

Prayer and the Unseen Enemy

By Harry Allen Ironside

For additional titles available for download, visit our website at

www.myhorizonstore.com



HORIZONPRESS

Prayer and the Unseen Enemy

By H.A. Ironside

He who seeks to enter into the privileges and responsibilities of prayer will soon be conscious of unseen hindrances which may greatly perplex him if uninstructed by Scripture. Satan and his hosts of evil spirits—unholy principalities and powers in heavenly places—constantly endeavor to hinder the prayer-life; and if the believer wills to be “instant in prayer,” the unseen enemy will use all his diabolic ingenuity to delay the answer.

This may astonish some who have never considered the teaching of the word of God on this subject. Let us meditate a little on Ephesians 6:10-20. Here we have the veil as it were pushed aside, and we discern the nature of the conflict in the heavenlies. Ephesians is the New Testament Book of Joshua. It gives us the Christian’s inheritance (secured for us by the death of Christ), as faith sees the waters of judgment turned back and a dry way opened up into the good land—the heavenly places where all our blessings lie.

This is not heaven itself, which will be our eternal home; but our *present* place of privilege, as blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. “All things are yours,” says the apostle elsewhere; but what is now needed is appropriating faith. All the land of Canaan was given to Israel by God Himself. But energy was needed to enter into and enjoy it—to appropriate it—to “possess their possessions.”

There will be no enemies to fight when we reach the Father’s house. But the seven nations of Canaan, greater and mightier than Israel, typify the unseen spiritual foes with which we have now to cope. Therefore the call is to “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” We are as dependent on God in this conflict as Israel was in the wars of the land. But “the Captain of the Lord’s host” was sent to lead them on to victory, and the same blessed One is our present omnipotent Captain of salvation. In His strength and power we shall be overcomers if we are obedient to His Word.

We must be arrayed in the full panoply, the whole armor of God, if we would stand against the wiles of the devil. Off his guard, Joshua was easily deceived by the wiles of the Gibeonites. Their good words and fair speeches spread a net for his feet, and Satan to-day works by cunning craftiness (Ephesians 4:14), or, as it might be rendered, “wily error,” to deceive those who do not know their Bibles and are not subject to the Word.

It is therefore of the utmost importance not to underestimate the power, nor misunderstand the nature, of the foes we have to meet. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood: (it is not with men, however wicked in life or however false their systems of teaching), “but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”

(verse 12). These are evil principalities and powers—craven, defeated foes—yet still relentlessly pursuing the people of God, and seeking to thwart them as they endeavor to appropriate their blood-bought blessings.

Dwell on the following Scriptures, and let the Holy Spirit open up to your soul the vision of the unseen heavenlies and the hosts of spirits, good and evil, engaged in constant warfare: Ephesians 1:21, Romans 8:38; Colossians 1:16; 2:15; and 1 Corinthians 15:24. The cross, where Satan did his worst, was the scene of his utter defeat. See Hebrews 2:14, 15. Note that “destroy” is really “annul” or “render powerless.”

The devil is a defeated prince, but a prince still; and myriads of fallen spirits are in allegiance to him. These are the “rulers” of the verse we are considering. The passage might be rendered: “The world-rulers of this darkness.” These unseen “world-rulers” hold sway over the minds of men who refuse to be subject to our Lord Jesus Christ. To them, Satan is the prince of this world—yea, and his god too. They are “led by the devil captive at his will.”

But as we have seen, he is not the only enemy. He is distinctly called in this epistle “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience. “The air” is included in the heavenly regions, the high places, or “heavenlies,” of our present verse.

In view of organized opposition such as this, how helpless we would be if left to ourselves and relying on our own strength and wisdom. Hence the exhortation to “take unto you the whole armor of God.” That heavenly panoply is outlined for us in the verses that follow. Note its parts:

“Loins girt about with truth.” It is as we know and practice the faith that we are kept from error. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. Christ is the Truth personally. Satan works by deception.

“The breastplate of righteousness.” This is practical righteousness—not that which is imputed to us through faith in Christ. The believer is made the righteousness of God in Christ, but if he does not practice righteousness he cannot stand in the great conflict in which we are engaged. To Israel God said, “When the host goeth forth against thine enemies, then keep from every wicked thing: (Deuteronomy 23:9). He who tampers with evil is trafficking with the enemy, and is already defeated.

“Feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” What shoes are these! We read of them again in Philippians 1:27, “Only let your conversation (or behavior) be as it becometh (or worthy of) the gospel of Christ.” It is the walk in accord with the gospel.

“The shield of faith” –implicit confidence in the living God, “whose I am and whom I serve.” It says, “If God be for us, who can be against us?”

“The helmet of salvation” is the knowledge of God’s delivering grace protecting our minds from the doubts Satan would inject.

“The sword of the Spirit” is not just the word of God as a whole, but the particular *saying* of God (illustrated for instance by our Lord Himself in His conflict with Satan in the wilderness), the special word or passage to meet each particular case.

Then lastly, a peculiar undescribed weapon which John Bunyan calls “All prayer,” without which we certainly shall be defeated: “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance.” If the devil can rob you of this you not be able to maintain your ground, “Watch and pray” go together—“praying always.. and watching with perseverance.” This demands spiritual energy. I must not allow myself to be careless or neglectful. It is well to accustom oneself to stated seasons of prayer, and to refuse to allow even pressing business to turn one aside. Who has not heard of the white handkerchief in front of General “Chinese Gordon’s” tent? The sentry pacing to and fro allowed no courier to enter, no matter how urgent, till that kerchief was removed. It indicated that Gordon was having an audience with God, and all other matters must wait. Is it not often otherwise with many of us? Oh, how God is put last! If there be time, after all else is attended to, a few moments are given to prayer.

Froude has told how the farm on which Thomas Carlyle was brought up was liable to be flooded at certain times of the year. A watchman was sent to warn the people when the waters were rising that they might get their hay and other perishable things out of the way of the onrushing flood.

On one occasion the Carlyle family were engaged in worship and prayer when he messenger rode up. Carlyle’s father refused to hear a word till the season of prayer was ended, but bade the man to kneel with the family in prayer, after which they turned to and went to work with a will and saved their goods. “God first” is a motto that never should be forgotten.

I would ask my reader now to meditate with me on a remarkable passage in the book of Daniel, chapter 10. Here we see God’s prophet on his face before the Lord for “three full weeks.” He is so exercised about a certain matter that he cannot partake of his ordinary food and drink. Day after day and night after night he prays. The burden is not lifted, for no answer has come. But observe the consummation. An angel comes to him and says,

“Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thy heart to understand and to chasten thyself before God, they words were heard, and I am come for thy words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days; but, lo, Michael one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I remained there with the kings of Persia. Now I am come to make thee understand what shall befall thy people,;” etc. (verse 12-14).

What mystery is here! A holy angel was sent from the throne of the Divine Majesty in immediate answer to the prophet’s prayer, but for twenty-one days he could not reach Daniel! Who could believe

this if it were not so plainly written in the word of God? For three weeks this angel-messenger had been in conflict with that particular “world-ruler of this darkness” who was evidently appointed by Satan to control, if possible, the king of Persia and prevent the carrying out of God’s plan.

The mystery deepens as we learn that Michael the archangel had to come to assist the first messenger, ere the evil angle was defeated. May we not learn from this why answers to many of our prayers seem to be long delayed? May it not be that God answered at once, but there may be something *to be settled, to us unseen*, ere the answer could reach us?

Let us not then be discouraged, nor accuse God of turning a deaf ear to our agonized cry. The answer may already be on the way, but Satan and his evil host are battling against it. But God is faithful, and in His due time He will see that the prayer we have made in accordance with His will is wonderfully answered to His praise and glory and to our eternal blessing.

“Unanswered yet?
The prayer your lips have pleaded
In agony of heart these many years?
Does faith begin to fail? Is hope departing?
And think you all in vain those falling tears?
Say not the Father hath not heard your prayer:
You shall have your desire, some time, somewhere.

Unanswered yet? Nay, do not say ungranted;
Perhaps your part is not yet wholly done;
The work began when first the prayer was uttered,
And God will finish what He has begun.
If you will keep the incense burning there,
His glory you shall see, some time, somewhere.”

It is thus that patience has her perfect work. Praying in spite of the enemy’s effort to hinder, watching against anything that might delay the blessing, trusting even though “hope deferred maketh the heart sick,” assured that God is faithful and will not suffer you to be tempted, or tested, about what you are able to bear. Faith looks to Him and cries, “I will trust, and not be afraid.

And even though called from this scene ere the answer comes, in a better world, with clearer vision, you may see how your heart-cry has been heard and answered in a way least expected. “I do not need to live,;” said a dying saint, “to keep watch upon the faithfulness of God.” The enemy may seem to triumph for a moment, but his final defeat is certain and eternal. Therefore let us heed the admonition to “Pray without ceasing,” and “pray in faith, nothing wavering.”