



Sermon – July 12, 2020
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week

Ephesians 6:18

Ephesians 2:18

Ephesians 1:16

Well as you're grabbing your seats, let's pick up our Bibles. We're going to be in Ephesians chapter 6 today, Ephesians 6:18, continuing in our study of the full armor of God. And if you're visiting us for the first time as a guest, welcome home. We're glad you're here. Whether that's in person or joining us online. And it was great to have Wes preaching last week. I'm glad to be back here in the pulpit. This morning we're going to pick up where we left off. If you remember last time we were together, when I was walking through Ephesians 6, we finished the full armor of God. And it might feel as if Paul is moving on to other things, but what we're going to find this morning is that His word about prayer fits right into the spiritual battle God has called us to today. Let's look at Ephesians 6:18 together. Paul says this.

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,

Now we know over the course of the last week, one of the big controversies erupted around our country is, what are we going to do when school opens next month? What's going to happen? Are kids going back full time? Are they staying online full time? Is there going to be a hybrid where they're in the classroom some days and out of the classroom other days. And I imagine with some of the different kids and parents in the room, everybody here has a different opinion. But classrooms have been at the centerpiece of our conversation as a culture this week. And it will be for the next month. But this morning, I want you to image with me that we are entering into the classroom of your heart. And imagine that there is a teacher there that is observing your spiritual life. And if that teacher was to assign you a grade, if they were to look at your life and assign you a grade on your prayer life, what would that grade be? What would they give you? And for many of us, the question would be, "Why is it so low?" And the easy answer, the common answer that we might respond with is to say, "Well I just lack the discipline. That's the reason that I struggle in my prayer life." But the question we should be wrestling with is, "What would it take to move from that point, that grade, to make it an A." And what we're going to find in the text this morning as we come to Ephesians 6, what Paul is showing us here is that a

solid prayer life doesn't come to the disciplined, but to the desperate. That if we understand the nature of the spiritual battle that we have been called to, it allows us to embrace the sort of desperation that fuels our prayer. And there's a connection happening here in the text. If you were to look back at the original language, you're going to see that in the original language, there is no period at the end of verse 17. It's one continuous sentence where Paul moves from talking about the armor now to prayer. There's this connection. Prayer is not some separate piece of the armor. It is the foundation for the battle. It is the piece that empowers everything else about us. And if we want to fight the good fight of the faith this morning, then what that looks like is we need to embrace three different aspects of prayer that Paul lays out in this passage.

Now I want to tell you now before we get into the rest of the text that in the response time this morning, after our sermon is over, we are going to enter into a time of corporate prayer together. And I want to lay before you right now that during that response time, we're going to have a chance to respond in salvation and to come for membership, but I'm also going to invite those of you in the room if you are willing and able to come to join me at the front to pray. Maybe you're going to want to gather with a minister to have them pray for you. Or you just want to kneel on one of these stairs that are here. We want to not just hear God's word call us to prayer; we want to actually turn that into a time of corporate prayer. And I want you to notice with me as Paul drives us through this verse in verse 18, we're going to see these three different dimensions of prayer that he's calling us to. And the first one you see there at the beginning of verse 18, he says, to pray at all times. So notice back with the way that he words it. Praying at all times in the Spirit. The way he talks about prayer there connects it to the prior commands that he's given to stand and to take up the armor of God. And he speaks there of doing it in all times in any circumstances. There, in other words, is never a bad time for prayer. He uses this word all, if you look back at verse 18, four different times in this one verse. There's this emphasis that it shouldn't, prayer shouldn't just mark some of our lives when it's convenient for us, or when we really, really need it. It should mark every aspect of who we are as Christians. Every aspect of our lives should be prayer that he says there is in the Spirit. And if you look back with me a page or two in Ephesians, look at chapter 2 in verse 18. Because we're going to understand how it is that we are to pray in the Spirit. Notice what Paul says. Ephesians 2:18.

¹⁸For through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

In other words, the Spirit of God that God has poured out into our hearts in salvation is now the access point we have with the Father. He is the means by which we come to God in prayer. That is what Paul is driving at here when he speaks of praying in the Spirit. It's that our prayers are both grounded and guided by the Holy Spirit. He is our access to the Father and He is our guide to the Father in prayer. And isn't it fitting that Paul talks about praying in the Spirit in verse 18 right after back in verse 17, if you see it there, he talks about taking up the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. So there's this connection between the sword of the Spirit and praying in the Spirit. The word of God and our prayers to God that Paul lays out there. And the question before us is this. What does Paul have in mind when he says we should pray at all times? Well it seems as if there's at least two pictures that we pick up in the New Testament for what the Christian's life should look like. If we're seeking to pray at all times we need to both pray consistently and pray constantly. We need to have regular rhythms of prayer in our life, but then we need to have ongoing communication and interaction with God at every time in our lives.

So let's think about what it looks like to pray consistently. A prayerless life is a prideful life. When we don't turn to God in prayer, it's because we are relying on ourselves rather than on God to meet our needs. And instead, Paul calls us to pray at all times. To exhibit a consistent life. Now if you're anything like me, you've got friends that are trying to take vacations but they're having to do unusual things during Coronavirus. And it seems as if I've heard more about people going to Yellowstone this summer than in my entire life combined. And one of the things that keeps coming up in social media feeds is people putting up pictures of Old Faithful. You remember Old Faithful. That geyser that spews 20 times a day. And the reason that your friends are going to see that and to enjoy it is not because it's the biggest or the strongest or has the highest spout. It's because it's consistent. You can count on that thing to blow 20 times a day and to erupt at a fairly consistent time where you can count on it to be there. And when Paul speaks here of the prayer life of the Christian, he doesn't focus on who prays the longest, who prays the deepest. He focuses on who prays most consistently. Who is going to be praying at all times? And so the question that we need to wrestle with is, how do we develop lives that are consistent in prayer? Well guess what. We live lives that consistently face problems. And so if you want to be consistent in prayer, then what you need to learn to do is to pray your problems. When those challenges in life come, they are invitations to turn them to God in prayer consistently, over and over again, regularly in your life. Paul speaks here of praying at all times. But that doesn't just embody this idea of prayer consistently, it also has this idea of praying constantly. So if you think about the way Paul talks about prayer throughout the New Testament, one of the most common things he has is the need for constant prayer. You think about the way he speaks of praying without ceasing. Or perhaps you see him talking about praying always for you when he writes to different churches in these letters. Or right here in verse 18 when he says praying at all times. There's this sense of practicing the presence of God. That as we go through our lives we are connected with God by the Holy Spirit. We are aware of His presence. We are in ongoing communication with Him. I remember a few years ago, our boys got walkie-talkies for Christmas. Which was great for outdoor entertainment. They'd take those off and they made up names for themselves. I think Double Eagle and Lion Blaze and Bookworm and several others that they came up with. And you'd hear them communicating on these walkie-talkies. And it seemed like the more intense the game, the more intense the communication between them. And when we think about what prayer is, what it's designed to look like, if we are living out a life of constant prayer, it is one of ongoing communication. And just like a soldier in the battle, God has called us to prayer as if it's a wartime walkie-talkie. And the idea is that the greater the intensity of the battle around us, the greater the communication. The greater the need to stay connected to God. And what we need to recognize is, yes, the strongest Christians often have the strongest prayer lives. But the reason for that is not because they are strong, but because they recognize they are weak. And in their weakness, they respond to God in a dependence that drives them to a desperation that leads them to pray at all times just as Paul is speaking of here in Ephesians 6:18.

But notice with me in the middle of the verse. He gives a second dimension of the prayer that we are to exemplify in spiritual warfare. We see that we also need to pray in all ways. Look back at the text here. He says, with all prayer and supplication. He highlights two different but related types of prayer here in the portion of this passage. And the first one, this idea of prayer, is that we need to pray with childlike specificity. He uses a term prayer. And if you look back in

Ephesians to chapter 1, hold your spot here, but look back. He uses this word exactly at the opening of this text down in verse 16 and notice what he says

¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

That word at the end of verse 16 is prayers. It's a word that's also used in verse 18, most often in the New Testament for that of intercession. Where one person brings prayers on behalf of another who is in need. And that's the picture that Paul is giving us here. That we should come to God with childlike specificity on behalf of ourselves and others. That we lift up our prayers to God trusting that He will answer them. And the reason for that is because we know that when we pray specifically, God answers in ways where only He gets the credit. That's one of the reasons why on our website, centralbcs.org/prayer, you can go there anytime, whether you're watching online or right now throughout the week, we have a pray request form. And we get prayers every week coming in from you and people around our community so that we can pray specifically for you. We can lift it up with that childlike specificity longing for God to answer our prayers. And I want to encourage you to do that. And I want to encourage you to do that. Every one of those comes to me as your pastor. And one of my greatest delights every week is to lift up each one of you in this type of intercessory prayer that Paul is speaking of here. To pray with childlike specificity. But notice he also speaks not just of prayer, but of supplication. Of coming to God not just with childlike specificity but with childlike boldness. So look back at what he says there. He talks about supplication. And in the original language, it was a word that was similar to this first word of prayer. But most often, it was used when someone was praying for themselves to God about an urgent need. So a few weeks ago when the Maurers were in the process of retiring, we had a retirement celebration for them over in the Central Town Square. And I remember standing there and interacting with people and one of our Legacy Adults walked up to me, he was wearing a mask, and I could barely see any portion of his face. And as he approached me he said, "Hey, do you know who I am? Do you remember my name?" And I was caught like a deer in the headlights trying to mentally run through things. And if you want to know what the word supplication means, I exhibited it right then. Coming to God with an urgent need, asking for Him to bestow on me a supernatural recollection. And I remembered his name. He answered my prayer. And by the way, please don't do that to me. I've only been here two months and most of the time we're spending it together in masks. This is a hard enough job as it is without that. But that's the type of picture that supplication is. We come to God with urgency that drives us to a fervency in prayer where He meets us in those moments. But here's the reality check we need. Even at times when we come to God with urgency, He may not always change our circumstance. But He often changes our hearts. That's part of what God is doing in prayer. He's not just working to answer your prayers by changing the circumstances around you, but by changing the circumstances in your heart. Paul is speaking there of this need for boldness. To come to God in a prayer that lays our needs before Him recognizing our dependence, our reliance, our determination on Him. That's why when we finish our time together in the sermon, during the response time, I'm going to invite you to come to the front and to pray. We need to lay those prayers before God. Ask for Him to move in ways that only He can. Because the only reason we can come to God to deliver our prayers through Christ is because God has come to us and delivered our salvation in Christ. In other words, the only reason that we come to God pouring out our prayers is because Christ has come for us pouring our His blood. He has made a way for us in prayer. He has invited us into a communion with God the Father that allows us to pray in all ways.

But notice with me how this text ends. Because we see a third principle here for prayer in the midst of the battle at the end of verse 18. Paul calls us to pray with all perseverance for all people. Notice how he says it there. To that end, at the end of verse 18,

To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,

So now Paul turns his attention to how to pray and who to pray for. He speaks there of to that end, to the end of praying at all times, for that purpose. In other words, if you want to be relentless in prayer, what's it going to take? And he gives us the answer there. He says, to keep alert. In the original language, this is the idea of staying awake. It's a vigilance. It's like the sleepless night of a soldier who's assigned as a watchman to keep view for those who may come to attack the citadel when it is most vulnerable. That is the picture that he is talking about there. This awareness, this urgency, this vigilance that we are supposed to display. In fact, it's the opposite of what we saw the disciples do in Mark 14. Do you remember that one? It's the Garden of Gethsemane. It's right before Jesus is arrested. He is going off in this fervent prayer to the Father and every time He comes back and He sees the disciples, what happens? He finds them asleep. They're not keeping alert. They're not remaining awake. And so often when we are lulled into that same draw of spiritual complacency, and yet we know why we must be alert. It's because the devil is a prowling lion seeking someone to devour. And that's why Paul says here that we need to have all perseverance. That there must be a relentless pursuit of God in our life. And this is a constant refrain in the New Testament. A connection between prayer and perseverance. That our prayer enables our perseverance and our perseverance drives us back to prayer. There's this connection between the two that Paul speaks of there that should fuel our hearts to make supplication for all the saints as he says in the end of verse 18. Praying for the rest of the covenant community of the church. That we're lifting one another up in the battle. That we see ourselves side by side living out the faith together. Fighting the good fight of the faith. Pouring out our hearts to God on behalf of others. That's one of the reasons why one of the things I'll not forget for a long time for my first month as your pastor, was the chance for us to gather out in that parking lot for the National Day of Prayer. And there were hundreds of us that joined up. It was one of the first times many of us had come out of the house. We were trying to figure out how to socially distance and to pray. But we went around to different stations and we made supplication for all the saints. We lifted up our community. It's one of the things I love about our prayer ministry here. Is the way that it facilitates that on a yearly basis, the way that on a weekly basis. Right out these doors we have a prayer room where those prayer requests that come up are lifted up by people in our church. And if that's something that's on your heart, we'd love to get you connected with how to be a part of that. Because Paul is driving us here to be persevering and making prayer for the saints. And if we're going to demonstrate that perseverance, what it's going to take if we want to find victory in the spiritual battles we face, we must persevere in our prayer life. Paul is showing us that we need to persevere in our prayer life even when times get hard. The challenge is that when difficult times come, cynicism often comes with it. We see the way that the world is broken or things aren't working out the way that we, that we would prefer. And as a result of that, we turn away from God in cynicism rather than turning to Him with a childlike spirit. But Paul is calling us here towards the pathway of perseverance. That when challenged come, we press into God. We trust Him as the only one who can save us. We embody that heart behind the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18 that we will be relentless on knocking at the door of God's house longing for Him to meet our

needs. That's the kind of perseverance we're called to display in our prayer life. But we're not just called to persevere in our prayer life. We are also called, Paul is showing us here, to persevere in specific prayer requests.

So as we're getting ready for school, our boys ordered some new backpacks online and we didn't get them from Amazon. And when they asked how long it would take to get there, and Cami said, "It'll probably be a week, maybe more." They were distraught. How could it be that you don't get things in one or two days? They're used to prime delivery. They wanted it right now. They don't want to be waiting for a longer period of time for these things to arrive. And how often is it that we want prime delivery for our prayer requests? What's taking you so long, God? Why haven't You met my needs? Why haven't You hit my timeline? But part of what God is doing in our prayer journey is forcing us into dependence on Him. And that's not just for the answers of our prayer, but the timing of our prayer. One of the things that I do and I would encourage you to think about doing is every day I keep a prayer journal. Where at least once a day I will add a specific prayer request to that journal. And I go through it every Monday and I review the prayers that I prayed and I mark out ones that have answered and mark those as answered or if there's one that God didn't answer or answered in a different way, I'll make note of that. And for those that I haven't seen answered, I continue to pray for them over and over again. There are some of them that are months or years in the making; still unanswered. As a matter of fact, one of those long time prayers I'm excited to share with you, next week in our church service is about a way that God has answered a specific prayer for our church. But I imagine there are many of you sitting here in this room or watching online who are living in the midst of unanswered prayers. And the question is, are you going to persevere? Are you going to keep praying for that prodigal son that still hasn't come home? Are you still going to keep praying for that family member or co-worker who hasn't experienced salvation? Are you still going to keep praying for that broken relationship that no one but God could find a way to fix? Are you still going to keep praying for the brokenness you see in our community that will only be restored if God moves? The call that Paul is making to us this morning is a call to persevere in prayer. One that lifts up all people trusting that God in His goodness and His timing will meet our needs.

We started this morning by wrestling with the question about prayer. If a teacher were to come in to the home of your heart and give you a grade for your prayer life, what would it be? But let's finish our time together with another question. If God were to answer every one of your prayers, what would be different about the world? What would change? Now I know in a room like this and for those gathered online, if God immediately answered all our prayers, I could guarantee you if we get to play college football, the Aggies are winning the national championship. Because a lot of you have lifted up that prayer, myself included, for many, many years. That's one of those persevering prayers we need, isn't it? But what else would be different? Who would come to know Christ? What relationships would be restored? What unreached people groups would now be able to embrace the gospel? What would be different about our community? And if you're having trouble answering that question, maybe you need to assess your prayer life and to wrestle with why is it, God, that I am not praying in the way that Paul is laying out for me here this morning. Because the call of the gospel that we see from Ephesians 6:18 is that if we want to find victory in our spiritual life, it comes by pressing on in the midst of battle through faithful prayer.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer in this time.

Father, as we come to You now, we don't just want to hear a word from Your Scripture about prayer, we want to turn our hearts to a time of prayer. To lay our needs at Your feet, trusting in Your goodness, knowing that You will provide everything we need for life in godliness. And I pray this morning that You would fill our hearts with a desperation for You. That we may become a people of prayer. That this church would be united in one heart for the lost. And united in one heart for Your glory. And that even now, during this time of response as we gather in corporate prayer, that You would do it in our midst. And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen.