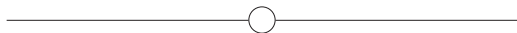


TEACH US  
TO  
PRAY

What We Can Learn from Scripture



CARLA D. SUNBERG



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# INTRODUCTION

I used to watch my grandfather in awe. Several times a day he would enter a time of devotion and prayer. Long passages of psalms he had memorized floated from his lips as though they were his own words. In a smooth transition, the words from Scripture became words of prayer, and my grandfather appeared to be swept away in a private and intimate conversation with the Lord. Somehow it felt as if I were an interloper, peering into something that was happening on holy ground. My father referred to his own father's faith as "mystical"—something that was not describable because we all recognized a depth of relationship that was beyond the earthly. His prayer life revealed a genuine relationship that reflected the reality of God. If you had any doubt as to the existence of God, all you had to do was listen to Grandpa's prayers. Grandpa Johnson knew how to pray, and from a young age this truth tugged at my heart. I wanted to know Jesus the way Grandpa knew Jesus.

I find that people often take prayer for granted. I have sat in numerous meetings with leaders discussing prayer.

Once, on the mission field, we talked about putting a specific emphasis on prayer in a strategic document. Someone responded, “Oh, that’s a given.” But then I thought that I’m not sure it is. Maybe in my grandfather’s time, it was a given that Christians knew prayer should encompass every part of our lives and certainly every aspect of ministry. It seems the past generations may have failed to pass on the spiritual gift of prayer to a new generation.

A number of years ago I was in the United Kingdom, sitting in a series of all-day lectures on Wesleyanism. One presenter was speaking about a second wave of Wesleyan influence in England that was somewhat related to the Holiness camp meetings in the United States near the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The presenter read a letter from someone who had attended the camp meeting in the United States, and I found it fascinating. The individual outlined the schedule for the day, which began with an early-morning prayer meeting. They broke for breakfast, then returned to the tent or tabernacle for another session of prayer. Evidently, this was a time when many would come forward to the “mourner’s bench” and cry out for God’s Spirit to be poured out upon the gathering. This would go on for an hour or two. The witness said the presence of the Spirit of God was so “thick” that people were giving their lives to Christ over the lunch hour. Again, in the afternoon, the people gathered, some around the mourner’s bench, others pacing the aisles as they prayed and interceded for the needs of the world

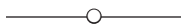
and of God's people. Eventually there was an evening service in which the Word was preached, and the altars were lined with those seeking a deeper walk with Christ. The author of the letter warned that there should not be too much preaching, for it could overshadow the great need for prayer. This letter, written more than a hundred years ago, made an impression on me and made me want to know more about prayer.

Sadly, it seems that these protracted periods of time spent in prayer are now part of history for the majority of Christians. Somehow prayer is a spiritual discipline that has not been passed on through the generations. In a recent meeting on discipleship, we spoke of the importance of prayer only to discover that we had never defined prayer and that, for many new believers, the concept was simply foreign. Nothing can be taken for granted. If we are going to be disciples of Jesus Christ, then we must be people of prayer.

A number of years ago I read a book called *The Divine Mentor* that encourages us to find mentors in the Word of God. My grandfather is no longer living, and there are times I wish I could sit under his mentorship and learn to pray the way he did. All the previous generations in my family have now passed on, so I have looked to Scripture to provide me with mentors who can teach me to pray. I confess I have been hesitant to write this book because I still have much more to learn about prayer, but I do know I have learned a great deal from what I have gleaned in the Word of God. I invite you to join me in this journey of men-

torship, where we allow Scripture to pour into our lives and teach us, a new generation, to be people of prayer.

# 1 WHY PRAY?



*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

—Ephesians 6:10–17



The church in Ephesus was filled with followers of Christ who were growing and developing in their discipleship. The city itself was a cosmopolitan center where people from around the known world came to visit the temple of the Greek goddess Artemis (or the Roman version, Diana). The temple to this goddess was an incredible building, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The secular world, filled as it was with pagan worship, encroached upon the fledgling spiritual lives of the new believers. Standing firm in their faith was becoming a significant challenge. Therefore, Paul wanted to instruct them on the ways in which they could stand firm, beginning by putting on the full armor of God, which has a lot to do with prayer.

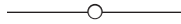
There are many pieces to the armor of God as described by Paul, but overall, the purpose is to be strong in the Lord and in the Lord's power. The armor reflects the power of Jesus in our lives, which gives us the ability to withstand the devil. Far too often we fail to realize there are ongoing battles in the heavenly realms, but Paul wanted to provide the church with a vision of warfare between good and evil. One of the reasons we must learn how to pray is that there are struggles in this world between warring principalities, and humanity can be caught in the middle. Yet Paul tells us there is a way through for followers of Christ: putting on the full armor of God. In reality, Jesus *is* the armor, and every follower of Christ is to find their strength by being in Christ. Jesus is the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. Jesus becomes the shoes on our feet, leading us

to the places where we are to proclaim his gospel of peace. All of this is possible by having faith in the One who will do it. By and through our faith in Jesus Christ, the flaming arrows of the evil one will be quenched. For the people of the Ephesian church, and for all of us, putting on the armor of God and standing firm becomes possible when we accept the gracious gift of salvation provided for us by the work of Christ. The result is a life empowered by the presence of the Spirit and a knowledge of Christ that grows through study of the Word and a life of prayer.

Unfortunately, we often venture out into life without putting on Jesus first. This happens when we fail to spend time in prayer. It's easy to become comfortable in our Christian walk and think, *I've got this!* Then comes the day when we are slammed by the unexpected. In that moment we realize we are unprepared and have been walking this Christian walk without the armor of Jesus Christ. We are unable to answer the tough questions, and our anxiety, fear, and frustration may get the better of us. Our responses are not Christlike, and we do not reflect Christ to the world. Recently, a friend of mine suggested praying on the full armor of God every day.

Just as we get dressed each morning to go out into the world, we should also take the time to intentionally put on Jesus. What happens as a result is attentiveness to truth, or a seemingly uncanny sensitivity to our surroundings. The breastplate of righteousness covers our heart, protecting us from the motivations and temptations that may drive

us in the wrong direction. When putting on our shoes, we can begin to pray about where they may take us that day—or to whom they may lead. We become prepared to declare the gospel of peace at any destination. We pray for a firm faith, undeterred by the voices of doubt. Daily, the shield of faith is reenergized as we focus on Jesus. After we have prayed intentionally to put on Jesus, we open the written Word, soaking up knowledge of the living Word. There is something powerful and synergistic about prayer and the study of the Word. After we are prepared for the day, we discover that the Spirit gently guides and leads us as we journey through the hours. Paul knew that he needed this kind of guidance to do the work he was trying to accomplish. Why would it be different for us? We need to put on Jesus, through prayer, now more than ever.



*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.*

—Ephesians 6:18–20

Immediately after admonishing the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God, Paul moved into prayer. Paul himself came to prayer with a deep theological understanding

that grasped the significance of the gospel and shaped his emphasis on the importance of prayer. There is a gospel of peace that is at odds with the world, and there is cosmic unity that is to be experienced in the church. There are forces that are directly at odds with God's desire for believers and the church. Paul was encouraging the church toward a spiritual understanding that would create a heightened awareness of the need to pray. When the Spirit moves, the church is to pray—not only for the people who are part of the church but also for others. Prayer begins with praise to God and then moves to supplication—or intercession—on behalf of people's needs. Petition is when we pray for God's grace to be extended to us because we recognize that our own behaviors have created distance between ourselves and God.

Paul knew that his preaching needed the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. He also recognized that his faith would grow within a community of faith. This meant he depended on his fellow believers in Ephesus to become partners in his ministry through prayer. Their prayers would help him have wisdom and clarity when the time came to speak the mystery of the gospel. He wanted to be able to declare this gospel with boldness, but he knew he couldn't do it on his own. When we connect prayer to the armor of God like Paul did, something powerful begins to happen in our understanding of living a life in Christ. The more we grow spiritually, the more we realize how much we need prayer. The more we pray, the more we grow spiritually. It all goes

hand in hand, and if we don't know how to pray, we will not know how to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I'm a person who likes background noise. However, I've found that this preference sometimes prevents me from hearing or sensing God's leading. I find direction when I find a quiet space and begin to listen and communicate with God in prayer. This is often true when it comes to my speaking or preaching. On an intellectual level, I can prepare material. However, something radically different happens when that material becomes infused with God's presence and leading. Often, in prayer, I have moments of insight that surprise me. In prayer I sense God's peace about a particular direction I am going in a project. God's leading helps me to have meaningful conversations with others. In prayer I'm prompted to contact someone or pray for a need. I need prayer because I need to be connected to God.

So how do we pray?

- We take the time to be grounded in the Word.
- We soak up every bit of learning and theological preparation that we can.
- We stand firm in the armor of God and then lean into all that God has provided for us, and journey into God's holy presence.
- We pray in the Spirit, not out of our intellect.
- We ask the Spirit to lead and guide us in new directions and toward new insights.
- We pray for our sisters and brothers who are in the midst of spiritual battles. When we are sensitive to

the Spirit, we will actually sense and know when this is happening.

- We will pray for boldness to speak the prophetic words of God to the world—yes, for ourselves, but we also pray for others to receive holy boldness.

We begin with praise and adoration of God on high. We intercede for others. We pray for our own spiritual well-being. Finally, we pray for a bold proclamation. This is the model that Paul has prepared for us, a church that shall be called a house of prayer.

## Practicing Praying the Armor of God onto Ourselves

Before heading out for the day, take a few moments to pray on the full armor of God.

1. Pray that you will have faith to stand firm in the face of challenges.
2. Ask the Lord to fasten the belt of truth around your waist. We live in a world that challenges our understanding of truth. We need God's truth to lead, guide, and strengthen us every day.
3. Ask the Lord to fasten the breastplate of righteousness onto your chest. The arrows of the enemy will come to attack your heart—including your motivations and your emotions. Every day we are challenged to make good decisions based on righteousness. We pray for this protection in decision-making.
4. Pray that your feet will be prepared and ready to take action at a moment's notice so that we may be participants in God's gospel of peace.
5. Pray for strength to pick up the shield of faith that can extinguish the attacks of the evil one. We need the Lord to increase our faith on a daily basis because we recognize that the evil one will try to attack everything we believe in, encouraging us to

denounce our faith. Pray that your shield of faith will protect you.

6. Finally, pray on your helmet and sword, for you are heading out into a world of spiritual warfare. With the helmet of salvation, we hold onto the truth that we are saved by faith, and the sword at our side—the Word of God—is our defensive weapon.