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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**August 29, 2021**

**The Power of Prayer**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, again I thank you for this church. I just thank you that as Fred has pointed out there are places in the world where people are taking their lives in their hands to assemble and we still have those doors wide open. We're just grateful and thankful for that, Lord, we just continue to see this as a gift, a gift that we want to use and use well. And so Father, we pray this morning as we open up the gift of your word we would have the presence of your Holy Spirit, that you'd guide us, that you'd accompany us and that you would give us the ability to make this of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well as you probably know we have been talking about "now you see me, now you don't" for weeks now, and we've seen how many of us have experienced intense times of God's presence and equally bewildering times when we have sensed nothing but his absence. This morning I want to take up one aspect of it that we haven't really addressed before where there's no more obvious place that God appears to be overwhelmingly present at some times or

extraordinarily absent at others, and that's in the area of prayer.

We all know that God has told us repeatedly of the importance of prayer, but I suspect that deep down most of us have a hard time understanding the point of prayer. We believe that God is absolutely sovereign, that he controls every single event, that all things work together for good to those who love God, but believing that makes the problem of prayer something to wrestle with. I mean we all want to believe that prayer is powerful, that it can change God's mind or direction and cause things to happen that would not have happened in the absence of prayer. But if God is omniscient, if God is omnipotent and he controls the future and every single event in the present, then how could my prayer possibly change his course or direction? I mean am I going to come up with some brand new insight or some new piece of information that's going to cause God to suddenly say, "Oh, I really hadn't seen it that way," or some new thought that God says, "Well, you know, I really hadn't thought of it that way," or "Yeah, I appreciate how sincerely you've appealed to me, so I'm going to change my mind on this or that." Is that really the way that prayer works?

Well this morning I think it's important that we spend some time understanding what prayer is all about, why God has called on us to pray, and then specifically why prayer for Afghanistan is so

desperately needed today.

You know the Bible consists of great accounts of answers to prayer but if you look long and hard enough you're also going to find that it contains great accounts of unanswered prayer. One such account is that of Hannah. As the months turned into years for Hannah she realized repeatedly that God had not opened her womb and it's obviously something that developed over a long period of time and during that period of time every month came with a reminder that her prayer had gone unanswered and God had seen fit to say no. Sarah no doubt had the same bitter answer to prayer each month for ten years before Isaac was born; so did Ruth, so did Rebecca who was barren for twenty years. That's twenty years of unanswered prayer. Joseph sat in a jail cell for two full years crying out to God and hearing back nothing. Gideon complained bitterly that the Midianites had overrun his nation and that God was simply ignoring his pleas. Paul prayed three times for God to remove the thorn in his flesh and three times God said no, no, and no. The prophet Habakkuk opens up his book with a well-known complaint: *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?* See, every one of these people thought they were in a "now you see me, now you don't" moment that was definitely now you don't. But interestingly enough God presents each of these people as being part and parcel of his

individual love, care and scrutiny, so much so that he peels back the curtain and he shows us his active involvement in the lives of people who are inclined to believe that he's not even there.

Gideon is a perfect example. See in the time of judges, Israel had rebelled, they had walked away from God and God's response was to turn them over to the Midianites who for seven years literally tormented these people. *Judges 6 says: And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey.*

Israel had rebelled against God. God even sent a prophet to them to tell them directly that the Midianites were coming against them as the direct result of their disobedience. It meant nothing to them. They continued rebelling against God and God continued to give the Midianites their way against them until God himself in the form of the pre-incarnate visit of Christ, he appears to Gideon and he appears to Gideon as he's threshing out wheat in a winepress of all things. Gideon is trying to get some kind of a harvest that he

can manage outside of the sight of the Midianites because every time they have a harvest the Midianites come in, attack and steal it. So here's Gideon, he's trying to thresh out some wheat in a winepress when he gets a visit literally from God himself. This is *Judges 6:11*. It says: *Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor."*

There's a lot going on in this passage that we need to unpack. First of all it literally seems that God is not above using a little bit of sarcasm, referring to Gideon, who's clearly hiding and cowering from his enemies. He refers to him as *"O mighty man of valor."* Gideon doesn't seem to hesitate to tell the angel -- who is God himself -- about his unhappiness with God. It says: *And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian."* I mean Gideon himself obviously you can't see the irony of a conversation he's having about being abandoned by God with God. The point is God is clearly

present, he's attentive, he's understanding exactly what is going on because he's responding directly to Gideon who thinks that God is none of the above. I mean there's irony abounding in all these different interactions that God has with his people because we're reading God's own observation of the very people accusing him of abandoning them or not hearing them or responding in a way that makes them think that God is absent. I mean Hannah and Ruth and Rebecca and Isaac and Joseph and Gideon, they all felt like Habakkuk when he said: *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?* And yet the proof that God does in fact care is right there in the account that God is writing. It's kind of hard for God not to know what's going on when he's the one who's reporting the dialogue that Hannah is full of anxiety and vexation and that she's deeply troubled in spirit. Gideon doesn't know it but he's spilling out his guts to the very God he claims has abandoned him. In Joseph's case God not once, not twice but three times said that he was with Joseph in all of his trials and all of the times that he felt utterly alone. And what's truly ironic is that all of us at one time or another have felt that God has turned a deaf ear on our prayers as well.

I think we all struggle mightily with what prayer is all about. So let's first ask the most obvious question there is about prayer, and that's what's the point? What is the point of prayer? Well,

let me frame this in the context of perhaps the most obvious question about prayer today and that's the question of prayer for Afghanistan. Why should we pray for Afghanistan? I mean is it a qualitative issue? Are we going to offer God some kind of new insight, some kind of new information and new perspective that omnipotent, omnipresent God doesn't already have? No. Maybe it's a quantitative issue. Are we going to collect enough voices, sort of like a spiritual petition drive to ensure that we get God's attention so that he responds favorably to a nation in crisis? Again no. You see, when it comes to prayer, it's far less a qualitative or quantitative issue than it is an issue of warfare, of spiritual warfare between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness and the role that God has placed us in in that war.

I mean most of us know that many, many years ago there was an actual war that took place in heaven between God and his angels and Lucifer and his followers and we have a record in Revelation of what happened as a result of that battle. *Revelation 12 says: Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world -- he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with*

him.

So we learn Satan is tossed out of heaven, he's tossed out of heaven and guess where he lands, he lands right here on planet earth. 2 Corinthians tells us that Satan is the god of this world. He's described as the prince of the power of the air in Ephesians 2, and one who has the power over this present darkness in Ephesians 6. But we also know the other side. We know that God came down to earth for the express purpose of destroying Satan and in order to do that he had to become a man. *Hebrews 2* says this: *Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he -- that's meaning Jesus -- he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*

You know, I've repeated many times what C.S. Lewis asserts about the gospel, that it's the ultimate true fairy tale, and that there really was an evil prince who came to this planet and took it over and there was a good prince who left his kingdom and came to ours in order to pursue and defeat the evil prince, and that he did it by living a perfect life and then offering up his life on the cross as a substitute for our life of sin so that we by faith could exchange our sinfulness for his perfection and stand before God now



perfect and worthy of heaven. But it cost the prince his life. We're not privy to the reason for the war in heaven but I think it's reasonable to assume that we human beings just might have had something to do with it. I mean we're the creatures that are made in God's image, and this evil prince was at war with God. So Jesus became one of us in order to destroy him and his works. *1 John 3:8* says it flat out, it says: *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.* So understand, we are the creatures that Satan hates with a passion.

And the inevitable question that comes up in understanding God and Satan is so why didn't God just destroy him? I mean after all he's a creature. He was created by God himself, God is the ultimate power, why not be rid of him? The problem is God is love. And that is an ultimate power that is not expressed by simply the ability to destroy. Jesus actually did destroy the works of the devil but he didn't do it through an exercise of raw power. He did it instead through the exercise of perfect love, and so he calls on us as his image bearer to be part of the process of overcoming the dark kingdom through love as well. And this is where Satan learns that God's intent is not to destroy him through raw power but instead to enlist the aid of mere humans, the very creatures that Satan detests, in bringing about his doom.

So we are God's co-belligerents in this battle and the weapon that God has chosen for his people is prayer. Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher said -- quote -- "Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence." So how does this work? How does God maintain his absolute sovereignty over all things while still carving out a role of critical importance for his image bearers? Well he does so through prayer. I've said it many, many times before, when God wants to move a mountain he doesn't just move a mountain, the very first thing he does is he moves his people to start praying that the mountain will be moved and then in response to those prayers he moves the mountain. This is how God insists on involving his children, created in his image in the drama of human redemption even though we stumble at it constantly. You know, like Jesus told the sleeping disciples in the garden of Gethsemane when he asked them to pray and they fell asleep, he said, *"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."* Jesus knows and God knows us. He knows we desperately need assistance in the labor of prayer, and so he tells us directly in *Romans 8:26*, he says: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* So the spirit intercedes for us because we are too weak to get it right on our own. And prayer is too important to leave to our weakness. I mean when you think about God's efforts to come

alongside us in prayer you can't help but conclude that prayer must be incredibly important to God.

So how is our labor in prayer effective? Well I've often described the cycle of prayer as an electrical circuit. And we know that in a circuit current can't flow unless there's a complete circuit from an energy source through a switch or a wire then back to the source. And if there's a break anywhere in the circuit it's a short circuit and current can't flow. That's how switches work. I think I got that right, Russ; is that right? Close enough? Okay. God is the source of all energy, spiritual and otherwise and he is the place where prayer originates. I mean the wires, so to speak, are the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit transports the will of God from the Father to us and then he energizes our part because we're the weak link. Again, *the Spirit helps us in our weakness*. I mean, to need to press the analogy a little further, it's like we human beings are literally switches. It's our task to complete the circuit through prayer. And that's why God treats our prayer as so critical. Because in this war between the two kingdoms, we become the switches that connect heaven to earth. I mean this is the way we look at it if we're going to just describe it in depth. I said first the Father is the one who initiates prayer. *Philippians 2:13* says: *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*. What God is saying is that he's the source of

everything we do including what we pray for, including what we desire to pray for. So it is God working in us that moves us to pray in the very first place.

And secondly the Holy Spirit translates and he intercedes for us. *Romans 8:26* says: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* Just think about this for a second. What God is explaining here, he's trying to unpack this whole process of prayer. I mean do you realize how much effort God puts into our prayers? I mean I can only imagine that this is ridiculously tedious and overwhelmingly inefficient to utilize creatures whose attention spans can be measured mostly in seconds, seldom in minutes, who frequently forget and frequently pray for the wrong things and with the wrong motives or probably spend half their time devoted to prayer daydreaming or just wandering around in a fog, and you know that's the case for all of us. And yet God sends his Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness. I mean our role in prayer is so crucial that God's Holy Spirit is coming alongside us to guide us, understanding that we don't do prayer right. And so the Spirit of God works in us and with us to empower and translate our

efforts.

And thirdly we participate. *Ephesians 6:18* tells us we are to be *praying 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.* Then fourthly, Jesus advocates. We say this all the time during communion service. *1 John 2:1: We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.* To advocate means to speak on behalf of, to speak for. And there's Jesus in the throne room of heaven who alone can vouch for our rights to appeal to God because it was his death on the cross that gave us that right. And then finally the Father orchestrates. *2 Thessalonians* says: *To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.* So here's God fulfilling every resolve for God and every work of faith by his power and then God reveals in that scripture why it is we pray. Verse 12: *So that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* And what's amazing about this process is that it can be described as a circuit involving Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and right in the middle of that circuit is a switch, and the switch is us. The Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes, we participate because we're the switches, Jesus

advocates and than the Father orchestrates. For God's own glory he has elected to run that circuit through human beings, and like any other circuit, if a switch doesn't cooperate, it's going to cause the whole circuit to short out and fail. Well that's us when we refuse to pray. And because God's sovereign purpose is never thwarted when we sin by refusing to pray, he simply raises up another switch.

I mean stop and think about it. Have you ever wondered why there's so many appeals in scripture for prayer? Let me just give you a sampling. This is *Philippians 4:6: Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 1 Thessalonians 5: Pray without ceasing. 2 Chronicles 7, we all know that one: 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. James 5:16: The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* I mean like I said, we are at war, and our role as humans is critical.

So where does this leave God? I mean is God up in heaven biting his nails, oh, just hoping that we get our acts together? Well may it never be so! He's much bigger than that. He's the one who is

working in us to will and to work. His Holy Spirit is helping us in our weakness. It is his Spirit that gives us the ability to participate in this circuit as a switch. But understand, if we fail in the switches, he'll just replace the switch with another or in some cases he will compel our will. I mean have you ever been forced to your knees in prayer? I mean I know I have. I mean occasionally I've heard some news that instantly, instantly brought me to my knees in prayer, some news so urgent that my first reaction was to go find a place to pray. I don't think that's coincidental. I think it's part of this proxy war that we are right in the middle of where God intends to act but his first action is always to move his people to pray so that he can act in response to our prayer. See, God's ends will always be accomplished, but God in his wisdom has chosen us to be a means to that end. As I've said we have no idea how critical our role is to God's great plan for his kingdom but God has made it clear that our prayer is crucial, that our resistance is a function of our weakness and our refusal to pray is a sin that is against God's will.

And so to sum up, the Father originates all prayer, the Spirit communicates the intention and the will of the Father, we participate, the Son advocates making us worthy to pray and then the Father completes the cycle by orchestrating a response. And

then again we find right in the middle of that cycle of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is this human touch, right in the middle is this fallen, frail, sinful human. It's us acting as the connection from heaven to earth. That's why God says in our text this morning, he says: *The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* Well James goes on to give an example just how that works in the very next verse. This is what he says: *The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.*

You probably know James is referring to an incident in the life of the prophet Elijah that perfectly illustrates this whole idea of this circuit of prayer. Israel was in full rebellion against God and under the rule of wicked Ahab and Jezebel. It's found in *1 Kings 17*. It says: *Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."* He's calling for a drought and sure enough there's no rain for three straight years. *1 Kings 18:1* says: *After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth."*



Note what he just said. God has told his prophet that he, God, is going to end the drought and he's going to send rain. But what follows next is the celebrated tale of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. We have wicked King Ahab and Elijah, they meet and they each accuse each other of causing disaster in Israel. Elijah proposes a duel to see who the real God is. Turns out to be Elijah alone verses 450 prophets of Baal and an additional 400 prophets of Ashteroth. So we have one Elijah on this side and 850 false prophets on the other. That's about fair odds because one man plus God is all the army that you need.

And so Elijah goes before the people assembled in this huge crowd, and he says: *"How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."* And the people did not answer him a word. Elijah goes on to announce the terms of the duel. There's going to be two bulls prepared on two separate altars but there's going to be no fire and the real God is going to supply the fire. So the prophets of Baal go first and they weep and they wail and they shout, nothing else. Elijah begins to mock their efforts, says: *And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."* And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until

*the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. Now it's Elijah's turn. It says: And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.*

*So just picture the scene now, everybody is watching, everybody is waiting. I mean, the sacrifice is sopping wet, water is dripping off and what do you think Elijah does? Remember what James says, Elijah does just what he's supposed to. He prays. Says: And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the*

wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. Well God answered the prayer as the prophet had prayed. The real God had delivered the real fire but then something else happened. This is verse 39. It says: And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape." And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there. And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain." So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees.

So Elijah goes up to the mountain, he's up at the mountaintop there praying for rain; but wait, he already knows what's going to happen. He already knows that God's going to send rain because God already told him. He already knows that God's going to do what God's going to do, so why pray? But this is no ordinary prayer. You know I've often said that the prayers that you know are going to be answered are prayers that are prayed with God's mind, God's will and God's intention and Elijah clearly had all of that down pat and he already had heard directly from God himself way back at the beginning of chapter 18. Let me just repeat. It says: After

*many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth."* Why bother praying for something that God's already promised? I mean why bother going up to the mountaintop? Why bother bowing down to the ground with your face between your knees? Well Elijah bothered because he knew that he was the switch. He certainly didn't know electricity but he knew that he was God's connection from heaven to earth in this circuit of prayer. Spiritual current flowed from God by his Holy Spirit through a human prophet named Elijah and then through Christ back to God for an answer. And even though Elijah had the very words of God's promise of rain, he still had a mighty work to do in prayer. And so Elijah goes to the very top of Mount Carmel, he bends his body down to the ground with his face between his knees and he's praying desperately for what he already knows is the will of God. Verse 43 says: *And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go again," seven times.*

So just picture this again. Not once, not twice, not three times, but seven times he sends his servant, and six times he comes back and says, "Nothing." You're Elijah, you just had a spectacular demonstration of God's power, fire from heaven has literally consumed the sacrifice. You've told Ahab that heavy rain is on its

way because God has told you so. You're on your face praying and zero. Now what? I mean how many times have you faced circumstances that had you praying over and over and over again and nothing? So what does Elijah do? We'll give you a hint. What he does he does again and again and again and again and again and again and again. I mean perhaps Elijah thinks at first, well maybe I didn't pray correctly. So maybe he tries a few different ways of expressing and then maybe starts thinking God isn't hearing him. Maybe he starts thinking he's not worthy because he's a sinner and he's sinned and perhaps he confesses his sins and maybe he tries again and again. Does that sound familiar? I mean he knows it's the will of God. He knows that with absolute certitude yet somehow it's not working. It's almost like there's resistance in the switch. Something's shorting out the circuit. There's a weakness in there of some sort. And what does the Holy Spirit tell us in Romans 8? He says: *"The Spirit helps us in our weakness. He intercedes for us with groans that words can't express."*

So after six failed attempts at completing the circuit, Elijah does what God wants us to do. He persists, he continues, he doesn't give up. Elijah sends his servant one last time and it says: *And at the seventh time he said, "Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'"* And

*in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. See, Elijah was praying with God's mind, God's will, and God's intention and it still took seven times for his prayer to be powerful and effective. Elijah prayed seven times because that's what it took to get the puzzle pieces to fit. I don't know why it took seven times but I suspect it has something to do with the warfare that we're right in the middle of.*

So what does this mean to us? I mean how does this story tell us what prayer is all about? Well what lessons can we draw from Elijah's story? Well I can think of three. The first one is it should be obvious but prayer is hard work. God never suggests that prayer is easy. Elijah gives us a great picture of somebody intensely laboring at prayer. He's on the ground, his face is between his knees, he's working it repeatedly. So the question it raises is do we work at prayer? Do we invest prayer with the labor it deserves? Do we make time for prayer? Is it a natural part of our lives?

Secondly, prayer is also discipline. See Elijah's response to trouble was prayer. He got that response through discipline. If

you're not disciplined in prayer, if you're not praying very much, you're going to find that that's the mark of your life. It's not habitual. It's not a natural response. See, we're in a spiritual war. Listen to how Paul puts it. He says: *Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.*

So here we have God laying out this incredible line of a whole slew of defensive weapons that allow us to stand against the enemy, and out of all of the weapons that God gives us, only the word of God

and prayer stand as offensive weapons. Picture if you're the enemy, I can't take off my breastplate and throw it at you, hit you with my shoes, they're not going to hurt you at all. But I can certainly come at you with a sword and the sword is the word of God and prayer, those are the only two weapons that can actually hurt the enemy. They're the only two that the enemy really cares about stopping and so he works overtime to keep us from those very things: prayer and the word of God.

And so the question that we have to answer from our own lives is has he been successful? I mean can you guess why the two most important parts of our Christian lives are also the source of our greatest struggles? I mean they don't come to us naturally because the enemy of our souls, the God of this age sees to that. And so a large part of the answer to his attack is discipline, it's making that which does not come naturally natural. You know great athletes aren't born that way, they just, they work at it. I remember when Luke played basketball in college. One of the things he was taught was the concept of muscle memory. They say you work on a shot and you shoot that same shot thousands and thousands of times. You do it so many times that your individual muscles develop a memory of their own so that every time you start to take that shot, your muscles respond in the exact same way. You make what is not natural, natural. Same is true with prayer. And you



know when prayer is natural when you have no problem going right into prayer at any time of the day for any reason with anyone. If you can't do that, then prayer's not yet natural for you.

And thirdly, prayer requires listening. I mean if answered prayer originates with God and it's communicated by his Holy Spirit, it's obvious that it is our task to receive that communication, to hear what the Spirit is telling us when he comes alongside us in our weakness, and that's not natural for us but it can be. It's just like anything else, it's doable with discipline. The more you do it, the more attentive your ears are going to become and it pays phenomenal dividends. I mean Elijah did it, and he's showing us how. I mean he's shown us that prayer is labor, prayer is discipline, prayer is listening.

So why has God called us to pray? Well because God originates prayer and the Holy Spirit communicates prayer and we participate in that prayer. And because Jesus has made us righteous he can advocate on our behalf and then God can orchestrate that prayer proving what God tells us in James: *The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

So finally, why should we pray for Afghanistan? Because God has told us to. Because he sees and knows and identifies with every

single need of every single believer in that singularly God-forsaken place. And we know that it is not God-forsaken. And that our prayer for Afghanistan is critical because we know that whatever God is going to do in that place he's going to do in response to prayer. So let's pray.

*Father, my prayer first and foremost is for the nation of Afghanistan. Secondly it's for every single believer in that country who is fearing for their life, who is anticipating a knock on the door from the Taliban wanting to know if they believe in the Nazarene. I just continue to pray, Lord, that you would give astounding courage, miraculous ability and a sense of your presence to each and every believer, each and every brother and sister in Afghanistan who names the name of Christ at a price.*

*And then Lord, I pray for the country, I pray for the people of Afghanistan. And Lord, I pray for the Taliban. Lord, it pains me to do so but I recognize the ultimate, ultimate end of the Taliban would come if they came fully to know who you are. And we've seen it before. Lord, Jonah when he went to the Ninevites was literally preaching to a nation that was just like the Taliban and overnight that nation converted. So you have that power, Lord, and we know that. We just want to tap into your will your way, your understanding, and we know that we can do that by trusting in your*

*Holy Spirit. I pray for your grace, I pray for your insight, I pray for your courage, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*