



“Victory, from the Knees Up”

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It was one of the strangest court cases in U.S. history.

The town was a ragtag collection of depression era decay on the dustbowl plains of Oklahoma, one of those wide spots on the road to nowhere. Situated between two churches was a saloon, the only lively place in that sleepy town. Petty hoodlums, rowdy rednecks, and cheating husbands came from all over the county to wet their beaks at this roadside tavern and spend their hard-earned cash on its delectable depravities. But to law-abiding citizens, deserted wives, and neglected children it was the Heartbreak Hotel.

So the pastors of the two churches called their congregations to a joint Saturday night prayer meeting. The gathered saints prayed fervently that God would destroy the saloon. About midnight, one of those violent thunderstorms that light up the hot Oklahoma night descended with a holy vengeance. A bolt of lightning hit the saloon and ignited a glorious blaze. By Sunday morning the den of iniquity was reduced to embers. Later that morning, the triumphant pastors of the two churches mounted their pulpits and each delivered a stem-winding sermon on the power of prayer.

On Monday morning the insurance company informed the saloon owner that the fire was an act of God, and therefore not covered by the policy. When he later heard about the Saturday night prayer meeting, he angrily sued the churches. It may well be the only court trial in U.S. history where people have been sued for malicious prayers.

His case was airtight in its logic. The insurance company said the fire was an act of God. The churches had prayed for God to destroy the saloon. Therefore, their prayers were responsible for its destruction, and they should be held responsible for the damages.

The attorney for the churches laid out their defense: the thunderstorm was a random act of nature. No one can predict where lightning will strike. Though their prayers intended the destruction of the saloon, they could not be proven to have caused it. Therefore, their prayers could not be held liable for the fire.

When the judge handed down his decision, absolving the church of blame, he wryly noted the following:

"This is indeed a strange case. The plaintiff, who is a professing atheist, claims that prayer destroyed his saloon. So he obviously believes in the power of prayer. On the other hand, the defendants deny that their prayers were responsible for the fire. Therefore, these good religious folk obviously don't believe in the power of prayer."

Ouch! These Oklahoma churches remind me of the early Christians in Jerusalem. The Apostle Peter had been thrown into jail. So the church gathered to pray for his release. During that prayer meeting an angel shook Peter's cell,

his shackles fell off, and he walked past the guards and out through the gates. He arrived at the house where the prayer meeting was going on. A servant excitedly told the praying saints that Peter was at the door. They responded, "You must be out of your mind. Don't you know that Peter is in jail? And we are in deep prayer, asking God to get him out. So don't disturb us while we are praying!"

Why are Christians so surprised by answered prayers? The truth is: there is nothing as *powerful* or *necessary* as prayer. St. Paul has given us some basic training on spiritual warfare. He has shown us how to be battle ready, how to stand firm in the heat of conflict, and how to put on our armor. And now he shares what might be the most important principle of victorious warfare:

The weakest believers on their knees cause Satan to tremble.

The Apostle Paul says in verse 13, "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 in heavenly realms." St. Paul is talking about the angelic war for the control of this universe.

In this series we have learned about the greatest angel God ever created. His name is Lucifer, which means the *Bringer of Light*. Isaiah called him the *Morning Star*. As the dawn breaks through the early morning darkness, the stars begin to disappear. But one star remains brighter than the others, and is the last to fade into the light of day. It is the planet Venus, the brightest object in the night skies. Isaiah is saying that Venus is a picture of the archangel Lucifer, the *Morning Star*. He is the brightest of the angels; the one whose glory still shines when all the others have faded away.

The prophet Ezekiel tells us that God commanded him to be the guardian cherub in the Garden of Eden to protect those first humans that he had created out of the mud of the earth. Lucifer's pride couldn't handle such an assignment. The brightest of God's fire angels was offended that he should become a servant to these mud people. So he rebelled against God, and brought the man and woman down. He rallied a third of the angels to his side and plunged heaven into civil war. But he and his rebel angels were defeated and cast out of heaven. We call these fallen angels demons. Lucifer is better known as Satan or the devil. This dark lord of hell has continued to lead his demonic forces in an unholy jihad against God and his people. These demons have no other passion than to destroy us before they are cast down to their own eternal destruction. This is the war of the "heavenly realms" that St. Paul is talking about in verse thirteen.

These spirit beings are awesome in power. Jacob wrestled with the *Angel of the Lord* and was crippled for life. The Sodomites tried to grab hold of the angels who came to Lot's house and were struck blind. Angels are created from

heaven's fire. We are made of clay. How can mud people defeat fire angels? We can't outthink, outwit, outwrestle or outlast these titans of the invisible world.

That's why we have to put on *spiritual armor*. In reality, we must put on Christ. He alone is the creator of the angels, and is greater than them all. He alone defeated the devil and his demons in every encounter. At the Cross he alone delivered the death blow to Satan's dark kingdom. One day he will cast Satan and his demonic hoards into the Lake of Fire.

Christ did what our first parents couldn't do in their flesh. He does what is impossible for us to do in our flesh. Mark this down: winning battles in *spiritual* realms against *spiritual* forces requires *spiritual* power produced by *spiritual* prayer. That's why St. Paul concludes his manual on spiritual warfare with these words in verse eighteen: "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 saints." He wants us to know these truths about prayer:

1. Power comes from the knees up.

Verse eighteen says, "And pray...with all kinds of prayers and petitions..." If our fight was against flesh and blood, we might be able to pump ourselves up and win the day. But we are in over our heads in battles against spiritual powers. So we need spiritual power unleashed by prayer.

Remember, all the armor is defensive. But the Romans didn't outfit their legionnaires in the finest armor in the world for altruistic reasons. These soldiers were trained to be killing machines. Their armor was designed to keep them alive long enough to get to the enemy lines so that they could kill as many foes as possible in hand-to-hand combat. There are two offensive weapons: "the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God" and "praying in the Spirit." We defeat our Enemy with the Bible and prayer.

How did Jesus always defeat Satan? The first thing he did every day was to arm himself by getting away alone to pray. He was always praying, and he was always winning his battles. His greatest battlefield was his crucifixion. How did he arm himself for that Black Friday? The Bible tells us that he went to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed so fervently that blood poured out of his sweat glands. His disciples were also facing their "day of evil." But they slept while he prayed. Jesus triumphed at the Cross, but the disciples fell apart, turned tail and ran away. Prayer is the greatest weapon we have. William Cowper wrote, "There is nothing the devil fears more than the weakest saint on his knees." This is why he fears our prayers:

1) It unleashes the power of heaven.

Prayer not only arms us, it calls down the artillery of heaven. Do you remember when the authorities in Jerusalem dragged the Apostles before their court and ordered them to stop preaching or face the full fury of the law? They

went back to the church and reported those death threats. Did they wring their hands in despair, or cry out in terror, or decide to cool it with the gospel until things calmed down? Acts 4:24 says, "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God." The prayer that followed was a passionate cry to the sovereign God of the universe to protect them from the threats of dark spiritual forces and give them the power to stand in their "day of evil."

What happened as a result of that prayer? Acts 4:31 says, "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." In short, prayer brought down heaven's power. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they went out into the streets of Jerusalem and boldly preached. More people were converted, and the church grew geometrically. To put this in military terms, we are scouts who have been parachuted behind enemy lines. We zero in on the enemy targets, set the coordinates, and call in the artillery. Then heaven responds with a "shock and awe" bombardment that scatters the enemies of our soul.

2) It changes the one praying.

Think about the foolishness of many prayers. "Hey God, I've got some really big problems down here. If you'll listen, I'll tell you about them." It's as if we expect God to respond, "Hey, I didn't know. I was so busy taking care of all the other problems in the universe, that I didn't notice yours. But now that I know, I'll get right on it." We get even worse with our prayers: "Hey God, it's me again. I think I've figured out the solution to my problems. And this is what I think *you* need to do." Imagine God's response: "Thanks again. I had another idea. But goodness sakes, your plan is better than mine." There's no end to this foolishness: "God, it's me again. I'm not sure you heard me right the first few times. Frankly, I'm not happy about the way you're dealing with my problem. If you don't do it my way (and real soon), I'm going to have a faith crisis. I might even quit believing in you." Do you think God will respond this way: "Hey, hold on a minute! Daddy doesn't want his special little darling to be hurt. Daddy will give whatever your heart desires, as long as you don't reject me and run away from home."?

There's that classic Hollywood Cowboy Movie prayer. John Wayne wraps his arms around his wounded sidekick and whispers his prayer to the *Cattle Boss* in the sky (violins playing "Home on the Range" in the background):

"Lord, I don't know if you're listening or not. And I ain't much on prayin' or churchgoin'. I've shot a lot of cowpokes, drank a lot of whiskey and ran around with saloon gals. But the little fella here, he ain't never done nuthin' bad. He deserves your help. And if you would kindly help out the little fella, I'll hang up my guns, marry Sally Sue, and live a clean life from here on out."

We may laugh at that cowboy caricature, but it's the way most folks pray. No wonder Mark Twain said that our first prayer ought to be, "Lord forgive our prayers." The truth is: prayer isn't informing God. He already knows everything before it ever happens. It isn't about telling him what to do. He always has a better idea. It isn't about manipulating him with threats or promises or endlessly repetitive prayers. He will do what he wants to do for his own glory and our ultimate good. We don't have to play games.

The ultimate end of prayers isn't to inform God but to *conform* us to God. Prayer is not about us changing God's mind (who would ever want a perfect God to change his mind?). It is about God changing our minds. As we wrestle with God in the heat of battle, he begins to conform us to his image. When Jesus began his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane he begged his heavenly Father, "Take this cup (of suffering) away from me." He was desperately trying to get out of going to the Cross. But, by the time he had finished, he prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done." In prayer we focus on God. St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that, when we behold his glory, we are "transformed by that glory." When we pray we quote the Scriptures, remind ourselves of his promises, thank him for his goodness, and the peace of God overwhelms us. Prayer is a weapon. Prayer unleashes heaven's power. And prayer changes warriors, making them more like Christ.

3) It is God's means to accomplish his will.

People often ask the question: if prayer isn't about changing God's mind (if he is going to do whatever he wants anyway) why do we pray? J.I. Packer, in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, has the best answer: "The God who ordains whatever comes to pass, also ordains the means by which they are to come to pass." Take evangelism: God decides who will be saved. Why then do we go out and share the gospel? Because the God who decides who will be saved has also decided to bring them to himself through *our* evangelism. God has decided what he will do in this world. But he has also decided that it is *our* prayers that unleash the power to get it done. In verse thirteen, he tells us that it is his will that we stand in the day of evil. In verse eighteen he tells us that it is through prayer that his will is accomplished. God doesn't need our help to glorify himself, or save the lost, or defeat evil in this world. But he gives us the blessed privilege to partner with him. Through godly living, we get to glorify him. Through evangelism, we get to work with him in reaching lost people. Through prayer, we get to make his will a reality on this earth. Through spiritual warfare, we get to defeat his and our enemies. So how do we warriors pray?

2. Because the battle never ceases, prayer must be unceasing.

Verse thirteen says, "Pray...at all times...be alert and always keep on praying." F. B. Meyer says, "The greatest tragedy in life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer." In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, St. Paul tells us to "pray without

ceasing.” The original Greek describes a persistent hacking cough; not a long, sustained cough, but fits of *short* coughing. Prayers don’t have to be long or formal. I remember when I was a youth director, riding in a car with one of our elders. As we pulled off the freeway to go to a meeting, our Senior Pastor said, “Let’s have a moment of prayer.” The elder bowed his head, closed his eyes, and ran into a telephone pole on the side of the road. He didn’t know that he could pray with his eyes open. Prayer is a running conversation with the Jesus who walks beside you throughout the day, and stands with you in your battles. So how should we pray unceasingly?

1) Pray only in the Spirit.

Verse eighteen says, “...pray in the spirit on all occasions...” What does it mean to pray in the spirit? Some people say that it means praying in tongues. But Paul is telling us that we should *always* pray in the spirit: “on *all* occasions, with *all* kinds of prayers and requests.” Every time we pray we are to pray in the spirit. So it can’t just be praying in an unknown tongue. It is so much more and deeper than that.

2) You must be born of the Spirit.

Romans 8:14 says, “Those who are led by the Spirit are born of God.” When God created the first man out of clay, he breathed into him his very essence and the human became a spiritual being. But, when he fell into sin, his spirit was disconnected from the Spirit from which it came and he began to shrivel up and die. But, through Christ, we are reconnected to God. Our spirit again flows toward God’s Spirit. Our deepest longings for fellowship with him are reestablished. But those who are not born again are still disconnected from God. God hears their prayers and sometimes answers them. But they are not the same as Christian prayers. They are inadequate and unspiritual. But when the Holy Spirit invades us at conversion, what Romans 8:27 says becomes true: God “...who searches our hearts, knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes with the saints in accordance with God’s will.” In short, the Holy Spirit searches the deepest recesses of our Spirit and connects them with the will of the Father. Only the Holy Spirit knows our deepest needs and the deepest desires of God at the same time so that he can connect the two perfectly together. Only “saved” people can pray prayers that really save people.

3) Watch out for flesh-based prayers.

When Paul says, “...pray in the spirit on *all* occasions...” he is contrasting the spirit with the flesh. What is it to pray in the flesh? The half-brother of Jesus says in James 4:2&3, “You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures.” James is saying that “flesh” prayers are self-focused prayers. In the Hollywood movie, *The Apostle*, actor Robert Duvall plays a charlatan tent evangelist. One night he gets down on his

knees and prays two words over and over again in rapid-fire succession: "Give me, give me, give me, give me..." The focus of "flesh" prayers is on *me* and what will give *me* pleasure. They originate from the lusts of the flesh and are aimed at satisfying those pleasures. But prayers "in the spirit" originate from the Holy Spirit. They are focused on God and what will give *him* pleasure. They passionately seek *his* will. Rather than coming to God to get *felt* needs met, "spirit-filled" prayers are focused on the greatest need of a human being: to know God and enter into deep personal relationship with him. In "spirit-filled" prayer the spirit within us is connected with the God who is Spirit. Only then will we experience our greatest satisfaction and the power for winning warfare.

4) Pray according to the Scriptures.

Why should our prayers be filled with Scripture promises? St. Paul reminds us in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God breathed..." God breathed on the prophets and apostles who wrote our Scriptures. St. Peter wrote, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21) Our Bible is not only the *word* of God; it contains the *will* of God. Do you want answers to your prayers? Then plead the promises of Scripture. God is not the author of confusion. He doesn't say one thing, and then do another. Because Spirit-filled prayers are filled with Spirit-breathed Scriptures, they are the most powerfully-effective prayers of all!

5) The Holy Spirit must intercede.

Romans 8:26 speaks of times when we don't know how to pray. We are so overwhelmed that we are at a loss for words. There are times when we pray the wrong kinds of prayers. Are we doomed by our inadequate or even unspiritual prayers? Thank God, we are not! Romans 8:27 says, "...the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will..." Isn't that wonderfully liberating? When all we can do is groan (totally at a loss to understand our situation or our feelings or even how to frame our prayers) the Holy Spirit is searching the depths of our spirit and then taking the things we can't even utter to the Father in heaven. In "flesh" prayers, we sometimes jump in and say the first thing that comes to our mind. But Spirit-filled praying waits calmly with a single request: "When I open my mouth, Holy Spirit you give the utterance. Let my prayers ride on the river of the Holy Spirit that flows out of my inner being."

Battle ready Christians know that the stakes are high. Two kingdoms are in conflict. This is a battle to the death. There are no truces and no neutral zones. The battle rages day and night as titans of the unseen universe clash in hand-to-hand combat for your very soul, the souls of your children, and the future of this world. To enter an arena like this, you need nothing less than an unceasing, spirit-filled prayer life.