

Successful Spiritual Warfare

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Robert. Good morning, everyone. Really good to have you with us, whether you're in person in the church here or watching on YouTube. To be involved in Christian leadership is to be on the front line of spiritual warfare.

It doesn't matter whether it's in a church situation, any kind of leadership in the church here, or in another Christian work. If you're involved in leading God's people and God's work, then the devil will attack you.

Now, of course, the devil will attack all of us, regardless of our situation. We are all in a spiritual battle, and Paul reminds us of that, doesn't he, in Ephesians chapter 6, as he exhorts us to put on the whole armor of God.

But I suggest that the attack can be particularly strong on those who are in positions of leadership in Christian activity, because they have responsibility not only for themselves, but also for the work that they're leading and for others who are involved in it.

And if the work they are doing is worthwhile and glorifying to God, then the devil is going to attack it and is going to attack them. That attack will come in a number of ways.

[1 : 17] The work will be attacked. Things will go wrong. There will be situations arise that are really difficult and might distract from the main purpose of what they are trying to do for the Lord.

The team will be attacked. There may be disunity, or there may be team members who face particular problems or who go wrong in their own lives, and that affects the whole leadership and the whole team.

And those in Christian leadership will also be subject to personal attack. Perhaps feelings of pride in what they are doing, or perhaps feelings of inadequacy, and the two can quite often almost go together.

Or perhaps it is attacks on their health, their physical or mental health. Or their ethical and moral life, their devotion to the Lord Jesus.

There's all sorts of things in which the devil will attack those in leadership, and many of them, of course, would apply to all of us. Why am I telling you this? It's because I think Psalm 20 gives us a good basis on which to recognize the attack that comes upon us, and to face it together.

[2 : 33] And I divide the psalm up into two sections. The first, which is broadly verses 1 to 5, I'm going to call the prayers of God's people. And then the second section from verse 6 on, I'm going to call the power of God's presence.

And I think for Christian leaders, these are the two things that are our great defenses against the attacks of the devil. The prayers of God's people and the power of God's presence.

Put it back around on the psalm. It says at the beginning, it's a psalm of David. That may be the case. It certainly is a regal psalm. It's a psalm about a king. And it's a king, it appears, who faces danger.

It's coming under attack and needs help and protection. He's going out to battle. And it is at that stage not apparent that he will be victorious in the battle.

And so in the first few verses, we have the people, his subjects, who are praying for him. And then the second part of the chapter of the psalm, we have the king's expression of confidence in God and that having God on his side will be enough to defeat anything that comes against him.

[3 : 49] The prayers of God's people and the power of God's presence. So let's dig into the psalm and look first at the prayers of God's people.

And the first thing you may notice as you look at verses 1 to 5 is it doesn't look like a normal prayer. In our normal prayers, we come to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Now, sometimes we pray to the Lord Jesus, sometimes we pray to the Spirit. But in any case, our prayers are directed towards God. In this psalm, the prayers are immediately addressed to the king. And it is not a conventional prayer in that sense. It's more what we might call a blessing or a benediction. The prayers that we might use most often that look a bit like this are at the end of the services when we say a short benediction as we go out.

Nevertheless, I think that this is very much a prayer. Perhaps it's a form of prayer we could use more often to address people directly with our request to God for them.

[5 : 03] I was thinking in some ways that would be quite embarrassing if someone did it to you, but also very powerful as an expression of their concern and their bringing you before God.

So we have this prayer and it has four main parts to it. So verse one, I would suggest, is focusing on who God is.

May the Lord answer you when you are in distress. I'm particularly thinking in this case about going out and being attacked in a battle. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you.

Now, you may know that when you see the word Lord, and in most Bibles it would be in capital letters, when you see the word Lord in capital letters in the Bible, that is the name that is usually called in English Yahweh.

It is the name that God introduced himself to Moses through. It is, if you like, the personal name of God, the Lord. And so the first part of verse one would be a reminder to the Israelites, who were the first people to read the psalm, of the God of Moses.

[6 : 12] That the God of Moses was the one who led them out of Egypt, who in the terrible situation that they were in at that point, brought them out, brought them safely in the end to the promised land, and was the one who was there to help and protect them.

But then the psalmist also talks about the name of the God of Jacob. Now, that's slightly unusual in the Bible to talk about just the God of Jacob. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is probably more common.

Now, perhaps Jacob is just another word for the nation of Israel in this context. But perhaps also the psalmist is thinking back to the life of Jacob himself.

Remember, Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the son of Isaac, the father of Joseph and his brothers. And Jacob in his life faced many problems largely caused by himself.

And at one stage, he had to flee from his brother Esau. He had stolen the blessing of his father from Esau. And he had to flee. And then he came back and he had to seek God's protection.

[7 : 21] And at the end of that, as Jacob is reflecting on that, his reunion with Esau has gone well. And he says, let us go up to Bethel. Bethel was where Jacob first met with God when he saw the ladder going up to heaven.

Let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.

So perhaps we could say that when the psalmist refers to the God of Jacob, he is thinking about the personal protection that God gives. So there's a protection for the nation, for God's people, and there's the protection for the individual as well.

And good when we come to pray, to pray for ourselves as a church, as a group of God's people, and to pray that God will protect us, all of us, from the attacks of the evil one.

But also to pray for individuals, leaders certainly, but others as well, and for ourselves, that God will protect us individually from the attacks of the enemy and will keep us faithful to him, who God is.

[8 : 35] Verse 2 then talks about where God dwells. It says, May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion.

Now the sanctuary here may be referring particularly to the temple or the tabernacle in the older days, and Zion is a reference to Jerusalem, probably certainly to a part of Jerusalem.

What is it saying here? It is saying that God is with his people. The temple was where God dwelt among his people. Zion, Jerusalem was the place where ultimately the temple was built.

And I think the emphasis here is on the God who is with us. Now in verse 6, the psalmist will talk about the God who is in heaven, and that obviously is true as well.

But the psalmist is here emphasising as the king goes out to battle, as we face many attacks spiritually in our lives, that God is near us.

[9 : 43] God is everywhere that we go. And God knows every situation that we face, and he is able to be with us and to help and protect us through them.

God dwells among his people, and he is here to help us. Moving on, we'll go fairly quickly through the psalm.

Verse 3, I would suggest, is about what God requires of us. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings.

So before he went out to war, the king might well make some sacrifices to God as a sign of his devotion and as part of his prayer as he went out, that God would be with him.

Now this is not some kind of superstitious thing, that if you do this, then God will help you. If you don't do that, God won't. It is a sign of devotion to God and of dependence on him.

[10:45] And the prophets in the Old Testament remind us there's no good making sacrifices to God if our heart isn't right to begin with. The act of making the sacrifice isn't the thing that really pleases God.

It is the heart of thankfulness and of repentance at times that it comes from. And so for us, as we would seek, whether as individuals, as leaders in the church, as leaders in another Christian organization, as we would seek to go out and to be part of God's work and to take our place in the battle.

We need to go out with right hearts before God and we need to be doing the things that God would ask us to do. We need to be meeting with God's people.

We need to be praying together. We need to be encouraging and strengthening one another. But all of this must come from hearts that are devoted to God, that love God, and that are seeking God's will in our lives.

The sacrifices, however we interpret them in modern time, the sacrifices by themselves are not enough. What really matters is having hearts that are full of praise and devotion to God and seeking to serve him.

[12:02] And that then brings us on to verse four, which I've called When God Answers. And verse four says, May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed.

Now this isn't a blank check, whatever the king fancies God should give him. Rather, I think it follows on from verse three and says if the king's heart is right, then his desires will be right too. He will want God's glory and God's blessing on him and on his people. And so the plans that he makes will be done with that in mind.

Again, very important if we're thinking about Christian work of church or other Christian activity in our day, that we have the right desires in our heart, the right desire that God may be glorified, that people may be brought to know him, that his people may be built up.

And also that we plan, that we seek God's guidance and that we try to move forward in his strength. We're not just drifting along as Christians and hoping that things will go okay and that God will bless us.

[13:14] Rather, God has given us gifts that we can use. He's given us minds that can be aligned to his will and that can help us as we plan, as we seek to do what is right and to be obedient to God.

So four things, four key things that might be part of our prayer life and that we need to reflect on as all of us face spiritual battles and perhaps particularly for those who are in leadership.

We need to recognize who God is, that he is the great God who cares for us and who wants what is best for us. We need to recognize where God dwells, that God is among us, that in everything that we do, we can experience his presence and know his power.

We need to be aware of what God requires, particularly of what he requires of our hearts and our attitudes towards him. And we need to be aware of when God answers as we have the right desires and as we make plans seeking his guidance.

And so in verse five, the psalmist says, may we shout for joy over your victory and lift our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant you all your requests.

[14:34] The word that's translated victory here is an interesting one. Similarly in verse six and verse nine in the chapter, the root meaning is actually salvation. So what the psalmist is saying, may we shout with joy at your salvation.

In other words, the king is going out to battle and the people are looking forward to coming back and saying, yes, we've been victorious. We've repelled the enemy. God has saved us.

Now, of course, when we come forward to a Christian context and think about our lives, salvation has a particular meaning for us. We think of salvation as being what the Lord Jesus has accomplished for us through his death on the cross at Calvary, taking the punishment for our sins

so that all who trust in him can be saved, can be saved from the penalty, that God's righteous punishment from sin can be saved too from the power of sin.

And let's all of us make sure that we have experienced God's salvation, that our trust is in him and that we know Jesus as our savior. But our salvation goes beyond just being saved from the penalty for sin, being given the assurance, the knowledge of eternal life through the Lord Jesus.

And day by day, our salvation is worked out as we seek to live for the Lord Jesus and to experience his presence with us. And we should have joy in our salvation.

[16:07] Whatever our circumstance, whatever we may face in life, we can have joy in our salvation because we know that our God is with us and will answer our prayers.

Let me bring a sort of challenge to you now. How do we pray as a church? So we've talked about the power of prayer.

We've talked about some of the components of our prayer, how we should come to God. How is our prayer life as a church? I think one of the sadnesses of coming out of what's happened over the last two or three years is that when we come together to pray as a church, the group is generally pretty small.

There aren't that many members of the church who feel that the need or we give priority to coming together to pray, whether it's on Zoom on a Monday evening or on our Wednesday evening prayer meeting once a month.

Can I challenge you on that? What the Psalm presents to us is the power of God's people praying together, of coming together to pray for their King and to pray for the task that God has given him to do.

[17:20] Can we make a bit more time to come together as a church and to pray together and to seek God's face and to know the power that comes when we unitedly come before God and look for his presence with us?

Pray privately. I hope we all do. Pray privately. Pray for our leaders. Pray for each other. But let's also give priority to meeting together to pray and unitedly bringing our prayers before God.

The prayers of God's people. Now we move on from verse 6. I've called it the power of God's presence. The slightly funny picture there is chariots and horsemen which are, as we'll see, are no use up against God's power.

The power of God's presence. Now in the first part of the psalm, it was the people talking, addressing their King, but actually praying to God. In the second part of the psalm, I think it is the King responding.

Now it's not entirely clear who is speaking when, but I think the most straightforward explanation of certainly verses 6 to 8 is that it's the response of the King to the prayers of the people.

[18:33] And the King's response is one of complete confidence. Confident that God will grant the prayers of the people that he will be victorious in the battle.

So in verse 6 he says, Now this I know, the Lord gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand.

Three key phrases here, I think, in this verse. The first is the Lord. We already thought of that. It is the fact that the Lord is there and the Lord is the one who grants the victory.

Second key phrase is heavenly sanctuary. We thought of the nearness of God to us, that God is among us, but God is also in heaven and he is overseeing all the affairs of our world.

It is only through God's grace that the universe exists and is maintained and is in order. It is only through God's grace that any of us have come to know him and to accept Jesus as Savior and to know God's presence with us.

[19:46] And we're looking not just at the God who is here with us, we're looking at the great God who is in heaven and who is in charge of all things in our universe.

And then the third key phrase is his right hand. The right hand is very often associated with the exodus from Egypt and how God's right hand was active in achieving that.

God's right hand speaks of his power, of the fact that there is nothing beyond him, that everything is under his control. And so the king has this great confidence that the Lord will give victory, that he will do it as the great God of heaven who is in control of everything, and that he will do it through the power of his right hand because there is nothing that is beyond him.

And even if the king is faced with overwhelming force as he goes out and as he meets the enemy, he knows that God will be there and he will be victorious.

Which then brings us on to what he says in verses 7 and 8, which I've called the king's conviction. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

[21 : 08] They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm. The king says, other people around us rely on human strength.

They rely on the fact that they've got big armies and they've got all the weapons, or would it have been in those days, the weapons, modern weapons of warfare. They think that will be enough. But with God there, it is not. And we can look through the Old Testament and time and time again, we can find examples of where God's people appeared to be up against unchallengeable odds as they faced other enemies and God protected them.

Coming to Jericho. How did the Israelites take the battle of Jericho? They did it through God's grace as they marched around it for the seven days and the walls collapsed and they were able to go in and take the city.

What about Gideon? Gideon who had just 300 men in his army and yet was able to go out to the great host and through God's power and through God's divine miraculous intervention to be victorious.

[22 : 21] David and Goliath, a small boy against a great giant and yet God gives him the victory. The time of Elisha when Samaria was absolutely surrounded by the Assyrians and appeared to have no hope at all.

The people were about to give up. They were resorting to terrible things because of what was happening and God intervenes and the army is sent away.

There is a complete victory for his people. With God on their side, if they trusted in him, his people knew they would be victorious.

And I think there's a challenge for us today. What do we trust in? If we go out into the street and talk to people, what do you think? What is the basis for any hope you have for the future?

Some would say, well, it's technology. Technology will get us there. It will solve all the problems of our world. Aren't our scientists doing wonderful things? And yes, they are with their God-given intelligence as they seek to develop our society.

[23 : 28] But technology won't save us. We get a situation like we've had the last three years as a virus comes and eventually technology catches up and is able to help with it.

But for a while, we are absolutely floored. Human reasoning. If we can just think logically and forget God and think about the universe without God will be okay, say many atheists.

Where does that get us? It brings us to a hopeless situation. Tolerance of one another. People would say, well, we should tolerate people with different lifestyles. And yet those who are usually, would proclaim tolerance in many ways, often the most intolerant of people who disagree with them. Tolerance isn't the way ahead. The only thing that brings us hope and security for the future is trusting in God and believing that He is the one who is in control and can bring us victory in whatever kind of situations we face.

And so then we have a concluding verse. I've not concluded this in either of the divisions of the chapter. I think it's a summary of the chapter. And I think the picture on the right and the wording there is probably a better translation than the NIV in this case.

[24 : 47] The best translation is, save Lord, may the King answer us when we call. Now the King here is a King with a capital K and in this series we're thinking about God the King and I think this is talking to us about God the King.

So on the one hand He is saying, save Lord. We're in a desperate situation. Please save us. And on the second He is saying, well, only the King, only God the King can do us.

We need Him to answer us when we call. And that is still the situation for us today. We need God's salvation in whatever situation we're in and we need to bring our prayers to the King and to seek His answer to us.

So two things to leave you with today. First is, do I pray for God's people? We've talked about corporate prayer, we've talked about individual prayer.

Are we praying for one another? Are we praying for our leaders? Are we praying for each other?

This week we had, last week we had two prayer meetings. On Monday we were praying for Luca Fernandez who at that point was very ill and things seemed to be going very badly and it was really bringing our requests, our hearts, built requests to God for help for those who were looking after Him for recovery.

[26 : 12] By Wednesday he had improved a lot, his condition was a lot better and we were able to come and bring our thanks to God for that while still praying for, as we're doing this morning and will continue to do for Luca and for the whole family.

But it is a great privilege to be able to pray for one another and then to look and to see God answering us. Please let's make sure all of us, if you're part of the church or part of another church, that you pray for the church, pray for the leaders, pray for each other.

And then the second challenge is do I trust God whatever my circumstances? Do I experience the power of God's presence with me?

When things are hard, do I turn to God and recognize that only He can help, that only He can bring me through? We've been thinking quite a lot this morning about Gordon Gray and many things I can certainly identify with that Alistair and Margot said to us.

One of the things I think really stood out with Gordon was his trust in the Lord despite his circumstances. I think all the time he's been at this church, he's had serious heart problems for the last few years, he's been out of extreme amount of pain through his arthritis and other things.

[27 : 36] And yet through all of it, whenever you spoke to Gordon, there was a brightness, there was a confidence in God, there was a feeling that, yes, I'm going through difficult times, but I'm still concerned about other people and I'm still confident that God will bring me through and will help me in my circumstances.

Do we see examples like that? And there are others in the church. Do we see examples like that as ones that we can follow and whatever circumstances we are in, that we can experience God's presence and God's grace among us?

So two things to take away and think about. Do I pray for God's people and do I trust God whatever my circumstances? In a few minutes, we're going to move into a time of communion, but before we do that, I want to pray.

And for the prayer, I want to do something a little bit different. I'm going to read a hymn that is based on Psalm 20. I think it brings it, if you like, up to date. It is a Christian viewpoint on Psalm 20 and I think it is really powerful.

So let's pray together and I'm going to, as I say, I'm going to read a hymn as our prayer. And it says, May God our deepest hopes fulfill, and move our hearts to seek his will, rejoicing in his triumph still and his prevailing name, who hears and answers all our prayers, who knows the weight of human cares, and in his Son our nature shares, forevermore the same.

[29 : 34] Let others trust in wealth and power to save them in the evil hour. we find our refuge and our tower in God's eternal name, in him to stand, secure and strong, believers who to Christ belong, and with his saints in ceaseless song, his faithfulness proclaim.

Amen. Amen.