

Combat Prayer, Part 3

Ephesians 6:18-20

The flesh will be your undoing. The flesh is going to compromise you every time. Pay attention to that Puritan pastor-theologian John Owen. He wrote an entire treatise on that one verse, Matthew 26:41, "Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation." Many have been helped by his treatise called *On the Mortification of Sin in the Believer's Life*. I'll attempt to just summarize the principles, here, and illustrate what it means to be instant in prayer through this discipline of watchfulness in prayer.

Let me run this through Paul's war metaphor. Imagine it's you, whoever you are. You're no longer at your job, at your desk, in your home, and you're no longer doing any of those things. You're patrolling through a forested area in bad-guy country because you're a member of a small unit on a special mission, a squad-sized unit, only eight of you there, totally surrounded by hostile forces, and all of them looking for you,

intent to hunt you down and kill you or even better, capture you alive, take you back to somewhere dark, and torture you and then kill you, maybe make a video in the process. You've been moving all night; now it's time to stop before day breaks, before the light comes. You spread out a bit, set a perimeter, get yourselves dug in. Your squad's all going to take shifts, half of you getting rest and the other half standing watch.

Halfway through your watch, you spot movement through the trees. You look more intently, and you verify you see enemy troops out there. You don't know their number, but they're beyond your perimeter, and the danger seems to be lurking out there and moving maybe even closer to you. So what do you do? Multiple choice question for you. What do you do? Do you—choice number A—rush the enemy, rushing at the soldier that you saw, screaming like a wild man, firing full auto with your gun, chucking grenades until that guy lies dead on the ground? Is that your option? If you watch Hollywood movies, you would choose that option, and you would be wrong.

But let's think about that. Let's, let's "what-if" this option just a little bit. What if that guy you saw isn't alone?

In hostile territory, that has to be assumed, doesn't it? You've just managed by your rush at the enemy, you just managed to alert all the enemy troops that are hunting for you for miles around because you've been firing your weapon on full auto and throwing grenades. You knucklehead. Now everybody knows where you are. What if he or his buddies kill you? Or worse, what if they shoot you, then take you captive? It's not about you anymore, is it? It's about your whole squad. Now they're waking up in this whole chaos. You're gone. They hear noise, shooting, you yelling like a banshee. They don't know what's going on.

Okay, that option didn't work. Let's try something else, option B. Do you leave your comrades behind because half of them are getting some much-needed rest? It's been a long night. They're tired. You wouldn't want to wake them. So you sneak outside the wire. You stalk, your prey like a ninja, come up from behind him and silently take him out. That sounds good, too, very Hollywood, a different kind of Hollywood. Let's "what-if" this second bad option. You're never as stealthy as you think you are, ever. What if you make noise and compromise your position? More to the point, you've left the strength, the protection of your squad behind. You're isolated outside your

own perimeter, and now you're even more surrounded by the enemies that are out there. This is bad. Two bad options.

I could go on with bad options. I won't do that. I'll point you to the one option I'm trying to drive you to, letter C. I've whittled down the options. You see the enemy out there. You see movement. You know there's troops. You know you're being hunted. What to do? Get on your squad radios, get everybody awake, alert your buddies. Depending on the enemy's strength and numbers, the best option might be to get your radio man to call for a gun run or an air strike, bring in one of those awesome Apache helicopters or one of those AC130 gunships and just light up the whole forest. Just turn the forest into a desert. Just knock down all the trees.

I know that's not, green, of me to say that, but we could put those trees to good use in some way, printing paper, whatever. Make sure you obliterate that enemy by using superior firepower, which is only a phone call away. Why take a chance? Listen, if you've done something like that, you've done your job as a watchman. You have done your duty as a guard. You've stayed awake. You've been alert. You've saved your entire squad. And

what's better, you fought smarter, not harder. You let the big guns do the work. You neutralize the threat without even having to fire a shot.

You see the analogy to prayer, don't you? And this is John Owen's point, which is unpacking Jesus' point: the need for watchfulness to fight against the enemy's temptations. Jesus doesn't say, watch, and when you see temptation, go and dabble with it. He doesn't say, watch, and when you see temptation, go take a walk or do something active. Maybe those things are good to do. But what does he say? He says, "Watch and pray that you don't enter into temptation."

That's your action because the point is to resist in the evil day. It's to stand firm, not to enter into temptation, which in and of itself is sin. Just to enter into the temptation is sin. And that leads to even more sinning. It leads to falling. It leads to compromise. And once you're compromised, guess what? Your entire squad's compromised, your place on the line is compromised, and there's a hole for the enemy to drive a truck through.

So when you see the enemy, when the conscience fires to warn you about a temptation that's enticing your soul, whether it's a particular lust, whether it's a sense that you have been slighted in some way, whether it's a perceived offense against you, whether it's an occasion for bitterness, whether it's a bit of juicy gossip, just a tidbit, whether it's the temptation to slight somebody's character, whatever it is, if you're standing watch as Jesus told his disciples to stand watch, as Paul exhorts us to do, you're awake, you're alert, you're looking out for just such an attack. It doesn't take you by surprise. Nothing can take you by surprise because you're always watching. You've been waiting for this.

Now that it's come, you entertain no illusions of your own ability to fight a temptation in your own strength. But you know Someone who does. So you get on your radio, also known as prayer, call for help, and you rain down the power of divine omnipotence on the head of your tempter, send him lurking into the bushes. You ask God to obliterate that temptation and every thought of that temptation that you know you're too weak to face. You ask him to fight your battle for you. It's in prayer that you raise the shield of faith "with which you will be able

to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one," not just a high percentage. All. You'll watch his fiery darts fall to the ground harmlessly as you praise God for his mighty, almighty power. And then you're back to your post to keep watching, being prayerful because you love watching the enemy get obliterated.

Paul writes, "...to this end, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints." And then he's quick to add in verse 19, Oh, and don't forget to pray for me, too. Beloved, I'll just say this, make a brief comment, and move on to the next point. Don't forget to pray for your leaders. Don't forget to pray for your pastors, your elders. I've been under authority as well, and I know how tempting it can be to criticize your leaders, take up offenses against your leaders, gossip about their weaknesses, amplify all their shortcomings and faults.

It's really easy to criticize leaders, which is why Paul says in a number of places in Scripture, but I like this one in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, he says, "We request of you, brethren." I love how soft he is with that language. He didn't say, I implore you, I exhort you, I command you, I demand. He says, "We request

of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”

There's no better way to foster an attitude of loving appreciation for your leaders than to pray for them, that God would uphold them by his power, that he would protect them from enemy attacks. The fiery darts of temptation hit your leaders, too, and sometimes the enemy is on full auto with fiery darts at your leaders, firing darts of temptation, distraction, discouragement. Don't give any aid to Satan. Don't help his ongoing efforts to take down Christian leaders. Oppose him, loving your leaders through prayer. It was Spurgeon who said, “No man can do me a truer kindness in this world than to pray for me.” I hope that's your thought, too, and I know for so many of you, that is. So encouraging.

Now, being on the alert is not only about a negative watchfulness; it's also about a positive watchfulness as well. There's an advancement aspect to staying alert and being prayerful. So here's a third point, number three, combat prayer



is not only constant and instant; it's also strategic. Strategic. Believe me, I spent some time thinking about how I can make, strategic, into a word that ends with, ant, so it would just beautifully kind of sync up with the other two points, but I couldn't do that. So combat prayer is strategic. That's the way it is.

Now taking everything we've surveyed so far, let's carry all that into verses 19 and 20, being fully protected, verses 14 and following, taking the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit into battle, praying constantly, instant in prayer because we're watching for enemy attacks, we also watch for opportunity. Be praying and watching, as it says as well, "on my behalf," Paul says, "that words may be given to me in the opening of my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel for which I'm an ambassador in chains, so that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly as I ought to speak."

As I said, our participation through prayer is what turns each of us into force multipliers in spiritual warfare. From the least to the greatest, from the youngest to the oldest, from the simplest thinker to the most complex and intelligent, calling on

God is how every single saint gets into the fight. Earlier in the letter, in Ephesians 5:15 and following, Paul calls attention, you can turn there if you'd like to, Ephesians 5:15 and following, Paul calls attention to the time and the occasion and the moment. He says, "Therefore, look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but as wise," and here's why you want to be wise: You're "redeeming the time because the days are evil." Another way to translate, redeeming the time, is to take advantage of every opportunity, "because the days are evil." On account of this, don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Over in 1 Thessalonians 5:4 and following, Paul gives a similar exhortation, similar wording. You can turn there if you'd like and read it for yourself. It's so interesting because this is the other text in the New Testament epistles where Paul uses this armor of God imagery. 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 4, "You, brothers, are not in darkness, that that day would overtake you like a thief, for you are all sons of light and sons of the day." That is to say, you're awake, you're alert, you're watchful. So "You are sons of the light, sons of the day. We are not of night nor of darkness. So then, let us not sleep as

others do, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night. Those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day," here it is, "let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation."

And we could keep on reading, but let's stop there to draw attention to the point, that in both, in Ephesians 5 and 1 Thessalonians 5, Christians are to be those who are fully awake, alert people, those who are always paying attention to their surroundings, to their environment, to the social context even, the cultural context, political context. Know the world you live in. Know the struggles and the travails of the people around you. Be aware. Read the room, as they say.

We know we live in a battleground, and when we know that, it sets our expectations about life, that things are bound to be hard because warfare is not easy. We're going to take some casualties. We're going to take some shots. Unwise, foolish people are those who live for pleasure, those who are here to entertain themselves and distract themselves to death, those who expect everything around them to conform to them and their needs

and their desires, who want to spin the world around their demands.

Wise Christians, they don't set expectations like that about the world. They know it's fallen. They know the people around them are fallen. Even the saints in the church are redeemed sinners: capital S, capital I, capital N, capital N, capital E, capital R, capital S. If you've ever been sinned against by a Christian, it hurts, but yeah, but it shouldn't surprise you. Wise Christians are awake, alert, sober-minded, watchful, so we can be effective in praying. Wise Christians know their Bibles. They understand the will of the Lord. They're actively looking to make the best use of time and redeem every single opportunity.

And Paul doesn't want us to guess about how we can pray most effectively for him, and by extension for all those who serve the churches of Jesus Christ in leadership. He asks the church to pray that God will give him words, meaning here utterance, speech. Whenever he opens his mouth, he wants the language and the manner of expression to be God-giving, given. And that is what every true pastor wants. It's what every

preacher wants. He wants his mouth to be a conduit of divine truth, and not only in content, but also in intention of the text, in mood, in its tenor, in its love, in its tone.

Most of all, Paul prays that he opens his mouth in boldness, “so that in proclaiming the mystery of the Gospel, I may speak boldly as I ought to speak.” The Gospel, the announcement of the grace of God for sinners, who will reconcile to himself in Christ all who bow the knee to Jesus as Lord over all, that’s a message that’s only fitting to speak about with boldness, freely, with joy, without any equivocation, without any drawing back, but with deep conviction, full-throated Gospel proclamation, and Paul’s praying for that.

You think of anybody on this earth, apart from the Lord Jesus himself, who was bold. I can think of John the Baptist. I can think of Elijah on Mount Carmel, and I can think of the Apostle Paul. They’re in my top three. Why would he be praying this? Paul reminds them, I’m, “I’m an ambassador in chains.” The last thing we expect our ambassadors serving overseas to have to do is to be in chains, to be put into a prison cell. I mean, that would be the height of offense, wouldn’t it? The height of

offense is for one of our ambassadors overseas to be diminished in any way, to be insulted, to be treated shabbily, let alone to be hunted down, captured like an animal, and thrown into a cage. But that's Paul. I am an ambassador for the Lord Jesus Christ. I am an ambassador of the King of all the earth. And what's up with this? I'm in chains.

And he anticipates standing before the Emperor of the Roman Empire, who at this time in history, by the way, is Emperor Nero. Caesar is Nero, not one of our presidents. Nero, who had no problem taking from the rich and everybody else in society to fund his escapades, his immorality, his sin, his vileness, his capriciousness, his violence. Think about using the vehicles of government to turn that as a weapon against your enemies, your political enemies. The Caesars had no problem with that at all. No qualms, before such a reprehensible, power-hungry leader; capricious, vile, violent, a bold proclamation of a higher Lord than Caesar. That's what Paul's about to preach.

We understand the reason for his request, here. Not everyone wants pastors to preach the Gospel boldly, freely, with deep conviction. As we're all fully aware, the times that Paul

predicted in 2 Timothy 4:3, those times are upon us. Those are the times we live in. He said, "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their desires." I always find it interesting, he doesn't necessarily say false teachers, just teachers "in accordance with their desires." Could be false teachers, could be professing Christian teachers who are a lot softer on the ears, softer on the demands.

We've got a world of that around us. The Internet has provided unprecedented access to ear-tickling teachers, allowing people to "accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires." And all those teachers out there create unreasonable standards of comparison. When people sit here and listen to their pastor, and then they go online and listen to everybody they like to listen to, they start comparing. You can't help but do that. It stirs up rebellion in the heart, discontent in the pew.

Listen, the only way for faithful churches to resist the incoming tide of those who 2 Timothy 4:4 says "will turn away

their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths," the only way for faithful churches to resist this tide, which is very powerful around us, is to pray. It's not to preach angrier sermons. It's not to scold everybody for going on the Internet. I go on the Internet, okay? I go on the Internet. The other pastors go on the Internet. The elders go on the Internet. We love good Internet preaching, teaching, podcasts. We love to listen to that. We are careful about our diet. We're careful about how much we take in. We're careful that we don't listen so much that we stop being readers.

So I don't want to be going on an angry screed against Internet preaching and stuff like that. I just want to tell you that the way you resist this tide is not by, by becoming legalistic in any way; it is to become more intent on prayer. Pray that God would help us, protect us, protect our leaders, protect our members, protect our unity, protect our harmony, fill us with gratitude, fill us with joy, joy in Christ, joy in our salvation.

What are we to pray for in that same passage where Paul's giving that warning, 2 Timothy, chapter 4? What are we to pray



for? That pastors and teachers would fear God and obey Paul's command, that solemn charge he laid on the conscience of Timothy, 2 Timothy 4:2: "Preach the word. Be ready," or the word translated in the old English is, be instant, "in season and out of season." "Preach the word, being instant in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction." Pray that for your leaders. Pray that for your, for the pastors that you love, that you know from your past. Pray that for faithful pastors that we're connected with because they're all under attack, especially in these evil times.

Beloved, I know for a fact there are many in this church, many outside the church who are doing exactly that. They're praying. They're praying, praying fervently as good soldiers in spiritual warfare against all the enemy's designs to stifle the truth, to discourage, distract, divide this church. They're praying for other churches in the same way as well. We're all in this together.

You want to know how to apply this sermon? Because you can, and you must, put this into practice for the rest of your life as a Christian who's engaged in spiritual warfare. You've been

enlisted into the army. You can't get out of it. It's a lifelong enlistment. You don't want to get out of it. Truth is benefits are awesome.

Here's how you apply it. All you have to do is take the outline points from this sermon and turn them into points of application. And let me just tell you, by the way, that's how you apply every sermon that we preach. I don't make outline points just for you to follow the thought, have little hooks to hang your thoughts on and know where we are and be organized. But it's also so you can have that little summation of the point beyond it, so you can turn that into an application point. That's your job, is to learn how to apply the sermon that you listen to every Sunday, to apply that in wisdom, apply this in prayer. Let's do that together.

First, pray constantly. Here's how you apply it. Pray constantly. Pray habitually. Pray as an ongoing habit of mind and of practice of daily life. I like what William Gurnall said; he wrote this, "What bread and salt are to our table, that's what prayer is to the Christian in all his undertakings, enjoyments, and temptations. Whatever our meal is, bread and

salt are set on the board.” This is a time he's writing before all of our concern about cabor, carbohydrates and high cholesterol and all the stuff I really don't care about. I like bread and salt on my table, too.

Keep reading. “Whatever our meal is, bread and salt are set on the board and whatever our condition is, prayer must not be forgot. As we dip all our morsels into salt and eat them with bread, so we are to eat every grace, season every enjoyment, mingle every duty, and oppose every temptation with prayer.” Be always ready for prayer. Be always praying. Put on the full armor of God every single day and then by praying every day, throughout the day, about everything at all times in the Spirit.

Your closest, most intimate companion, even if you are a married person, your closest companion is the Spirit of God indwelling you, the Lord Jesus Christ who is over you and with you, who said, “I will never leave you or forsake you” and your God, whom he represents and brings to you and you to him, you're in his presence at all times. Enjoy the fellowship of the triune God that you have. And pray. Pray constantly.

If you need help building a pattern for prayer, just like we did today, just go through the prayers in Scripture. Start with the Lord's Prayer. That is such a framework for a healthy prayer life. Start there, stay there until you kind of get the sense and pray like that, Matthew 6:19-13, Luke 11:2-4. And then, as just as we did, learn from Paul's prayer reports and his epistles how to pray. Pray through those things for yourself.

Second application point: Pray instantly. Pray instantly, immediately, at the very first sign of enemy activity, at the very first sign of opportunity. Pray because you're watchful, because you're alert and aware. You're praying for yourself. You're praying for your brothers and sisters as comrades-in-arms in the same fight. You're praying for your pastors, elders, shepherds, that we all resist in the evil day and stand firm. And you're praying for opportunity as well, open doors.

William Gurnall says, "If a Christian is careless in praying, then he is weak in hearing, loose in his walking, and

he shall find that he miscarries in all his enterprises, he's ensnared in all his enjoyments, he's baffled with every temptation, and discomposed at every affliction that meets him. And the reason of all this is because our strength both to do and to suffer comes from God." Christian, be instant in prayer. We have to pray, pray constantly, pray instantly, watchful at all times for any sign of, weakness, weakness, but also every opportunity.

So third, pray strategically. Nothing is more strategic in advancing the cause of God and his kingdom than the proclamation of God's mighty Word. You want to be strategic; you want to be effective; you want to make a true mark in this world with your life? You cannot do better than unleashing the almighty power of God by praying that his Gospel goes forward freely, with deep conviction, with all boldness, without hindrance, without equivocation, without softening the hard edges. It's full force. Pray for the pastors of this church, pastors of other faithful churches as well. And by doing so, we will resist in the evil day and stand firm together. Bow with me for a word of prayer.

Our God, it is our desire to do what this passage calls us to do. It's our call to arms to put on the full armor of God and then to be prayerful soldiers, marching into the battle, taking the field, and expecting that you are always present, always there to help us in every time of need. Whether we're under attack or whether we're seeing opportunity, we just pray that you would give us strength, encouragement, joy, gratitude.

It's just the, the privilege that we have of being numbered in your army, of calling our commander-in-chief, friend and Savior, of calling you, the infinite, immortal, eternal God, our Father, and calling the Holy Spirit our, our truth teacher, our guide, the illuminator of the truth, and our Comforter. We know that the Spirit and the Lord Jesus Christ pray for us at all times, bringing our requests to you before the throne of grace, and we pray that you would involve us as a church in that ministry as well, that we'd be used by you in this army to good effect. Pray that your will would be done in each and every life here in our church as a, as a body.

We pray for other faithful churches around the country as well, men whom we admire, esteem, respect, follow. We pray that

you would strengthen them. So many names I don't want to mention now, but they're on my mind, Lord. And I know there are, are people in this congregation who regard other teachers as well. And we just pray that you would lift them up, strengthen and protect them. Don't let them fall into scandal. There's been so much of that. We ask that you protect all of us. Help us as a mighty army to go forward, taking hill after hill, advancing the cause of the Gospel, that your name, God, would be glorified in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.