

Old Testament lesson – Daniel 10:1-21
New Testament lesson – Mark 9:14-29

First Things First

It's hard for me to believe this, but more than 50 years ago I bought a 3-record album called "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." The album was from the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, but it featured a whole bunch of country music stars, including Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, and Mother Maybelle Carter. It also included Roy Acuff, who sang a song that was supposed to be a warning against drunk driving, called "Wreck on the Highway."

In the song, there is a person who talks about the scene of the wreck, and he asks, "Did you hear anyone pray, dear brother? Did you hear anyone pray?" The singer then gives the response of the other person, "I didn't hear nobody pray, dear brother, I didn't hear nobody pray."

Clearly, anyone who hears the song should catch the warning about the potential consequences of drinking and driving. But I wonder how many Christians have listened to that song and heard the rebuke that would apply to so many of us? How many times do we encounter a tragedy and our first response is not to pray? Admittedly, many people would say something like, "Oh, my God, how horrible!" But I'm going to make a judgement call and say that sort of response doesn't really count as a prayer.

Some years ago, Annette mentioned to me that whenever she hears the helicopter, she prays for whoever might be on it. Around our house, if you hear a helicopter, it's almost certainly on a serious medical run. It *might* be a crop duster, but that's usually an airplane. So I've started doing that as well. I would like to think that other people pray when they hear the helicopter, because that means someone was praying for me when I was being taken to Springfield last October.

But prayer as a first response is kind of the exception for me, and it should be the rule. When I first hear about an earthquake, or a flood, or a fire or a war, or a dozen other kinds of tragedies, my first response is not serious prayer. Again, I

don't mean a quick and easy prayer like, "God help those poor people." I mean a prayer in which I take a few minutes to pray for the victims, those who are helping, and so on. If I don't know how to pray for that particular situation, I can rely on God's promise in Romans 8:26: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.*

That is a very comforting thought. God provides prayer assistance for us in times when we know we should pray, but we just don't know how or what to pray. If I had to describe what it is like, I suppose it is an awareness that God knows you want to pray, but you don't know how, and you can tell that the Holy Spirit is praying on your behalf.

What about times when we encounter an emergency situation and we have some ability or training to handle a situation? We may know CPR or first aid, or maybe we are just the person who can call 911. We should still be praying even as we act. We can say a quick prayer for the people in need, and we can also make a quick plea for God to help us to do what we can. We can pray silently or aloud, because I doubt that anyone would turn down help just because someone is praying as they offer help. They might think you are foolish for being religious, but they would be a bigger fool if they refuse help for that reason.

Have you ever heard someone say, "Well, all we can do is pray." *All we can do?* Or maybe you've heard, "I've done everything I can do. Prayer is all that's left."

Prayer is the first and most important response we can make to anything, no matter how important or trivial. There are times when I am looking for something, and I am having trouble figuring out where my loving wife might have hidden it. Eventually, if I don't find it, I will resort to prayer. It is amazing how often that

helps me figure out where she put it, or sometimes, where I actually left it. Then I have to add a prayer for forgiveness.

Once we pray, we might wonder, how does it work? Do our prayers move God or change him in some way? Do our prayers affect the will of God so that he does something we want? That does not really make sense, does it? We talk about God's will, and God's sovereignty, saying that we should trust that God is in charge and will carry out his will. So it makes no sense to think that we could change any of that with a prayer.

One of the important changes prayer does bring about is change in the person praying. For example, if we think about the what we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," our prayers may change us in ways that make us more willing to accept God's will, even if it is not what we want.

Prayer can also change circumstances. That seems to be what happens in our OT lesson.

Daniel experiences a vision that is not seen by the others with him. However, they seem to sense something supernatural, and they run away. Daniel is also very frightened, so much so that he is completely drained of strength and he falls unconscious. He sees a "man" of astonishing appearance, looking like gold and bronze and gemstones and fire, with a voice like a multitude.

This "man" or angel, or whatever he is, touches Daniel, stands him up and tells him not to be afraid. In his account of what has been happening he reveals himself as some sort of messenger of God, which, by definition, makes him an angel.

He was sent because of Daniel's words, that is, because of his prayers. But something truly extraordinary happened. His mission met with resistance from the prince of Persia. Now, what earthly prince would be able to withstand an angel of God? Well, there isn't one. In order to overcome this prince of Persia, it was necessary

to send the angel Michael to help. It seems fairly obvious that the prince of Persia is some sort of spiritual being that operates in that part of the world. Later in the lesson, there is mention of the prince of Greece.

Bible scholars have sometimes interpreted these princes to represent human leaders, and they date the writing of the book long after the actual time of Daniel. Regardless of that, we have here an insight into the realm of the spiritual. We have guidance for our own experience with prayer.

After Daniel's visitor is finished speaking, Daniel is unable to speak. Another being who looks like a man touches his lips and enables him to speak. When Daniel complains of his weakness, the same man touches him again and strengthens him.

Now, perhaps, this is simply another angel. He says he is going to return to fight the prince of Persia, and after him he will have to face the prince of Greece. So we might think it is Michael, who came to the aid of the first angel when he had trouble reaching Daniel. However, this being says there is no one who contends by his side except for Michael, "your prince."

So who is this speaker? Is it perhaps Christ? From a Christian viewpoint that makes sense.

This takes us into a rather controversial area of Christian faith known as spiritual warfare. It can be a very lucrative area of ministry for those who claim to have all kinds of insight and knowledge. I am not one of those. Much about the spiritual dimension remains hidden from most people, if not all, and I attribute that to the wisdom of God. Nevertheless, spiritual warfare can and, I think, should be an important part of Christian prayer life. It is an area of prayer that is important for helping to change circumstances. We can see this indirectly illustrated in our NT lesson.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday in the Church year, and this passage occurs immediately after the Transfiguration. After that event, Jesus goes back down the mountain with

Peter, James, and John. They come upon a scene that is in wild contrast to the heavenly encounter they have just had. There is a crowd around the other disciples, and there is arguing, and everyone runs up to Jesus in amazement. Jesus asks the other disciples, “What are you discussing?”

But they don’t have time to answer before someone in the crowd says, “I brought my son to be healed of his evil spirit, but your disciples were not able to cast it out.”

Jesus laments the faithless generation he must live among and deal with. Then he tells the man to bring his son. Before Jesus can say or do anything, the spirit convulses the boy. Jesus eventually casts out the spirit, and the boy is cured. There are some other interesting points in the story, but not for today.

When they are alone, the disciples who were unable to cast out the spirit ask Jesus why. His answer is significant: “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

Wait – what? When did he pray? There was absolutely no mention of prayer after Jesus came upon the scene. What is he talking about?

How many times do we read in the gospels that Jesus went off to pray? Those are probably only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Just as it was his habit to go to the synagogue every week, it was also his habit to pray every day, probably multiple times each day, but at least once, by himself.

Prayer is how we communicate with God. If you try to maintain a relationship with someone without communicating with them on a very frequent basis, that relationship is going to deteriorate. It is no different with our relationship with God. If you only communicate with God on Sundays, you will maintain the relationship, but it will not be a strong one.

Jesus prayed many times long before he cast the spirit out of that boy. He was successful because he had maintained his relationship with

his source of power and authority – his father in heaven.

Many Christians do not realize how much power and authority we have. It might be because we don’t use it for spiritual warfare, or because we don’t maintain it with enough prayer to make us effective in spiritual warfare. Or it could be simply that people have never been made aware of it.

Not too long ago I mentioned the time a friend of mine gave me some advice that led me to stop doing transcendental meditation. But I did not explain exactly what the advice was. He told me to apply 1 John 4:1: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” He said I should bind the power of Satan before I meditated, and I could find out if there was any demonic power involved.

I figured it was my opportunity to prove there was nothing wrong with transcendental meditation. I would show others once and for all that it was simply a mental exercise to maintain mental clarity and such. So, for several days, before I would begin to meditate, I would say aloud something like, “In the name of Jesus I bind the power of Satan around me and I forbid any evil spirits to come near.”

Every time that I did this, the meditation failed to work. Some people would say it was the power of suggestion, but that makes no sense. I *wanted* the meditation to continue working so that I could continue practicing it in good conscience. I wanted to prove my friends wrong.

Later, I learned that the so-called mantras of transcendental meditation are actually the names of Hindu gods. Those, of course, would be false gods or demonic spirits. Jesus has given his followers authority over evil spirits. Even when I did not intend for it to do what it did, that authority stopped the false gods from working in the transcendental meditation. That is the authority of Jesus’ name, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I don't think it is any secret that I was rather pleased with the outcome of last November's election. But it comes with a hidden danger.

Many evangelical or conservative Christians believe we avoided 4 years of movement toward socialism, more woke ideology, and possibly more direct attacks on Christians. But this could easily encourage complacency on the part of many people, and that is when the devil can make tremendous progress in his efforts to make the Church more ineffective. Historically, the times when the Christian Church was strongest spiritually were those times and places when the Church was being persecuted.

We know that for the next few years the government will not be promoting transgender ideology among children. We know that traditional Catholics will not be monitored by the FBI. We know that if parents go to school board meetings to remove pornographic instructional material from the curriculum, those parents will not be labeled as domestic terrorists.

But the devil will not be laid off or laid back or on vacation. He really does not care who is in the White House or who has control of Congress or the courts. It might change his game plan, but he's been at this for a long time. If you don't think there is a prince of America on the devil's roster, you'd better think again. And he knows how to manipulate either party.

Our NT lesson should make it clear that we must always be a praying people, regardless of

what the circumstances seem to be – good times, bad times, hard times, easy times, war, peace, boom or bust. We must be diligent about prayer, because we never know what is coming. We never know what is happening behind the scenes, in the spiritual realm. And we don't know how important our prayers might be in making a difference. Our prayers do not change God, but they apparently have an effect on spiritual battles, as Daniel found out.

As I have thought about this topic of prayer, it has occurred to me that my prayer life is not what it should be. Lent begins this Wednesday, so this is an excellent time for all of us to examine our lives and consider how we might improve our prayer life. Maybe start with 5 more minutes a day than you spend in prayer now. By the time Easter arrives, an improved prayer life could very well be a daily habit.

Everything in the Christian life that is worth doing should be preceded by prayer. It is what builds our relationship with God. It is what helps us develop into the kind of disciples we ought to be. It gives us the strength to make it through difficult times. It can bring healing and comfort in difficult situations. It can overcome forces of evil in ways that we don't understand, but it works anyway.

If we are going to be followers of Christ, we need to put first things first. And prayer should be the first thing. Amen.