

Ephesians 6:17-20

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 Pray 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, 19 and also for me, that utterance may be given 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.

Prayer is a Wartime Walkie-Talkie

As I have done my yearly survey of the Biblical teaching on prayer in preparation for prayer week, I have been impressed more than ever before that God has given us prayer not as an intercom for increased convenience in our secluded cottages, but as a walkie-talkie connecting the general's headquarters with the transportation line and the field hospital and the front line artillery. Prayer is not a bell to call the servants to satisfy some desire we happen to feel, it is a battlefield transmitter for staying in touch with the general.

I think that is obvious in the text. Paul says (in verse 12) that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces. Then he calls us to take up arms (in verses 13-17). Then he says, "Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance...." That is clearly combat talk. Keep alert! Persevere!

But then I started seeing evidence for this everywhere I looked. For example, **in John 15:16 Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit,**

and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you."

Notice: Why is the Father going to give the disciples what they ask in Jesus' name? Answer: Because they have been sent to bear fruit.

The reason the Father gives the disciples the gift of prayer is because Jesus has given them a mission. In fact the grammar of John 15:16 implies that the reason Jesus gives them their mission is so that they will be able to enjoy the power of prayer. "I send you to bear fruit...so *that* whatever you ask the Father...he may give it."

Is it not plain then that the purpose of prayer is to accomplish a mission? It is as though the field commander (Jesus) called in the troops, gave them a crucial mission (go bear fruit), handed each one of them a personal transmitter coded to the frequency of the general's headquarters, and said, "Comrades, the general has a mission for you. He aims to see it accomplished. And to that end he has authorized me to give each of you personal access to him through these transmitters. If you stay true to his mission and seek his victory first, he will always be as close as your transmitter, to give tactical advice and to send in air cover when you need it."

What has become clearer to me in recent days is that many of our problems with prayer and much of our weakness in prayer comes from the fact that we are not all on active duty, and yet we still try to use the transmitter. We have taken a wartime walkie-talkie and tried to turn it into a civilian intercom.

Take another example from Scripture. In Luke 21:34-36 Jesus warns his disciples that times of great distress and opposition were coming. Then he said, "But watch at all times, praying that you may have

strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man." In other words, following Jesus will inevitably lead us into severe conflict with evil. It will surround us and attack us and threaten to destroy our faith. But God has given us a transmitter. If we go to sleep it will do us no good. But if we are alert and call for help in the conflict, the reinforcements will come and the general will not let his faithful soldiers be denied their crown of victory before the Son of man.

WHAT ABOUT PRAYING FOR PEACE?

1 Timothy 2:1-4 looks like it might be an exception to this battlefield image of prayer. Paul says that he wants us to pray for kings and for all who are in high positions "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." Now that sounds very domestic and civilian and peaceful.

But read on. The reason for praying this way is highly strategic. Verses 3-4 say, "This [praying for peace] is good, and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." God aims to save people from every tribe and people and tongue and nation. But one of the great obstacles to victory is when people are swept up into political and militaristic conflicts that draw away their attention and their creativity and their strength from the real battle of the universe.

Satan's aim is that nobody be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And one of his key strategies is to start battles in the world which draw our attention away from the real battle for the salvation of the lost and the perseverance of the saints. He knows that the real battle, as Paul says, "is not against flesh and blood." So the more

wars and conflicts and revolutions of flesh and blood he can start the better, as far as he is concerned.

So when Paul tells us to pray for peace because God desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, he is not picturing prayer as a kind of harmless domestic intercom for increasing our civilian conveniences. He is picturing it as an urgent message to headquarters asking that the enemy not be allowed to draw away any firepower onto decoy conflicts of flesh and blood.

So I am more convinced than ever as we begin 1985 that God has given us prayer because Jesus has given us a mission. We are on this earth to press back the forces of darkness, and we are given access to headquarters by prayer to advance this cause--that's all. When we try to turn it into a civilian intercom to increase our conveniences, it stops working, and our faith begins to falter.

PRAYER IS FOR THE KINGDOM

In a recent issue of *World Christian* magazine David Bryant tells about a young Hindu social worker who came to America and stayed at his house. He and his wife took her one evening to dinner at a friend's home. On the way the Hindu woman "witnessed" to David Bryant and his wife Robyne. She showed them a picture of a guru who had died 45 years ago. She and her family now worship him and pray to him.

When Bryant blurted out, "But he's dead!" she disagreed and said that in response to her prayers he has given her a very good life and surrounded her with many blessings.

When they got to the home where they would eat dinner David Bryant hoped that his Christian friend would help bear a credible witness to

this Hindu woman. But he was dismayed when at the dinner table his host said, "Great house, isn't it? I know I put a lot more into it than I can ever hope to get out of it. But I don't mind. We plan to be here the next 45 years anyway, God willing. We're so thankful. The Lord has blessed us in so many ways. I don't know what we'd do without him."

Bryant sat in his back yard the next morning asking himself: Is that the point of prayer--to treat God like Coke? Some say things go better with Coke. Some say things go better with Christ. Some say things go better with a guru. A bird splashed into a nearby birdbath and sent Bryant's mind to Matthew 6. Yes we are supposed to be as free and peaceful as the birds. But why? To seek first the Kingdom!

The power of prayer was not given to the church to win comforts but to wield a weapon.

The theme of our Prayer Advance 1985 is "The Weapon and the Wielding Power." The weapon we have in mind is the one in Ephesians 6:17--the sword of the Spirit, namely, the word of God. And the power we have in mind--the power that wields the weapon--is prayer. In the original Greek Ephesians 6:18 does not begin a new sentence. It connects with verse 17 like this: **"Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying through all prayer and supplication on every occasion..." Take the sword...praying.**

Prayer is the power that wields the weapon of the word. And by the word of God we do battle against sin and unbelief in our own lives and in the world.

That is the truth that has gripped me most firmly over the past weeks of reflection about prayer. We will talk about how prayer empowers

the word next week under the title "The Power That Wields the Weapon."

But here at the beginning of prayer week we need to focus on a more basic truth about the relationship between prayer and the weapon of the word. Not only does prayer wield the weapon of the word, but the weapon serves the wielding power. That is the title of today's message. Today I want us to focus our attention on the several ways that the word helps us pray.

The word of God is a living and active weapon. When the hand of prayer reaches out to pick it up, it is not dead weight in the hand. It sends its own impulses up the arm of prayer. That's what we want to think about in the time we have left this morning. How does the weapon serve the wielding power? How does the word serve prayer? I'll mention five ways.

FIVE WAYS THAT THE WORD OF GOD SERVES OUR PRAYERS

1. The word reveals a God who delights in the prayers of his people.

The most basic encouragement for our praying this week is the truth that our God delights in our prayer. Proverbs 15:8 says, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but *the prayer of the upright is his delight*." In the book of Revelation John describes golden bowls full of incense filling the throne room of God with pleasing aroma. And the bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints.

Wouldn't it encourage you to spend time in prayer this week if you really believed that every time you bowed your head in prayer the Master of the universe enjoyed it? It's as though he has a favorite

food. And when you pray he can smell the aroma from the kitchen as you prepare his favorite dish.

The best thing of all is that the food God loves most is to answer prayer. When God gets hungry for some special satisfaction, he seeks out a prayer to answer. Our prayer is the sweet aroma from the kitchen ascending up into the King's chambers making him hungry for the meal. But the actual enjoyment of the meal is his own work to answer our prayer. The food of God is to answer our prayers.

The most wonderful thing about the Bible is that it reveals a God who can only satisfy his appetite for joy by answering prayers. He has not deficiency in himself that he needs to fill up, so he gets all his satisfaction by filling up the deficiencies of people who pray.

"Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" says the Lord. No. Therefore "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving...and call upon him in the day of trouble, and he will deliver you." (Psalm 50:13-15). An answered prayer is the meal of God. So if you want to feed him with the only kind of joy he is capable of, hold up the cup of prayer and let him fill it.

So the first way that the word of God serves the weapon of prayer is by revealing a God who delights in the prayers of his people. (See also Romans 8:26 where God loves our prayers so much that he commissions his Spirit to pray through us when we are hindered in our praying.)

2. The word serves prayer by commanding it.

The most basic command of the Bible is that we be people of prayer--that we be people who look away from ourselves and our own resources to God. God wants to be God for us. He wants to be our

treasure and reward and defense and hope and peace and joy. And when he commands prayer he simply is saying, "be the kind of people who want me to be all of that for you, instead of looking to the world for your treasure and reward and hope and defense and joy."

"Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

"Continue steadfastly in prayer." (Colossians 4:2)

"In everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4:6)

"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near." (Isaiah 55:6)

The commandments to pray abound throughout Scripture. God has strewn the pages of the Bible with invitations to share in his favorite meal--answered prayer. Let the commandments to pray move you this week to devote new time to mixing your golden bowl of prayer with God's favorite dish.

3. The word serves the wielding power of prayer by offering promises to make us hopeful in our praying.

Just take a sampling for your encouragement during prayer week.

"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

"The LORD is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth. 19 He fulfils the desire of all who fear him, he also hears their cry, and saves them." (Psalm 145:18-19)

"For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you

will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, 14 I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:7)

"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened..." (Matthew 7:7-8)

In other words, since God is the kind of God who delights in prayer and who feeds himself by answering prayer, he gives it not only the force of commandment but also the incentive of promise. Amazing promises--to stir us up to pray this week with all our heart.

But that's not all. He also gives us a history book of answered prayer.

4. The weapon of the word serves the wielding power of prayer by encouraging it with stories of tremendous successes in prayer.

It tells of Jesus praying all night before he made the decision about who would serve as the twelve apostles of his church (Luke 6:12). Then he chose them and they changed the course of world history beyond imagination.

It tells of Solomon praying for understanding so that he could rule well (1 Kings 3:9). Then God answers and gives him so much insight that people came from around the world to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

It tells of Elijah praying that no rain fall for three years. And no rain fell. And then the prayer for fire on Mt. Carmel to defeat the priests of Baal. And finally the prayer for rain as he bowed before the Lord alone on the mountain. And there was a great rain. (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1, 42-45)

The word is a history of God working in answer to prayer. And the stories are written to make us hopeful in our praying (Romans 15:4).

5. Finally, the word helps us in our praying by giving us the content of our prayers.

1 John 5:14 says, "And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him." We must pray according to his will. And what better way to pray according to his will than to pray his very words?

The weapon of the word of God serves the wielding power of prayer by giving words to prayer. And now you can see, as we draw things to a close, that the power that wields the sword of the Spirit is not really our power. Prayer, when it is full of power is full of the word of God. The sword of the Spirit is wielded by the power of the Spirit. The sword is full of the electricity of God. When we touch it with prayer the current of divine power runs up our arm. And the wielding power becomes the very power of God.

Make this first full week of 1985 a week of prayer.

Let the word reveal a God who loves the aroma of prayer and satisfies his longings by answering prayer.

Open yourself to the commandments of the word to pray without ceasing.

Be encouraged to pray by the amazing promises made to those who call on God with all their heart.

Imagine yourself in one of the great Bible stories of answered prayer. And then fill your prayer with the very words of Scripture.

I believe with all my heart that if we devote ourselves to the word and prayer like this through the week, it will be a week that changes the world.