

Resolved to Finish Well: Staying Alert in Prayer
Ephesians 6:18-24

*“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, **keep alert with all perseverance...**”*

Introduction: Before setting out to conquer the summit of Mount Everest in 1924, George Mallory was asked *why* he wanted to attempt it. *“Because it’s there”* was his famous response. Last seen about 800 vertical feet from the summit, Mallory’s body was finally discovered in 1999 by an expedition trying to prove whether he or his climbing partner, Andrew “Sandy” Irvine actually made it to the summit.

We know, of course, that the summit of Everest was reached by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953 after decades of attempts and discoveries of pathways. Since then, Everest has held both fascination and aspiration, as thousands have actually reached the top, with 500-900 permits per year given out to adventurers since 2010 (except for the COVID years) attempting to conquer the highest mountain in the world, rising over 29,000 feet into the air. However, there have also been hundreds of deaths, with at least 317 known currently. In order to reach a summit that has been described as “the size of a dining room table, many remain up in ‘rainbow valley’, an area right below the summit where dead litter the mountainside still wearing their brightly colored winter gear, and 3,000 feet below that is commonly called the ‘death zone’ where climbers succumb to low oxygen, shifting weather, and low pressure.

There is an obvious question of “why”, why would someone risk their life to simply leave their name on a small swath of land and say “they did it”? I’m sure there are some in this room who would LOVE to have the opportunity to take on this challenge, where others may think this is the craziest of ventures. But what strikes me are the parallels of the perilous trek up to the highest peak and what we are called to in perseverance in our life with Christ. Listen to **Jon Krakauer**, the author of *Into Thin Air: A personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster*, where 8 people died as the weather turned unexpectedly trapping different groups in their trip up and down the mountain:

*“I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was primarily **about enduring pain**. And in subjecting ourselves **to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering**, it struck me that most of use were probably seeking, above else, something like a state of grace.”*

*“Not only during the ascent but also during the descent my willpower is dulled. The longer I climb the less important the goal seems to me, the more indifferent I become to myself. My attention has diminished, my memory is weakened. **My mental fatigue is now greater than the bodily. It is so pleasant to sit doing nothing—and therefore so dangerous. Death through exhaustion is—like death through freezing—a pleasant one.** Reinhold Messner *The Crystal Horizon I*”*

*“When I rest I feel utterly lifeless except that my throat burns when I draw breath... I can scarcely go on. No despair, no happiness, no anxiety. I have not lost the mastery of my feelings, there are actually no more feelings. I consist only of will. After each few metres this too fizzles out in unending tiredness. Then I think nothing. I let myself fall, just lie there. For an indefinite time I remain completely irresolute. **Then I make a few steps again.**”*

As we finish out this wonderfully rich, deep, and encouraging book, we are brought once again with the call to **persevere, to keep alert, and to make sure we stay the course of our clearly delineated mission.**

The world we live in is difficult, the path narrow, the battle raging, our bodies weak, and our enemy is vicious. But Paul emphasized that our resources are strong, we are blessed in the heavenlies with every spiritual blessing, loved before the foundation of the world, chosen, predestined, and adopted as children of God through Jesus Christ. We are redeemed, forgiven, and sealed. Grace has been lavished on us, the mystery of God's will given, and a sure inheritance promised. We were dead but have been made alive. We were strangers but now part of God's family. We were enemies but now have bold, confident access to God. We were weak on our own but now have the power of God working in us. We were alone but now have the Spirit dwelling in us. We were once children of wrath who lived according to the lusts of our passions, but now we walk in love, light, in wisdom, purity, and newness. We were once under the control of Satan in this world, unable to course correct in the world's system but forced to go wherever the current took us, but now have a full armament to withstand the battle brought by the spiritual forces of evil.

In spite of these blessings, we can still easily get bogged down in the overwhelming nature of this world. We can get tired and exhausted from responsibilities, discouraged with evil around us and disheartened with our sin within. In the midst of these inevitable struggles, we can feel like the one climbing up Everest, mentally exhausted and desirous of staying put, slowly freezing to death.

The Bible addresses this whole issue. Not only is there an acknowledgement of our desire and potentiality to **lose heart**, there are solutions. Jesus told a parable to His disciples in **Luke 18**, who faced the real possibility of losing heart and ceasing the vital activity of **prayer**. So He told of a widow who sought justice from a pagan, selfish judge through determined requests. Jesus' point that disciples should do the same, since we pray to a God who loves His elect and will answer their cries when we utter them day and night. Paul dealt with **losing heart** in **2 Corinthians 4:1, 16**, reminding the church not to lose heart since we have a new covenant ministry and that though our OUTER MAN is wasting away, our inner man is being prepared day by day for an *eternal weight of glory to come*. These both point out a perspective that Paul brings about again at the end of Ephesians, which is, **prayer and perseverance go hand in hand, and prayer is what binds all the pieces of armor together, making sure we are alert, watchful, and prepared to finish well.**

Key Observations of this text:

Notice in these verses a couple of observable facts. 1) Prayer is not a piece of armor, but it is needed for all the pieces to work together. If the midst of a battle, a weary soldier would want to rest, take a break, or simply allow exhaustion to dull his senses. Prayer is what keeps a soldier alert **in the midst of** the battle, aware of surroundings and potential attack. 2) Notice there are **4 "all's"** here, each describing prayer: ALL times, ALL prayer, ALL perseverance, for ALL the saints. Not only does this give us specifics about how and why to pray, but also puts a clear emphasis on prayer itself. If this was a book about doctrine and living, about position and practice, and about whom we are and what we do, prayer is the binding agent of it all (like applesauce at a Dutch dinner!). Prayer is not secondary, but is the **temperature gauge** of faith for believers in Jesus Christ. Continual prayer signals maturity, dependency, and strength, where a lack of prayer reveals a cold heart that trusts self, relies on one's own thoughts/emotions/abilities, and leaves one susceptible to disastrous attack.

Paul gives with **four different emphases on prayer**, then an illustration of how to pray for him, and finishes with final greetings to close this letter.

The Source of Continual Prayer: *All times in the Spirit*

Prayer is hard. We are easily distracted, often have expectations of immediate responses, and walk by sight rather than faith. We have relegated prayer far too often to formulaic times (before meals or bedtime) or when we are in a pinch (help me on this test, in this circumstance, etc.) only. Prayer is a beautiful expression of faith in God and is designed to give us access to the God of this universe, through Christ and the Spirit, in order to commune with Him **at all and any time**. Erin has often expressed that though we may not see each other throughout the day, it is nice to know that I'm thinking about her, even when we are not face to face. Prayer allows us to have God on the forefront of our mind throughout the day, in the best and worst circumstances, and when we wake in the middle of the night. In the OT, God called Israel to love Him with their whole heart, soul, and mind (Deut. 6:5) to talk about this when they sat, walked, and talked to their kids (6:7), and to bind them on their hands, put them between their eyes, and write them on the doorposts of their houses and gates (6:9). In other words, God should be on their mind and heart continually, on their lips consistently, and in their lives completely. Unfortunately for Israel, this devolved into literally wearing pieces of clothing and wrapping leather straps around their head and hands, rather than actually seeking the Lord. In the NT, Paul simply stated **"Pray without ceasing"** (1 Thess. 5:17)

But how do we do that? Is this a call to formal prayer throughout the day? The answer is in the words **"all times"**, every occasion, all circumstances, in every part of the day. Is there a time for formal prayer? Absolutely. Jesus demonstrated this on His teaching to the disciples and the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1-4). But there are times for spontaneous prayer, for silent prayer, for times of giving thanks, for making requests, for times of anxiety, for times of sorrow and desperation, for times of awe, for questions, and for simply acknowledging His greatness. We received a model of this in **Steve Severance**, who studied and prayed consistently, would pray with you (even if he didn't know you), committed to pray for you, asked if you were praying, and went home to be with Jesus surrounded by his family and friends with prayer and singing hymns. Prayer is the mindset and action we take when we know God is sovereign, ever-present, unchanging, never slumbering or sleeping, and ready to hear our requests.

But WHAT do we pray, especially in those awkward silent times or when we are overwhelmed with the weight and pressure of life? This is why prayer is done in the **Spirit**, here being the Holy Spirit. There are two specific ways that the Spirit helps us in prayer. **1) The Spirit helps us wield the sword of the Spirit in prayer** – Notice that it's the Spirit that guides us in truth and prayer, connecting these two activities intimately. How do we grow in WHAT to pray for? We grow in our understanding of God and His will through the Word. This elevates prayer from request-laden words to opportunity to adore, to praise, and to bless the Lord. It moves us to thanking Him for all the blessings we have in Christ. It turns the focus from ourselves to God and others, giving us insight into both. **2) The Spirit Himself intercedes for us** according to **Romans 8:26-27**:

"Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

The Holy Spirit comprehends the thoughts of God (1 Cor. 2:11), so His intercession, which is too deep for words, is effective on our behalf. We trust that the Spirit is active, not only helping guide us in truthful prayer, but guiding us according to the **will of God**. Remember, the Spirit will never be the source of anything that is contrary to God's will or Word, so any message or wording one attributes to the Spirit has to pass that test. In prayer, we pray, the Spirit prays, and even Christ prays on our behalf (Heb. 7:25) so that we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him.

The Request of Prayer: *with all prayer and supplication*

Not only do we pray consistently, we are called to make prayer **specific**. The word supplication here means to request or petition for particular benefits or needs. As we pray for others, we seek to focus our prayer on the real spiritual needs and thank God for His glorious blessing.

It is a joy to listen to children pray. There is a purity and innocence of child-like faith and understanding, where the scope and sphere of knowledge is limited, but a total trust within that circle. Children pray all inclusive prayers: *bless the whole world, help everyone in every hospital, save everyone!* But as we grow in our child-like but knowledge filled trust of our Savior, our prayer should become more specific but no less trusting. Often we do not experience the comfort and encouragement of answered prayer because we have never prayed for specific benefits or needs. We are reminded as a church that every venture in the name of Christ with which we embark, from personal evangelism, to parenting, marriage, to equipping, leadership development, to church planting is a result of specific, committed prayer – or at least it better be. Every attempt in the name of Christ needs to have prayer as the focal point, so that when the prayer is answered, God receives the glory and we stay humbly in the shadows of the Son.

The Goal of Prayer: *keeping alert with all perseverance*

So we pray consistently and specifically, but there is another, perhaps unexpected benefit and purpose in prayer. We are to **stay alert** in prayer, and praying helps **keep us alert!** Watchfulness is a repeated emphasis in the NT, an imperative necessary in a world that is set against us and an enemy who is constantly prowling (1 Pet. 5:8). Jesus emphasized watchfulness since we do not know when He will return, but WHEN HE DOES, He should find us ready and awake (Matt. 24:42; 25:13) as He told parables of the 10 virgins and the returning master. In the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before Jesus died, Jesus asked His disciples to “remain here, and watch with me” (Matt. 26:38) and to “watch and pray that you may not enter temptation” (26:41). Their spirit was willing but flesh was weak, so they fell asleep over and over, unable to maintain a watchful spirit.

This is where prayer is so hard and necessary. When we feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and just too busy, prayer gets squeezed out. Then, we are faced with a decision or circumstance and we are caught unaware and unprepared, so we cry out in reactive response. Though that is good and God will still answer, the call to persevere and stay alert demands that we stop the cycle. These last weeks Erin has been gone so it’s been me and two daughters at home. They have been helpful and responsible, but the cleanliness of our house is not up to its typical par set by my bride. Last week, after picking Luci up to come here for worship (I was here early), we were visited by the Luke & Eric Severance and two friends who came by to see their old house. I invited them in and quickly remembered that things were messy, cluttered, and not put away. I laughed as I thought of these passages of not being prepared for a visit, thinking in my mind that I’d tidy up *later*. That is the disposition we often take with prayer – *we’ll do it later, when we have no idea when the visit will come*.

This is why we are called to be watchful (1 Cor. 16:13), to keep awake and sober (1 Thess. 5:6), and to watch ourselves and stay awake (Luke 12:37). This is the job and function of elders, who are called to be alert (Eph. 20:31) and who are keeping watch over our souls (Heb. 13:17). This is primarily done through prayer, since there is no way to truly stay alert without it. That is why Paul said in a parallel passage in **Colossians 4:2**, “*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*”

The Objects of Prayer: *(on behalf of) all the saints*

This leads to the last facet of prayer, which is the object. Paul builds a case that the most effective prayer is often uttered for others, not we ourselves. We are called to make **specific prayer for all the saints**,

meaning that there is a unique and intimate relationship that we share with each other, and our standing firm to the end is dependent on the prayer of others to achieve. Prayer for others should **primarily** focus on the spiritual needs of the saints, not merely the physical. We pray according to the blessings laid out in Ephesians, that our friends and family would exercise their weaponry. We pray that they would take hold of these blessings, grow in maturity, and glorify the Lord, standing firm to the end.

Paul demonstrated that people were his most important value and mission. He sent Tychicus to them (6:21) so they'd know how he was doing and to be encouraged. Our prayer becomes more specific and effective for others the more we know them, understand them, and engage with them. This is why if you are a part of this church, you must engage with people at a growing and deepening level. As you do this, you begin to pray more often and more specifically for them. I realize often that I have people praying for me regularly, and it is necessary and effective. Without it, I'd be unprotected and less alert. *Do you engage in prayer for the people of this church? Is it specific? Do you pray for our pastors/elders? Do you pray for our effectiveness in reaching people for Christ? Do you pray that God would raise up leaders, equipped churchmen and women? If not, would you?*

The Illustration of Prayer: Prayer for Gospel Effectiveness

It is instructive on several levels to observe what Paul asked for in terms of prayer at the end of his letter. He did not ask for physical comfort, or to be released from prison, or for a good outcome to a trial. He prayed for **effectiveness for his mission in the circumstances in which he found himself!** A few observations from his prayer:

- 1) **Boldness is needed in sharing the gospel** – Paul wrote the book on evangelism, Christ, and the church, and he was the most effective missionary the world has ever known. Yet he himself asked the church to pray for **boldness**, that he would speak *clearly, openly, and plainly* the message of the mystery of Christ? Why did he need prayer? Because he faced the same fear and anxiety we do in sharing Christ with others!
- 2) **Words are needed in sharing the gospel** – Notice he wanted to “proclaim” the mystery of the gospel, meaning to truly share the gospel takes communicating words, not simply a good life lived. Paul was chained to a guard which gave him a captive audience, but merely living a godly life in front of a guard would not actually share the gospel. The gospel **MUST** be communicated clearly, from the holiness and glory God, to man's sin, to our need of forgiveness, to the work of Christ on the cross to the call of repentance.
- 3) **Cost is involved in sharing the gospel** – Paul knew the cost. The reason he was in chains was because of the very gospel he wished to continue to communicate. In an ever devolving world that is closer to Romans 1:32 rather than 1:18-20, there will be a growing cost in not just holding fast to the truth, but being known as those who proclaim it! The best way to suffer no persecution is to keep your mouth shut, and thereby reveal that you really do **NOT** believe in the power or greatness of the gospel itself.
- 4) **Prayer is required in sharing the gospel** – This is no small thing. Paul was a professional by any standard, but he was dependent on the prayer of the church body and family for effectiveness. Perhaps one of the reasons we may not be motivated to share the gospel is that we are not praying toward that end, or that we are not all praying toward that end.

One last observation as we end this great book. Paul ends with a greeting and benediction, reminding of the peace, love with faith, and grace we've been given from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Bookending this letter is an emphasis on the sovereignty of God, by whom we are blessed and every believer chosen and predestined before the foundation of the world. Some who balk at that reality will

say it lessens our motivation to evangelize. But Paul drank deeply from the well of God's sovereign grace, and that motivated him to continue to evangelize boldly! I hope we are a well taught church who **loves doctrine**, because in right doctrine we can worship God truthfully and honestly. But being well taught, it SHOULD motivate us more than ever to proclaim the greatness of Christ, the offer of forgiveness, and the mystery of the gospel to a world captivated by their own sinful desires. May we learn from Paul to drink deeply of the fountain of truth to allow it to spring forth in proclamation to others. In all of this, may be do it all **FOR HIS GLORY, MAGNIFYING CHRIST AND DISPLAYING HIS GREATNESS IN THE CHURCH!**