**PAUL’S PRAYER REQUESTS**

***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.**19******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, 20for which I am*** ***an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may*** ***declare it fearlessly, as I should***

Ephesians 6:18-20 (NIV)

Paul now adds prayer to all he has just written about the armour of God, not because he thinks prayer is another weapon but because he thinks it pervades all spiritual warfare. Equipping ourselves with God’s armour is neither automatically assumed, nor is it a mechanical operation. It infers a complete dependence on God, a dependence which we constantly express in our prayer life. The NIV begins a new sentence with verse 18 but Paul has a participle, ‘praying,’ which joins ‘praying’ with his instruction to put on the spiritual armour. This gives the sense: ‘Put on each piece of armour with prayer.’ and then continue ‘*on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests’* (6:18).

Praying is to be ‘*in the Spirit.*’ The Holy Spirit is given to us to help us in every part of our lives. We need Him constantly and this comes into sharpest focus when we pray (Romans 8:26,27). Paul has used the term ‘*in the Spirit’* a number of times already in this letter (2:18,22; 3;5; 5:18) where its meaning is broader than asking the Spirit for help. Paul saw a meeting of the life of the Christian with the life of the Spirit so the Spirit became the very ‘atmosphere’ of the Christian’s life. As we learn to live in the Spirit, we will increasingly find the Holy Spirit placing in our hands the word of God and prayer as our most effective combination in battle.

The word ‘*all’* or its equivalent is used four times in 6:18. We are to ‘*pray in the Spirit on all occasions*,’ ‘*with all kinds of prayers and requests,*’ ‘*always keep on praying’* (literally: ‘with all perseverance’), ‘*for all the Lord’s people*.’ Too many Christians pray sometimes, with some prayer, and some perseverance, for some of God’s people. The New Testament frequently tells Christians that they must never stop praying (Luke 18:1; Romans 12:12; Philippians 4:6; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). ‘*On all occasions’* is literally ‘at every time’ where ‘time’ is ‘kairos,’ a particular time, a decisive time, not just hours and minutes time (chronos). Prayer is a systematic discipline. Building consistency in prayer only comes when prayer has become a habit of life, where we have learnt to ‘*be alert and always keep on praying‘* (6:18). Jesus emphasised the need to keep alert because of the unexpectedness of His return (Mark 13:33ff; Luke 12:37ff) and because of temptation (Mark 14:34-38). Being alert was a widely used summons to vigilance for Christians (1 Corinthians 16:33; cf. Revelation 16:15), partly because the devil is always on the prowl like a hungry lion (1 Peter 5:8), false teachers like fierce wolves (Acts 20:31) and the tendency for Christians to be sleeping when they should be praying (Colossians 4:2).

Christians must not limit the focus of their praying to themselves. We are to be praying ‘*for all the Lord’s people’* (6:18; cf. 1 Timothy 2:1). 1 Peter 5:9 brings out the same link between our prayer focus in spiritual warfare and the wider body of Christ. Peter exhorts his readers to ‘*resist him* (the devil) *standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering*.’

Having asked the church to pray for others, he now asks them to pray for him, ‘*Pray also for me*‘ (6:19). Paul often asked the churches to pray for him (Colossians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1). In writing to the church in Ephesus, Paul is well aware of his position in the forefront of the battle, (even though he was in prison), and of his vulnerability. The strength he needed was not just for his personal confrontation with the devil but particularly for his evangelistic ministry that would rescue people from the devil’s dominion. This had been part of Paul’s original commission when the risen Lord Jesus had told him to turn people ‘*from darkness to light and from the power of* *Satan to God’* (Acts 26:18). He was under house arrest but had not left the battlefield. There were those soldiers to whom, one by one, each for a shift of several hours, he was chained. And there were other visitors. He could still witness to them and he did. The fugitive slave, Onesimus, whom he led to faith in Christ was one of them. Jewish leaders came to his lodging (Acts 28:17,23) and heard him explain the gospel ‘*from morning till evening’* (Acts 28:23).

Paul doesn’t ask for freedom from prison but for freedom to continue sharing the gospel. Specifically, he asks for wisdom (clarity) and boldness (courage). He asks them to pray firstly ‘*that whenever I speak, words may be given me’* (6:20). ‘Opening the mouth’ was an expression only used when the words spoken were questionable. He is asking that he has clarity in the content of what he says. Paul never lost the sense of his great responsibility in being entrusted with ‘*the mystery of the gospel’* (6:20; cf. 3:3,4,9). The gospel is a ‘*mystery’* because it can only be made known by revelation.

Paul asks, secondly, that he would ‘*fearlessly make known’* the gospel message (6:20), not in any way diminishing its content. This is a request for boldness. Like the earlier apostles in Acts 4:29, his prayer is not for success, or deliverance from danger or suffering, but for boldness and courage in proclaiming the message God had entrusted to him. Clarity and courage remain two of the most crucial characteristics of authentic Christian preaching. Clarity without courage is like sunshine in the desert, lots of light but nothing grows. Courage without clarity is like a landscape in the middle of the night – much to see but no light to see it by. We need both and so did Paul.

Now, to give point to their praying, Paul reminds his readers that he is ‘*an ambassador in chains’* (6:20). Though in prison at the will of the Roman Emperor, he still felt the importance of his position as the representative of the King of all human kings. He was the bearer of the word of His royal master. Because of the way he represented Christ, he was ‘*in chains*.’ Acts 28:16 notes that when Paul first came to Rome, he ‘*was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him’* and then in verse 20 that ‘*because of the hope of Israel … I am bound with this chain.*’ Paul’s greatest concern was not that his wrist be unchained but that his mouth might be, not that he would be set free but that the proclamation of the gospel would be. Paul knew he had a responsibility and a privilege which would remain until the end of his life. He knew how he ‘*should’* speak in witnessing of Christ and so closes, repeating the request that they pray that he might ‘*declare it fearlessly‘* (6:20)

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

‘The Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians’ (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. F. Bruce (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984)

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‘The Prison Letters (Paul for Everyone)’ by Tom Wright (SPCK, London, 2004)

‘Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words’ by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)