

Recall & React: Equipped with Gospel Armor (Part 4)

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I can think of very few things more unsettling in warfare than the reality of landmines. Thousands of innocent civilians and many children die and are maimed each year from inadvertently entering a minefield set up during an armed conflict and triggering one of the mines. Many of these were set years ago. It's estimated that millions and millions of acres of land around the world are still unusable because they are contaminated by landmines.

Now, imagine for a second, if you were walking along and you encountered this sign with barbed wire around it. What sort of a person would go ahead and step over the barbed wire and frolic in the field beyond the barrier? A person lacking in humility and swollen with pride.

When it comes to our spiritual lives pride leads us into minefield after minefield. The Bible warns us over and over again that pride will lead us to spiritual harm and destruction. Listen to Isaiah 2:11. Proverbs 29:23 and Proverbs 16:18. Why is pride so sinister and damaging? The arrogant person trusts in himself. He thinks he is the expert in every area. He rejects the counsel of God and thinks he knows better. Our spiritual enemy sits and salivates over the prideful person.

If there has been one thing that has been clear throughout our study of the armor of God, I hope you have seen how important humility is for the warrior engaged in spiritual battle. We cannot be exalted in pride. We must rely on God's strength and not our own and we will see this again today as we finish up this section.

In Ephesians 6:10-20 we have been studying **4 Tactics Necessary to Resist our Spiritual Enemy with God's Strength**

1. Rely on God's Power at Work in You (v. 10)

Verse 10 sets the tone for the rest of this section. Let's read it. The power of God that raised Christ from the dead is at work in us. We must cultivate the humility to depend on God's strength for the fight. Second, in depending on God's strength we must know our enemy and resist.

2. Recognize and Resist the Enemy (vv. 11-13)

Let me read verses 11-13. We are able to resist and stand firm when we put on God's armor and know our enemy. He makes clear exactly what this armor is in verses 14-17 and this is our third tactic.

3. Receive the Gifts of God for the Fight (vv. 14-17)

Paul gives us 6 pieces of armor here in verses 14-17. Let me read this. Some of the pieces are mentioned in the book of Isaiah as being worn by God and/or the Messiah. The point is that we have these gifts given to us through the work of Christ. We can trust the armor for the battle. It will hold and it will keep us safe.

But practically speaking, how do we put on the armor? How do we make sure we are equipped with it? That's what Paul wants us to understand in verses 18-20.

4. Request the Help of the Spirit (vv. 18-20)

Let's begin this by reading verse 18. Paul is not giving us a seventh piece of armor here or something else to be doing in order to earn God's favor. He's saying that prayer is the posture of humble dependence that we take as we utilize each of the gifts of armor. Dependent prayer is the mindset that we carry into the fight. One author put it this way and I thought this was helpful.

"Paul wants his readers to understand that prayer is 'foundational for the deployment of all the other weapons', and is therefore crucial if they are to stand firm in their spiritual struggle." – Peter Obrien

But this is challenging for us because we are self-confident and independent people. We are Americans and we think we can do anything. We figure if we just work hard, we can make it happen. So, to get on our knees, close our eyes, and speak to someone we can't see seems unhelpful and unproductive.

But in this spiritual battle there's nothing more productive than dependent prayer. In fact, Paul ends this section by focusing on prayer because this is the most important part. And here's the beauty of this. Prayer is open to even the weakest Christian at his or her weakest moment. In fact, when you recognize you are your most vulnerable and lacking in strength, you are in the perfect mindset to pray.

I want you to notice how important Paul sees prayer because of the number of times he uses the word "all" in verse 18. Look with me. Nothing is outside the

scope of prayer and no time is a bad time to pray. Let's look in more detail at these 4 uses of the word "all" to fill out our understanding of the importance of prayer. First, we are to pray at all times in the Spirit. What does it mean to pray at all times? Well, he's not saying to do nothing but pray. Think of this as saying to pray in all seasons and in all circumstances. There are favorable seasons and difficult seasons. We are clearly in a time of heightened anxiety and concern right now. We pray differently in different times, but it's always an appropriate time to pray.

But notice that when we pray, we pray "in the Spirit." What does it mean to pray in the Spirit? It's not some mystical experience where you go into a trance. If you look up to verse 17 the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. The Spirit works through the Word of God. So, praying in the Spirit means praying according to God's revealed will in His Word. It means praying based on the Word of God and informed by the Word of God. In other words, I pray for what God desires.

The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 is a wonderful example of this. You will notice in this prayer that there are 6 total requests. The first three are "you" requests, directed to God and the second 3 are "us" requests where we ask for our needs to be met. In this prayer Jesus gives us a guide for praying according to God's will or we could say praying in the Spirit. We prepare for spiritual battle by humbly aligning our thoughts and desires to God's, which He has given us in His Word, which He activates in our hearts by the Spirit.

Second, we are to pray "with all prayer and supplication." These two words are very similar but there's enough of a distinction to separate them. The word "prayer" focuses on the general practice of approaching God in prayer. It includes adoration of God, confession of sin, and thankfulness for what He has given. The word "supplication" focuses more on specific requests that we make to God. God wants us to lay out our requests before Him and ask Him for things. Now, our requests are formed by the Word of God, but we do ask, and He wants us to ask. Paul is saying here that we utilize every type of prayer available to us to exercise our dependence on God.

Third, we keep alert in our praying with all perseverance. To be alert means to keep watch. Think of what Jesus told the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane. Stay alert in prayer. Stay awake. This phrase is used other places in the NT to

encourage believers to remain watchful as they wait for Jesus's return. The idea is that in light of Jesus's return we need to remain spiritually watchful in prayer while we wait.

It's easy to fall into a sense of complacency. This is especially true for us in a very comfortable modern lifestyle. Augustine describes it this way. He says to imagine that we are wanderers in a far country away from our homeland and that wandering away from home is miserable. So, we begin the journey home with great excitement because we know that joy and satisfaction can only be found at home. But then he says things begin to change:

"We find, however, that we must make use of some mode of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that fatherland where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey: and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delight would make us truly happy." – Augustine

For most of us this sense of apathetic complacency is so normal we hardly even notice it. And this is why Paul exhorts us here to keep alert or watchful with all perseverance. We cannot properly engage in dependent prayer and stand firm in the midst of spiritual battle when we are asleep.

The fourth use of the word "all" to describe dependent prayer is found at the end of verse 18. Up to this point Paul has focused on prayer for individual personal needs and struggles. But, of course, we aren't in this spiritual battle alone. In fact, you don't want to enter this battle alone. A lone soldier will not last long against this enemy. The beauty of the church is that we are engaged in the fight together.

I have to say that our current situation of social distancing makes this quite difficult. It's easy to isolate and not reach out to anyone. This is the time when more than ever we need one another. I've heard stories of people at WBC calling and checking in on one another and offering to help in any way they can. It's so good to hear that and if you haven't done any of that so far let me just encourage you to do it.

You know, at some point we are going to emerge from this time of isolation and my desire is that we would realize through this how important the church really is. It would be a shame to come out of this crisis time and go right back into our normal mode of operation. God wants to work in us something good through something uncomfortable and difficult. We can begin practicing the importance of the gathered church now by praying for one another. Pray that God would keep us safe physically, but also pray that God would protect your brothers and sisters spiritually. This is a time of heightened spiritual warfare. It's easy to get anxious, panicked, and unsettled. Pray for strength for those around you. Pray for perseverance. Pray for peace.

And as we pray for one another, let's let Paul's example guide us. In verses 19-20 he asks them to not only pray for all the saints, but to pray specifically for him. This might seem selfish at first but look at what Paul wants them to pray for him. You can see twice in these verses that he asks for boldness. He wants boldness to do exactly what God has called him to do. Look what he says at the end of verse 19. This takes us back to 3:7-13 and Paul's purpose in ministry.

This purpose fits with his description of himself in verse 20 as an ambassador in chains. An ambassador represents the king or the president or whoever is in higher authority over him. He's in a foreign country on behalf of the leadership of his home country. But he speaks with the authority of the one whom he represents. Paul's mission in life is to represent his king by boldly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to see Gentiles come to Christ.

I think what Paul is doing here is helping them to keep focused on the overall mission in the midst of spiritual battle. It's quite easy to have our understanding of spiritual warfare narrowed to our own struggles and lives. Paul says we need to pray for the broader work of the gospel in our world. This is why he wants them to pray for him. He knows he needs their prayers and he knows that the proclamation of the gospel is the most important reality. The mission must remain central.

So, the theme of this section explaining the armor of God has been remarkably consistent. We stand in God's strength because we have on His armor in a posture of dependent prayer in order to resist our spiritual enemy. I pray that we will be able to stand together no matter what spiritual assaults come our way.