

Pray IS A Verb

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Several years ago, in an article for World Magazine, Tony Woodlief addressed his concern that prayer had lost its place in the world of verbs. In his article *Tough-guy Christianity*, Woodlief makes these observations:

"I stumbled upon a discussion amongst manly Christian men, the kind who love "Wild at Heart" and in-your-face preaching by pastors with untucked shirttails, and who harbor visions of standing up to thugs and infidels. They were discussing how best to fight evil in the world. I suggested we all pray without ceasing...."

"I'm not sure when prayer became associated with cowardly piety, but that's certainly how some of these men see it. ... I'm troubled when I hear people speak of prayer as if it is separated from the practical, physical world of action. We would do well to remember that the Church fathers, though they differed in many respects, were singular in their attention to prayer. ... In other words, to regard prayer as something separate from the "doing" of the physical world is to make a grave mistake about what takes place in the seen and unseen places."

Especially Western men tend to emulate characters like John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, and Edward G. Robinson. They were actors who played men of action and intimidation. Simply their presence on screen sent shivers down the spines of their adversaries. It was clear that they weren't men who delivered empty threats or passively stood by while evil prospered.

Even when studying Scripture, we guys tend to connect with characters of a similar nature; David, Jonathon, Elijah, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul. All of these were men who knew their mission, had clearly defined goals, and kept moving forward even against the longest of odds. They all had, as John Eldredge put it in *Wild At Heart*, a longing for "a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue." There was very little hesitation or uncertainty in their lives. They were men of action, they didn't just sit back and "pray." They got things done.

But is that really the lesson that these Biblical heroes teach us? Have we somehow misunderstood their examples, or even Jesus' own example for that matter? I think our Scriptures for today may help to shed some much needed light on this subject.



Our gospel lesson begins at a point early on in Jesus' ministry. As you can see from the map, Jesus had already made a rather sweeping loop across Samaria and Judea; ranging from Capernaum in the north to Jerusalem in the south. It was on this early journey that he stopped off in Cana and performed His first miracle at a friend's wedding. (*John 2*; notice how close Nazareth was to Cana)

It was sometime after this that they were in the same area. The people of the region remembered Jesus from His earlier works, especially the miracle in Cana.

John 4:46 Therefore He came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum.

It was when Jesus' returned to the region of Galilee that He was approached by an important man; a man not from Cana but from Capernaum (*about 18 miles away*).

John 4:47 When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and was imploring {Him} to come down and heal his son; for he was at the point of death. **48** So Jesus said to him, "Unless you {people} see signs and wonders, you {simply} will not believe." **49** The royal official *said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." **50** Jesus *said to him, "Go; your son lives." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off. **51** As he was now going down, {his} slaves met him, saying that his son was living.

A man of influence and rank hears of Jesus' return to the area (*possibly a Jew working in the King's employ*). He may have heard of Jesus' previous miracle in Cana. But as a nobleman, he may also have heard of Jesus' reputation and deeds as He passed throughout the land. One commentator put it this way, "Although he is a royal official with servants at his command, he goes in person to beg help of Jesus." This man of action is in desperate need of another *Man of Action* like Jesus, because his son was dying.

But when he begged Jesus to come and heal his son, this man of influence is instead met with a chiding meant not only for him, but also for all around him.

"Unless you {people} see signs and wonders, you {simply} will not believe."

Jesus was challenging the depth of their faith which was obviously based on the "evidence" they could validate with their own senses. Jesus challenged that experiential faith based on material proofs. In other words, Jesus knew that their "evidential" faith would falter if the miracles stopped.

In turn, Jesus was challenging this distressed nobleman to believe in Him, not because of an action, but because of Jesus' character and His word. "Go; your son lives." And even though he would have preferred to have Jesus come along, the nobleman took the challenge.

"The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off."

This nobleman understood, and believed, that Jesus could do more standing still (*at a distance*) than anyone else could do in person. We see no doubt in his behavior.

You see, that is the foundation of the practice of prayer. It is the belief, the conviction, that Jesus can, through our prayers, do more “*standing still*” as it were, than all of our frantic busyness combined. Our prayers need to be rooted in the absolute assurance that Jesus’ position in glory, seated at the right hand of the Father, doesn’t limit Him, but actually empowers Him to “*do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.*”

Our New Testament epistle for today from Ephesians 6, however, seems to reinforce the imagery of action. The Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul, describes in great detail the articles of armor we’re given for battle. We are first instructed to “*be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.*” And in turn, we’re told to put on, piece by piece, the full armor of God:

- The Belt of Truth
- The Breastplate of Righteousness
- The Shoes of the Gospel of Peace
- The Shield of Faith
- The Helmet of Salvation
- The Sword of the spirit – the Word of God

(Our only offensive weapon)

That’s where we often stop. We read the passage and our “action-driven” mind fills in the rest of the command:

“You are armed for action, now run to the battle.

Fight the good fight! Take the land!”

We fly over the exhortations of the passage, jumping to an “active” conclusion. We forget the context.

- * v.11-“...so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”
- * v.12-“...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.”
- * v.13-“...so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore...”
- * v.16-“...the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil {one.}”

Each of these denotes an unwavering, yet defensive stance. You see, God never intending the burden of battle to be on our shoulders, but on *His*.

1 Sam 17:46 "This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. ... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, 47 and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the LORD'S and He will give you into our hands." (also 2 Chr 20:15)

Our Old Testament lesson builds to this promise:

Isaiah 30:18-19 Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him. ¹⁹ O people in Zion, inhabitant in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you.

And on the heels of this great “armor” passage, the very next instruction is not to march, but instead to *PRAY*.

Eph 6:18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...”

In the end, we are to be men and women of action; adorned in armor, standing firm against the enemies of God. But our first movement should not be a step to the front lines, but rather to drop to our knees for guidance, intercession, and intervention. We are to pray, be on the alert, persevere, and intercede for the saints, especially those fighting the battle with the sword of God’s Word. And then, as Woodlief concludes his article, “*If the Lord wants you to deck an infidel, as Saint Nicholas did to the heretic Arius at the first Council of Nicea, I’m sure He’ll let you know.*”