that the church is NOT a sect of Judaism. No, the church is ***the union of Jews who had received Jesus as their Messiah, and Gentiles who had trusted in Christ.***

Paul says in verse 20 that he was in jail—as "an ambassador in chains" on account of **the mystery** of the gospel—**this unity** of believing Jews and Gentiles. The notion that Jews and Gentiles were united equally as children of Abraham through Christ was infuriating to many Jews and THAT is a big reason they persecuted Paul. It would have been easy for him to downplay this unity of Jews and Gentiles because that was near the heart of the Jews' opposition him and it was a big reason they arrested him. Into THAT context of **temptation to downplay this emphasis on unity**, he asks that the Ephesian believers pray that **he would proclaim this mystery of the gospel boldly**. That is, that the threat of persecution, imprisonment and even death would not keep him from faithfully preaching *the mystery* of the gospel.

Notice that **Paul does not ask for prayer to be released from jail** because he knew that God had sovereignly ordained that he BE in jail. Being imprisoned, as we saw in Acts, was **Paul's ticket to allow him the opportunity to preach to Caesar** as Christ had prophesied he would when he called him to be an apostle [9:15]. The point for today is that when Paul teaches on warfare praying, he was not speaking hypothetically. In this militant context, he's probably praying for **the boldness to overcome the temptations from Satan to remove the sharp edges of the gospel**. We should always pray for whoever is preaching on any given Sunday that he would preach with Holy Spirit boldness.

How else can we apply this? First, **pray!** Most churches have about five percent of their people attending prayer meetings. Satan is working! I don't pretend to be saying that all of the effective praying in the church is done in prayer meetings, but it's a sad fact that, as someone has said, **when the Lord of the church is the only attraction, only a tiny percentage of his bride shows up to pray**. Ask God for grace to revitalize your prayer life—that he would inject it with the life of God! If you can't attend a Wednesday prayer meeting, start your own prayer meeting, and invite your believing friends. If you want to pray here, this church will be open 24/7 for anyone who wants to come and pray.

A second point of application is directed to the men. In my time here, those in attendance at prayer meetings has been somewhere between 80-90% women. There are legitimate reasons for that especially when those meetings occur in the day. But my years in ministry have clearly told me that **women tend to be more serious about prayer than men**. Maybe this is because of what we said a few weeks ago. That is, that men tend to view church and church activities as more socially-oriented and therefore more fitted for women.

This text ought to *violently wake us up from that delusion about the church!* The church is a spiritual army with Christ as our Warrior King and one of our most potent weapons is prayer. If this weren't so serious, it would be laughable that so many Christian men, who love a good scrap when it's in a boxing ring, on a wrestling mat, football field or baseball diamond **are frequently wretched prayer**

warriors. Men, if our prayer lives are weak, we are failing as warriors in the greatest fight on the planet, where the stakes are eternal and *infinitely higher* than the Lombardi Trophy.

If you would like to change this, consider attending the upcoming Men's Retreat. This is a time to eat well, enjoy competition, but make no mistake, it's first and foremost, spiritual basic training. So many men can't even recognize a spiritual attack. They develop a negative attitude toward a brother in Christ, and they don't even consider that this might be satanic. They don't even consider that the reason they feel strangely drawn to their new female co-worker might be an attack from the evil one to destroy their marriage and family. For so many men who are unfamiliar with the militant element of the Christian life, Men's Retreat is a great place to learn to be spiritual warriors.

Finally, if you're here today and this talk of warfare and demonic activity seems strange or even off-putting, know this. The apostle Paul says this about unbelievers in Second Corinthians 4:4. "⁴ In their case the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." If you haven't placed your trust in Christ, one reason this spiritual warfare talk sounds strange or even foolish to you is because **Satan has blinded you to the ultimate spiritual realities.**

You haven't seen the glory of Christ in the gospel and that's why so many think they're doing just fine without Jesus when they're actually under his judgment. But when God opens the eyes of an unbeliever, he/she is **miraculously enabled to see the glory of Christ in the saving message of the gospel. They also begin to see other spiritual realities as well—like the militant nature of life in a world ruled by Satan.**

If you're here today and haven't trusted in Christ to save you from the eternal penalty of your sins through his death on the cross, please don't leave here without doing that today. Ask God to open your eyes to see your desperate need for a Savior and when you see that, cry out for his mercy. God will give you a new heart with new desires and a new set of spiritual eyes to see spiritual realities that right now you are blind to. May God give all of us the grace to live as soldiers of the cross for his glory and our joy.