

## STEALTH WEAPON

37<sup>th</sup> in a Series on Ephesians called, “Messages to the Misfits”  
Ephesians 6:18-20

When Toby was around 10 I helped coach a hockey team he was on. This was in a pretty competitive league. As was common this was a league that had an age limit of 12 years old. At that age there can be considerable disparity between kids at the young end and those at the older end. Some of those 12 year olds would have turned 13 during the season and gotten their early teen growth spurt. There was one team in that league that we all heard about fairly quickly. All the boys on the team were in that oldest group. It also turned out that the coaches had recruited some of the most athletic and talented kids in the area, kids that would have been the best in their age group. This turned that team into something of a super team, and they were rolling over everybody. Toby's team was made up of all kids at the younger end of the age range. They were likely the youngest team in the league. Despite that handicap they were a pretty good team and were doing quite well. Then came the day we played against that “super” team. Their kids were quite a bit bigger than ours, and I think that may have intimidated a few of our players. The other team's reputation added another element of intimidation. I know that some of our kids came into the game with the expectation that they could not compete with this team. I wasn't so Pollyanna in my thinking that I thought we'd beat that team, but I thought if our kids played their best we could at least give them a game.

Our kids didn't play their best. The other team scored on the very first rush up the rink. They skated by our kids like they were skating past statues. Less than a minute into the game we were losing 1-0. It never got any better. I don't remember the final score, but I know it was ugly. I remember the helplessness I felt as a coach because there was simply nothing I could do to help our kids against a team that was overwhelmingly better than they were. All I could do was try to encourage them, tell them not to get down, and try to focus them on just going out and doing their best. It wasn't very helpful.

Sometimes I think in the spiritual battle we feel a little like that. We're up against an enemy that is significantly superior to us, and he is overwhelming us. If you've ever felt like that, I've got good news for you. You, in fact, are not overmatched. You have a weapon that our enemy has no defense against. All you need to do is put that weapon into use. It intimidates our enemy. He can't defeat it, and he runs from it. His only hope is to keep you from using it. Let's see what this amazing weapon is by looking at Ephesians 6:18-20.

## PRAYER IS A POWERFUL PART OF OUR ARSENAL

Paul had been listing various parts of our spiritual armor like the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and so on. In verse 18 he mentions no such piece of armor, which might lead us to think that he's done with that thought. However, the grammar indicates otherwise, though that is not apparent in the English translation. It does show up in the English Standard Version. In that translation in verse 17 Paul commanded "take up the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit." Verse 18 says, "praying at all times in the Spirit," which means this is part of what he has just said. We should put on the helmet of salvation while praying. These verses are a continuation of Paul's description of the tools we have for fighting the spiritual war.

This weapon can be both defensive and offensive. He says we should be praying all the time for "all of God's people." This is the defensive aspect of prayer. Pray that God will protect your brothers and sisters from the attacks of the enemy. This is an important reminder that the spiritual war is not just about ourselves. It is easy to see this battle as applying primarily to our own personal lives. We think about how the enemy attacks us personally and how we can defend ourselves. And certainly prayer is an important part of that. But Paul calls on us here to get our eyes off of ourselves. Remember that your loved ones, your friends, your brothers and sisters in Christ, are also in the middle of the spiritual war. And he says we should pray for them. Pray that God will defend them in the spiritual battle.

Do you know who is a good example of this? Oh, oh, I know. This is church, so the answer is always Jesus, right? Well, in this case, yes, the answer is Jesus. John 17 records Jesus' prayer the night before he was arrested and eventually executed. In verse 15 he prayed for his followers, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." He was praying that God would protect his followers in the spiritual battle. If Jesus thought it was a good idea, maybe we should too.

I have convinced myself that I'd be a great general manager of an NFL team. This is because I see something glaringly obvious that the media -- and with disturbing regularity, NFL GM's -- seem to miss. People always want to focus on the so-called "skill" players, quarterbacks, running backs, receivers. Here's the dirty secret of football: the game is decided at the line of scrimmage. You can have the best quarterback or running back on the planet, and if you have a crummy offensive line, those skill players won't accomplish much of anything. A quarterback may have a terrific arm, but that won't do him any good if 2 seconds after the ball is snapped he's on the ground on his back because no one could block for him. A running back is going nowhere if the instant he is handed the ball he is hit by defenders 3 yards behind the line of scrimmage. So it's those big, anonymous guys up front that do the unglamorous job of blocking for other people who really determine the outcome of a game. Last year the Los Angeles Rams set the league buzzing with their dynamic offense that lit up scoreboards and took them all the way to the Super Bowl. This year with the same skill people they have been a big disappointment and will miss the postseason altogether.

Their offense hasn't been anything like it was last year. People say Jared Goff, their quarterback isn't playing as well. There is one reason. Their offensive line was a mess.

Why talk about this? Because we are called to be the offensive linemen of the spiritual conflict. Offensive linemen block the opponents in order to keep them from blowing up the quarterback or the running back. They don't get notice and acclaim and glory. They are mostly anonymous, doing a difficult and typically thankless job. On rare occasions they end up in the spotlight. And that's the job that Paul has given us. It is our responsibility to care enough about our brothers and sisters to block for them by praying, as Jesus did, that the Father in heaven would protect them from the evil one.

But prayer is not just defensive in nature. It's not just about protecting ourselves and others from the enemy. It is also about going on the offensive and taking the battle to the enemy. This is important because in most conflicts if you become totally defensive, you're going to lose. Do you remember what Jesus said when he told Peter that he was a rock? In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." A better translation of that last phrase is "Will not prevail against it." What does it tell you that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church? Gates don't attack, they only defend. That means Jesus pictured the church being on the offensive against hell and its powers. And he said that hell's defenses will not prevail against our attacks! In other words, we are to go on the offensive against the enemy.

I think sometimes we see ourselves as under attack and totally on the defensive. We think we just need to somehow survive the battle and that's our highest calling. It is not! Jesus wants us to go on the offensive against the gates of hell and he claimed hell's forces cannot stand against us! Paul asked the Ephesians to pray that God would give him the words to speak as he carried out his ministry. Twice he asked them to pray that he could declare the gospel fearlessly. We should be praying for ourselves and others that we might bring the great news of Jesus to the world around us fearlessly and that we could indeed defeat the gates of hell.

Prayer is a powerful weapon. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." What can we do that will fix that? How do you make a blind person see? You can't do it. If a person was deaf, would yelling louder at them help them hear you? No, it wouldn't help at all. How can we fix the blindness of people in the world? I'll take it a step further. Ephesians 2:1 says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins." That's true of every human being. We start out in life dead in our transgressions and sins. What can we do to fix that problem in other people? We can't do anything! We can't make dead people start living.

Oh, wait. There is something we can do. We can pray. In fact, that is the really only effective thing we can do. It takes God's power to make blind people see, to make people who are dead come to

life. Only God has the power to make that change. So the most powerful thing we can do is to ask God to use his power to work in people's lives to make them able to see and to live spiritually.

Last year I read an article written by a fighter pilot in which he described his encounter with an F-22, America's best stealth fighter and the world's best fighter. This pilot was flying an F-16, a fine fighter aircraft, in a training exercise in which he and a couple of other pilots were to engage in air combat with an F-22. He wrote about how he and his colleagues were all defeated, meaning they would have been shot down, by the single F-22, when they didn't even know it was there. Their radar never detected it, they never saw it, they had no idea the plane was in the area until it essentially shot them down. They had no defense against it. The cool thing about prayer is that it is our stealth weapon in spiritual warfare. The enemy has no defense against it. He cannot defeat it.

### PRAYER IS ITSELF A BATTLE

Given that prayer is such a powerful stealth weapon, what do you suppose our spiritual enemy thinks about it? He is terrified of it. The thing he fears most is that we would, in prayer, unleash the power of God in the battle. So what is his obvious strategy in dealing with prayer? Since he can't defeat it he pours his energy in trying to keep us from employing it. The F-22 is a mighty weapon in air warfare, but if it never leaves the ground, if it's never employed in battle, then it is not worth much. So our enemy will do all he can to keep us from praying.

In verse 18 Paul said, "Be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." Why would he tell us to be alert? It turns out that just trying to pray is ground zero in spiritual war. Satan does everything he can to stop us from praying. For instance, he goes to work on our heads and gets us to think of prayer as a duty, a religious obligation. We start thinking it's something we have to do to be good with God, and start measuring our spiritual maturity by how disciplined our prayer life is.

That is an effective way to totally sap the energy and power out of praying. It starts to become sort of the spiritual equivalent of flossing our teeth. I once knew a person who told me she loved flossing her teeth. That's just wrong. Yes, I am disciplined about flossing my teeth, but I am never eager to do it and I just want to get it over with. How dynamic is my prayer life going to be if I am never eager to pray and I just want to get it over with?

You hear about those mighty prayer warrior old saints who got up at 5 in the morning and began their day by praying 2 hours before they do anything else. That is impressive, and honestly it makes me feel kind of ashamed. I don't get close to that. But here's the thing, those people were no more accepted and loved by God than are you and I on our worst days. We are saints, God's holy ones, just as much as they are, because they became saints on exactly the same basis we did, the grace of Jesus Christ!

So that's one way Satan fouls us up when it comes to prayer. The other is the good old tactic of distraction. When I set out to spend time in prayer two things happen. The first is I get sleepy.

Every time. The second is my mind starts wandering all over the planet. It is incredible how many random thoughts start popping up. Do you get what's going on there? The enemy does not want us to pray. He fears that more than anything else. And so he comes up with every trick in the book to keep us from doing it.

Michael Molinos, a 17<sup>th</sup> century martyr, wrote about what to expect when we pray. “You may expect the enemy to come to you...you might expect weariness...You can expect to suffer through problems of a multitude of thoughts, problems of imagination, provocation of your natural desires.”

In his book, *The Devil Goes To Church*, David Butts recalled a time when he had been to a Christian conference and he got totally amped about prayer. He decided he wanted to get up early in the morning each day and spend extended time praying. So the next morning he got up at 5:30 AM. Here's what he said happened: “I had no sooner began praying when suddenly I had this overpowering urge...to wash my car! My mind began to fill with images of my dirty car and the hectic schedule for the day ahead that wouldn't allow me to get it washed. It became so overwhelming that I found myself getting off my knees to go wash my car.” As he was heading out to wash the car he had the thought, “When was the last time you had an overwhelming desire to wash your car at 5:30 in the morning?” The answer, of course, was never. The enemy was at work trying to keep him from praying.

In Matthew 26:38 Jesus was facing the horror of arrest, trial and execution. He said to Peter, James and John, “stay here and keep watch with me.” How did that turn out? Verse 40 says, “Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Couldn't you keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter.” Uh, no, he couldn't. He had the same problem we have. As Jesus said in verse 41, “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Twice more Jesus went and prayed, asking them to watch and pray too. And both times they went to sleep. In verse 45 Matthew tells us, “Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting?’” Yes, they were. So just remember when you struggle to stay alert when you pray, you've got company.

## PRAYER INVOLVES ASKING

Our society prides itself on being “scientific.” That means it tries to use human reason in the form of the scientific method to understand the world. That has been both a huge benefit and something of a curse to the human race. It has led to understanding and being able to cure many diseases, but it has also resulted in nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. And it has tended to take some of the wonder out of life.

But there is another sometimes negative impact of it. It causes us to think we should be able to understand everything and to be disturbed if we can't. This is a big problem when it comes to prayer. We want to understand why we should pray and how it works. We don't find it acceptable when the answer is “prayer is a mystery that you won't solve, but you should pray anyway.” And

yet, that's kind of the answer that Scripture gives us. It never explains how prayer works, and it never resolves for us conundrums about how God could be sovereign and still answer prayer. So people come up with some ideas about prayer that are either wrong or incomplete.

One of those ideas comes from the "name it and claim it" crowd. In Matthew 21:22 Jesus said, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." In John 14:14 Jesus said, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." That seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? If you believe, you will receive "whatever you ask for in prayer." "You may ask me for anything, and I will do it." Anything is a pretty unlimited range, don't you think? It sounds like all you have to do is believe God will answer your prayer and you can ask God for anything at all and he'll do it.

That is the promise we all want God to give, isn't it? What kid doesn't wish for the parents to take him or her to the toy store and say, "Whatever you want, it's yours. We'll get it for you." There are large segments of the world wide church that teaches that is exactly what Jesus was saying. But there are some obvious problems with that idea, aren't there?

The first problem I have with this theory is that it doesn't work. Every believer in Jesus has tried to live by this because we want it to work. And everyone of us has been disappointed because in some cases we did not get what we asked for. The name it and claim it tribe has an answer for that. They grab the phrase in Matthew 21:22, "if you believe." That's the problem. You didn't get what you asked for because you didn't really believe. You didn't have enough faith. Wonderful. Now in addition to disappointment I get to have guilt because I failed to have faith. But there are two problems with that. One is that there were times when I know I had faith. I truly believed with no doubt at all that God could and would answer my prayer, and even had certainty that he would. Then he didn't. Faith was not the problem. There are other issues with this theology.

There is a serious logical contradiction with this idea. Please excuse another football reference. As I speak today the Minnesota Vikings and New Orleans Saints are facing each other in the NFL playoffs. Both quarterbacks, Kirk Cousins for Minnesota and Drew Brees for New Orleans, are believers in Jesus. If they both operated out of the "Name it and claim it" philosophy it's easy to envision both of them praying, asking God to enable their team to win the game. It is impossible for God to answer both of those prayers. One of them must win and one must lose. There is an infinite number of impossibilities this idea creates. That alone should tell us this cannot be the correct understanding of prayer. But there's more.

This understanding of prayer creates a huge theological problem. It is a denial of the character and identity of Almighty God. It turns him into a divine vending machine. I look at all the treats, decide on the ones I want, and instead of inserting a coin and pushing the appropriate button, I just have faith. If I do, then God pops out the requested item. When we were flying on our recent vacation we looked for a movie to watch on the plane. We had enough time on the long flights to watch two movies, so one of them we opted for was the recent live remake of Disney's *Aladdin*. A

classic moment in the movie is when the genie first appears and sings, “You Ain’t Never Had A Friend Like Me.” Some of the lyrics of the song the genie sings to Aladdin are, “Master, you’re in luck ‘cause up your sleeves you’ve got a brand of magic never fails. You’ve got some power in your corner now. Life is your restaurant and I’m your maitre’d, come on whisper what it is you want, you ain’t never had a friend like me.”

Those words illuminate the problem. God becomes the genie. Who is the master? We are! We become the master and the Almighty, Sovereign, only wise God, becomes our servant. That is a doctrine that comes straight from hell.

It is so easy to see the fallacy with this thinking. Do you really want God to say, “Your wish is my command”? Do you really wish that God had answered every one of your prayers? I don’t. I’m relieved and glad that he did not answer quite a few prayers in my life. Our problem is when measured against God’s wisdom we are, at best, like a two year old. Would any wise and loving parents tell a two year old they will give the child whatever he or she wants? That would be complete disaster. So would the name it and claim it theology.

This has led some to believe that prayer is not about us asking God for things at all. Philip Yancey, a terrific writer whom I really respect, in a book on prayer wrote, “The main purpose of prayer is not to make life easier, nor to gain magical powers, but to know God. I need God more than anything I might get from God...Prayer is the act of seeing reality from God’s point of view.” Yancey is correct that the point of prayer is not getting magical powers and that the most important thing is to know God. But Paul clearly wants his readers to ask God for some things.

In Matthew 7:7 Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given to you.” He commanded us to ask. In Philippians 4:6 Paul wrote, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” In every situation, always make requests to God. Again, we are commanded to ask!

James 5:16 says, “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” James claims that it makes a difference in this world. Yes, the aim, always, is to know God, but from beginning to end the Bible claims that praying can and does change things in this world. God wants us to demonstrate our faith in him by asking and trusting.

God wants us to pray about everything. Everything? Aren’t some things too small, too trivial to ask God about them? In his book, *In A Pit, With A Lion On A Snowy Day*, Mark Batterson wrote, “We rank our prayer requests...We have big requests and little requests. We have easy requests and difficult requests. But that is a false construct...**To the infinite, all finites are equal.** There is no big or small, easy or difficult, possible or impossible. When it comes to God, there are no degrees of difficulty.”

So should I pray about whether to wear a blue shirt or a white shirt today when I can't decide? Here's a rule of thumb, if you might become anxious about it, might worry about it, pray about it instead.

Whatever we ask for we must always remember the last point:

#### PRAYER SHOULD BE DONE IN THE SPIRIT

Verse 18 tells us we should pray in a particular way. We should pray in the Spirit. But what does that mean? I've encountered people who refer to Romans 8:26, which says the Spirit intercedes for us with "wordless groans," or as some translations have it, "groaning too deep for words." They then say this means speaking in tongues, which is a language that is too deep for words.

In Paul's theology to live in the Spirit is the opposite of living by the Law, something that is clearly identified in Galatians. So living by the Spirit is living by grace. It is living by trusting that what God gives us in Christ Jesus is sufficient. So how does one pray in the Spirit? There are two important ideas involved here.

First it means knowing that what God has done for us in Christ is sufficient. That means I believe God hears my prayers not because I've earned that, or because I've been very good lately and sort of deserve it, but for one reason and one reason only. God hears my prayers because of what Jesus has done for me. I come to God purely on the basis of grace in Christ and nothing else. God answers my prayers 100% because of what Jesus has done for me. That is part of praying in the Spirit.

Understand that on your best day, when you have been on a spiritual roll and have been doing everything right, and on your worst day, when you've been a spiritual hot mess, doing everything wrong, God hears and answers your prayers for the same reason. It is because you pray in the name of Jesus, and for no other reason!

Second, it means praying with the understanding that what God supplies is all I need. That is the fundamental principle of living in the Spirit. It is believing that what God supplies is all I need. Whatever he chooses to give us, we accept it. We pray as Jesus did, "Not my will, but yours, Lord." As Tim Keller said, "God gives us what we would ask if we knew everything that he knows."

#### APPLICATION

##### SEE PRAYER AS A PRIVILEGE, NOT A DUTY

The one thing that can sap the joy and power out of prayer is seeing it as a religious duty, something we "have to do" or God will be unhappy. I've noticed that my little granddaughters always seem to be happy when Nana and Yapaw show up. They immediately want our attention.

They want to talk to us. They sometimes will want something from us and are not shy about asking, because they know Nana and Yapaw will do everything they can to give them what they want, if it's good for them. I expect that someday talking to grandparents might become a duty for them, but that day is not in the immediate future.

We get to talk to the Lord of all, who loves us more than anyone else ever has loved us or ever will. It is a privilege. We get to be with him, talk to him. And how desperately we need to talk to him because we are ever being attacked by an enemy who is stronger and more clever than we are. But our enemy is not stronger than our Father. In fact, he is helpless before him. What a privilege to ask the Father to step in and fight the battle for us.

### TRUST IN GRACE

One of the killers of the joy and power of grace is the sense that we have to "do it right." I have had some very interesting conversations with little Ella. Cara and Wesley are not yet at the place where they can carry on conversations, but Ella can. But it is not uncommon for a conversation with her to be a bit disjointed as she hops from one topic to another, as she starts off talking about one thing, then gets distracted by a thought and goes off in a completely different direction.

Occasionally she doesn't make much sense to me. Last night she was telling me about how she and her friend, Penelope, like to play doggy, and as far as I can decipher the pretend dog is named Zero. But then she started telling me something about her favorite Disney princess, Rapunzel. Then, even though she had eaten dinner, because I was eating a burrito she informed me that she was starving. Could she have some of my burrito? And for me it was all delightful. And there have been times, when she's really tired, that she fell asleep. I have not been offended by that. In fact, it endeared me even more to her. It is a precious thing to have that little 3 year old asleep on your lap.

That is much closer to how God sees you than what we typically think, that he wants us to do it all the correct way with the right attitude. God is not going to answer your prayers because you've been especially good lately. He answers your prayers because Jesus deserves it, and you come to him in Jesus 'name. And when you stumble around, get distracted, even fall asleep he just sees you as precious and delights in you being with him.

### USE THAT WEAPON

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Well, sure, but I'm not righteous. Hold on. Are you in Christ? Then in God's eyes you have the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There is no one more righteous. So by grace you are righteous, and your prayers are powerful and effective. They can impact things in our lives.

Journalist Ellen Vaughn tells a powerful true story in her book, *The God Who Hung On A Cross*. In 1999 a Cambodian pastor, whose name needs to be kept secret, went to the Kampong Thom Province in northern Cambodia to share the Gospel and try to plant churches. But he found the people there were not even a little receptive to his message. He was making no headway until he came to one rural village where the people embraced him and his message with surprising eagerness. He couldn't understand why this one village was so open to the Gospel. After some time he asked some of the new converts about that. Why were they so willing to believe in Jesus? One old woman came forward, grasped his hands and said, "We have been waiting for you for 20 years." Then she proceeded to tell him the story. In the late 1970's the Khmer Rouge Communist regime was in the process of killing two million people in their country. At one point their soldiers showed up in this village and ordered the people to dig a mass grave. Then they ordered the villagers to stand facing their grave. The soldiers intended to massacre the entire village. The people began wailing, crying out to idol gods, ancestors, even demon spirits for help. One woman recalled a time from her childhood when her mother had told her a story about a God who had hung on a cross. She thought that perhaps this God who had known so much pain would have compassion on them. So in desperation she began crying out to the God who hung on a cross. Soon, all the villagers picked up that cry, and all were crying to that unknown God. For some time they wailed, anticipating the bullets that would end their lives. After a while though the wailing began to subside. Eventually they began to think it strange that nothing had happened. Cautiously a few turned around, and discovered that the soldiers were gone. They never came back. Those people had prayed and waited for someone to come tell them about the God who hung on a cross, the one who had saved them when they prayed, and someone had finally come to tell them the rest of the story.

God answered the desperate pleas of people who really knew nothing about him. He did it in an impossible situation where all hope was seemingly lost. If he can answer those prayers, surely he can answer ours.