

STANDING IN PRAYER-FILLED CONFIDENCE

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Have you ever had that feeling of being overwhelmed? That's probably a stupid question, clearly. Finals are in the next couple of weeks and most of you are probably experiencing some of those emotions. No longer in school myself, I don't often feel that way or experience that. But currently my life is a sea of overwhelm. In two months my wife and I are moving to LA California. Now we found this out over six months ago, and I was pumped, I was ready to move on, to experience something new, moving forward, new experiences, all that Jazz.

But as it crept closer and closer, my excitement morphed itself into this anxious pile of stress. If you know me, I don't stress, I never stress. I have this weird temperament that tends to neglect the things that stress me out. Bills...psht. Rent....psht. I have always been able to shrug almost anything off. Let go of things and responsibilities easily. But now, I'm moving from Missoula Montana, not even 100,000 people, to 17M LA. On top of culture shock there's finding a job, finding a school, transferring my credits, finding a church, finding a place to live, finding another car, this that and the other thing, I don't know which way is up at this point. It's like that scene in the first star wars where they fall down the trash shoot and into the compactor. The walls of time closing in, and my Dianoga of responsibility and adulthood creeping trying to pull me under.

I can imagine and empathize with where most of you are at with school, finals, professors, work, broken down car, weird family relationships, trying to stay healthy and in shape, this that and the other thing. It's overwhelming, daunting and there is no scenario where you fulfill all responsibilities well.

A cool thing about the Bible and the gospel is that it never leaves us without hope. It never leaves us in a dark place, it always pulls us into the sun. Tonight I would like all of you to forget about everything bearing down on you, listen to what Paul has to teach us, and worship the Lord with me.

Ephesians 6:10-20

Pray

So often for us our greatest problems seem like the ones right in front of us. It's the next exam, that paper due tomorrow morning, work right after class, problems with your boyfriend or girlfriend, your recent breakup. It just seems in our season of life that we move from one calamity to another.

Paul actually has something to say about this. Lets look back once more at Ephesians.

Ephesians 6:11-12

What does Paul say about our struggle? What we are wrestling with? He doesn't say people. He doesn't say governments, school, or anything like that. He says our problem, our greatest adversary is evil. Rulers of Darkness, Authorities of Darkness, Cosmic Powers of Darkness. Evil, Sin. Sin is our greatest enemy. He compares it to war, to battle.

Ephesians 6:13-17a

He's saying be prepared for war, get ready for battle. This means we are going to get hit. Some people have this idea that following Jesus means butterflies, rainbows and unicorns. That after Jesus we fart rainbows, nothing stinks anymore. Following Jesus doesn't mean we stop suffering, stop fighting sin.

You've heard the song "Love is a Battlefield," Paul is saying all of life is a battlefield. We are going to get hit, We're going to take some shots. Sometimes those shots come from school, sometimes work, relationships, family. You see behind all of our human dysfunction is sin. Every problem, every war, every broken relationship, every fight, every failure ultimately at it's root lies sin.

Sometimes those shots come from others, from outside forces that happen to be in our circle of influence, or we are directly sinned against, sometimes it has nothing to do with us it just affects us. You can't control what others do, how others act.

Sometimes it comes from within us. It's our "passions are war within us", as James says. Our sin gets the best of us. Sometimes it's a combination of both. Someone does something to you, then you respond in kind with anger, contempt. The bottom line is that we live in a perpetual state of war. On one hand is the Bible, the commands of God, the gospel. And on the other our sin nature, the sin around us, the sin's against us. We are constantly fighting this lifelong war.

It's tiresome, it's daunting, it's overwhelming. Yet despite the odds Paul tells us to stay strong, and stand firm.

Ephesians 6:11, 13, 14a (Just "Stand therefore" in v 14)

Despite this war, despite the difficulty, despite the suffering, the Bible is saying stand strong! Be faithful. Unwavering. Do not give in to evil, do not give in to sin, and do not tolerate it either.

What is Paul talking about? Armor. He's communicating the need to prepare, to be prepared. To be ready. That means not being naive. Don't be naive about what you are really fighting.

In order to stay upright we need to know what we are really battling against, what we are really fighting: It's not flesh and blood. It's not crappy boyfriends or crappy girlfriends, it's not non-english speaking professors. The real battle, at least the battle that matters is against sin. Because gang, your greatest problem, my greatest problem is that sin separates us from God.

Isaiah 59:2

No God, means we are on our own. Without God we are on our own. There is no help, there are no reinforcements, there is no help side, we're on an island. The greatest problem any of us will ever have is separation from God do to sin. Sin is egregious, rebellion, it's injustice against God.

We have this human tendency to hate injustice. It's natural for us. We see injustice in the world and hate it. I was watching this youtube video a guy rescuing this abandoned dog. This dog had mange, infections, was malnourished, living in a dump. Literally a dump. It was a really cool 4 minute video of this dog being rescued. I have a dog and because of our move we have to give him up, I'm a huge softy, I lost it at the end.

Just to see the injustice of a dog being abandoned was enough to set me off. Most of us have that response. We have a tendency to want to do something about it. Donate money, donate time, whatever, we want to do something to help stamp out injustice and overcome the evil.

Friends as much as you want to defeat evil and suffering, as much as you want to triumph over sin, it is not just impossible, it's unfathomable on our own. No one can conquer sin by them selves with their own strength. It doesn't matter how much will power you have, how white you can get your knuckles, the battle we've been talking about, ceases to be a battle or war, it becomes a massacre. With you lying lifeless on the ground and Sin wielding the weapon that put you there.

Ephesians 6:10

Be strong in THE LORD, and power of HIS might. You see we don't alone have the strength to withstand it, the power to fight against it. But He does. The tables are turned with Jesus.

Where this analogy of battle and war starts to lose it's effectiveness is when we start to think about Jesus and the work He does. A war implies casualties of both sides. A battle implies uncertainty about who will win. You see with Jesus there are no casualties, there is no uncertainty.

Loving and Living for Jesus is not doable without the power of Jesus. Glorifying God is dependent upon God to give us the strength to glorify Him. Following Jesus, standing firm in our calling, means letting go of any residual self-confidence and replacing it with Christ confidence.

Why would you have self-confidence when all that got you was lying on the ground with sin standing over you?

Romans 5:6 says we are powerless without Him. Self-confidence shouldn't exist within you, Christ-confidence should consume you. Where every part of who you are oozes the glory of what Jesus has accomplished within you and for you. Where I once pointed to me, I now point to Him.

It's not over, the battle is not over, until eternity we will struggle and fight here on earth, it will continue to be a war, though we know the outcome. It's not over, but.....

The gospel births a strength and a power that is unmatched by anything in your life. The power of evil is not only dwarfed by the gospel, it is obliterated, it vanishes. Evil has no power, sin no longer has leverage.

Ephesians 6:13-17a

Now we're given some application, some 'how-to' on preparing for battle.

Paul paired with each piece of armor an application that we can take to put this idea of complete and utter reliance on Jesus into practice.

- The Belt of Truth. Truth matters. What you believe about God, about the world, about yourself matters. Viewing things rightly gives you a proper perspective to combat struggle and to live worshipfully
- The Breastplate of Righteousness. Jesus was perfect and we are not. His death means He took our imperfection and gave us His perfection. Just knowing that frees us from the burden of being perfect, and frees us to worship
- The Boots of Readiness. We've talked about this a little already, being prepared, living with expectation
- The shield of Faith. Having a saving faith imparts a liberating hope. With an eternal perspective difficulty now becomes nothing when look into eternity and see only the glory of Christ

- The Helmet of Salvation. We are saved. We were dead in our transgressions and He made us alive together with Him. Death no longer holds over us the sands of time, fear has lost it's grip.

We don't have time to dive into each one of these extensively tonight, so I would implore you to take a look at each of these yourself.

Now all of the items that Paul lists up to this point have been items of protection. Items designed to withstand, not to fight back. Each of these are tools for survival not for destruction.

But as you probably noticed there is one more item that Paul gave us that we haven't discussed yet, and that tool is used for fighting. It is used for destruction and death.

Ephesians 6:17b

The only offensive tool we're given in the Sword of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God is our weapon in our constant struggle for survival and success. Our offense isn't something we control it's God himself working on our behalf, Conquering sin for us, changing our hearts within us.

Now these truths can quickly become one of those Christian cliches. Where I say "You know I just have to trust God more in my life." "I just have to rely more on Jesus." While those are absolutely true, often they become catch phrases meant to give lip service or to bring momentary comfort, and they cease to be words of truth that speak meaning into our lives. Where there is truth without application or action this is a sin trap that is easy to fall into. Fortunately for us Paul charges us with action.

Ephesians 6:18-19

Our action is prayer. What we do is prayer. Paul's Final instruction, the last charge that Paul gives is Pray. The action Paul suggests we take when struggling is pray. The battle for souls rages on and Paul's final note of instruction is prayer.

If you are anything like me, you struggle with prayer. There have been times in my life where prayer was non-existent. Where prayer was an afterthought if it was even thought of at all. So I'm just going to lay all my cards on the table here, and we're going to chat about Prayer.

What is prayer? A lot of people have a lot of ideas about what prayer is, right. The most common though is where I have been most of my Christian walk. It's an appeal to God to change an adverse circumstance in my life. Make something easier for me. Work sucks, God please get rid of my boss. Oh, I got a final tomorrow and haven't studied or been to class in six weeks, let me pass please.

I thought of prayer as a magic lamp, always holding out hope that God would fix a problem that my own stupidity created. Like if I said the right things to God he would change my circumstances, basically I'm Harry Potter and prayer is my wand.

That sounds so ludicrous, but that's how we act. That's how we pray. That's what I do so often.

So let's define prayer: Prayer is communication with God, and it is a worship response to what God has done, and to what God has said in Scripture

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Acts 1:14

Matt 6:6a

Prayer is done both corporately and in private

Content of our prayer can be categorized into four prayers;

- Adoration and Praise
- Confession of sin, and repentance
- Thankfulness
- Petition, supplication, or intercession

We must have a proper perspective on prayer, lest we begin to think as I once did about genies and Harry Potter and what not.

1 John 5:14

Prayer within the context of God's revealed will

God has given us scripture, and has revealed Himself to us in scripture, our prayer should never come into contradiction with the Bible. Our prayers should never ever come in to conflict with what the Bible has said

James 4:3

Pray with a Gospel motive

A pure gospel motive is one that seeks to glorify the Lord Jesus. Not make much of yourself. If your prayers are self-serving, if they ask God to do something for you so that others, or even you can make much of yourself, your not doing it right. Motivation is a huge part of life, and appropriately it is a huge part of prayer. God's goal is to make much of Himself, and to glorify Jesus, that should be our goal.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Paul has some kind of affliction he is dealing with. A thing that is causing him pain and suffering, that pushes him toward weakness.

So often we pray to God to somehow make our lives easier, to alleviate suffering, for healing for ourselves or others, for God to change the hearts of those we care about. And so often those prayers seem to go unanswered. The suffering continues, the class gets harder, work gets more stressful, your sickness doesn't go away, the cancer comes back, and hearts are hardened.

We must always remember that:

God knows more than we do

God knows more. God sees the big picture. God has an infinite context to view our suffering in. Where we see it in the here and now, our understanding is limited. But God's is not.

So when those prayers seem to fall on deaf ears, and rather than the struggle being lessened it gets more intense, we can find solace, peace and comfort in knowing that God is working out everything for His glory and the good of those who love Him. It is easy to forget this because of our human limitations, but we cannot pray rightly without trusting that God knows more than we do.

As Jesus said in His prayer "your will be done"

Seeing prayer rightly, viewing prayer rightly produces an incredible amount of worship in our hearts. Prayer in the context we just discussed, is communicating to God that we trust He knows better than we do, and letting go of our fallen ideas of what should and should not be.

In other words prayer expresses our trust and reliance on God, and is a means by which we can come to trust and rely on Him more.

Ephesians 6:19-20

Paul is asking for help, he is asking for prayers that he would move forward boldly in the Gospel.

It isn't only important that we stand our ground, to stay faithful, to be consistent and steadfast in the face of difficulty; it is important that we move forward, and move forward boldly.

With Boldness we know that the gospel is everything, and that our greatest battle has been won, and our biggest problem has been solved. Because Jesus has defeated death, Jesus has defeated sin, Jesus has defeated evil, Jesus rules over us, and we live in that, and we love that, and we worship that.

What else can we do but be bold?

That doesn't diminish suffering. Don't hear me wrong here. I'm not saying life doesn't hurt. It does. Often. Emotionally, Spiritually, Physically. It is hard, and it only gets harder when following Jesus. But we have a peace, a unique peace.

Ephesians 6:15

In the midst of all this language about war. All this imagery of armor and weapons, of cosmic powers and dark authorities.

Right smack dab in the middle of the chaos is a peace. A peace that comes only from the gospel.

Friends life is bigger than a couple of final papers. The gospel is bigger than a couple years of higher education. Don't let the minutia of the little things cloud your vision of the Savior.

Find peace in the chaos. Find Jesus.