

December 17, 1967
I Thessalonians 5:14-23
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PRAYER POWER

"Pray without ceasing." --I Thessalonians 5:17

In the Old Testament book of Kings, there is the inspiring story of the prophet Elisha, not to be confused with Elijah, his immediate predecessor. The two prophets had similar lives and experiences. But whereas Elijah was a solitary figure, Elisha did his best work as he mingled with his fellowmen.

When he was on his death bed, nearing 80 years of age, Elisha was visited by the king of Israel, Joash, come to pay his respects and, as was the custom, to weep over the dying prophet. When he had been in the presence of Elisha for a few minutes, he cried out: "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen."

The army of Israel was at that moment near Damascus fighting the Syrians, and Joash was begging the help and the intercession of the dying Elisha for his armed forces. The story is full of symbolism, but the meaning is clear. Elisha tells Joash to pick up his bow and aim an arrow eastward, symbolic of a victory to come from that direction. He then tells Joash to smite the ground with his rod, which the king does three times. Elisha, however, is angry and knowing the character of Joash exclaims, "You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck down Syria until you had made an end of it; but now you will have only three victories."

II

It is a good example of a man who stopped too soon. Joash felt that three times was good enough, but the good enough is always the enemy of the best, and time after time in our lives we let that which is good keep us from that which is best. We get tired, we get bored, we get discouraged, and we stop pressing forward toward the accomplishment of that which was our original goal and purpose.

One of our retired men gave me a story the other day concerning the minister who found three little boys playing hooky from school. "Don't you want to go to heaven?" he admonished them. "Yes," answered two of the boys in chorus. But the third one replied, "No sir." "You mean you don't want to go to heaven when you die?" asked the preacher. "Oh, when I die!" exclaimed the lad. "Of course I do when I die. I thought you were getting up a crowd to go now."

Is it not true that a good many of us would change our lives drastically if we thought we were going to meet God tomorrow? But we keep telling ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, that that event is in the far off future for us and we have plenty of time to prepare for it. We don't have to do anything about it today.

III

In the spiritual life of man there are many obstacles to overcome. The biggest is perhaps this idea that we have plenty of time. When we look at the life of Jesus we catch a glimpse of what other obstacles there are. There is the temptation to use force instead of reason and persuasion as we seek to influence others. There is the temptation to give in to all of the demands and all of the goodies offered by this affluent society of which we are a part. There is the temptation to believe that we do not have to do anything for ourselves, for surely technology and science will shepherd us into a life of complete safety and security.

The story of Joash reveals another obstacle to our spiritual evolution. The father of Joash was Jehoahaz, and he had been a bad king and a poor ruler who brought evil times to Israel. One would have hoped that his son had learned that those evil ways were injurious to all concerned. But the sons often fail to learn from the sins of their fathers. So when Joash went to Elisha, it was not because he had determined on a new course of action, but because he found himself in an emergency and needed help. When the emergency was over, he reverted to his former ways. He was a victim of the same kind of temptation you and I face, which is to make God a source of aid and comfort only in emergencies. We often look upon him as an airman looks upon his parachute--a nice thing to have at hand, but he hopes he won't have to use it.

But evil is not overcome by occasional fragmented effort. We can all win occasional battles, but we need to win a war--the war against evil, temptation and indifference; the war against our lesser selves. If we are to do that, we need a sure hold on a power which can carry us through all emergencies and all temptations. We need a sure and certain hold on God. If Jesus' life teaches us anything it is that prayer is the one way by which to gain that grip on God.

They tell us that the Matterhorn is a difficult mountain to climb. Not because it is so high, many peaks are much higher; not because the ascent is so steep, but because there is so little on which one can fasten securely. There are no secure hand holds, for the mountain is made up of very flaky rock, sometimes called rotten-rock. You think you have a secure grip, but when you put your weight on it, it gives way.

Is it not true of so much on which we rely, of much in which we sometimes put our trust? It seems to help in the ordinary times and through the average days, but when the emergency comes, when we experience the dark night of the soul, when there seems to be a stone in the heart, we discover that there is really nothing there to which we can cling with a sure and certain confidence that it will never give way.

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Do you remember that lovely story of the father and his little girl crossing the rather long foot bridge? The father said to his little girl, thinking that she might be frightened, "Here, hold onto my hand." "No," said the child, "You hold onto mine, for I might let go, but I know you won't."

Do you not covet that faith and that confidence in a God who will never let go? Men celebrate Christmas because it brings to them each year a new assurance of God's love on which we can absolutely rely

IV

Prayer is the privilege God has offered man of gaining this kind of sure and certain hold upon the Eternal Goodness.

Surely every person here this morning has tried it, at least off and on. Some of you may be continually persistent in it as Paul urged us to be. But there are no doubt others who try it in emergencies, then give it up when things are back to normal, or who have decided that prayer may be all right for others, but they are too fine, too noble to become beggars at the feet of God.

Well, of course, such people completely misunderstand what prayer is. In an effort to explain what it is, let us use a little phrase you have often heard me quote, "Prayer is not asking for things, not even for the best things, it is going where they are."

Some people may deny that this is prayer at all. Prayer for them has become identified with asking, beseeching, begging God to do what they think needs to be done. Either that or prayer is used to instruct God: "Oh God, the world is in awful shape, crime is on the increase, juvenile delinquency is up, and the use of narcotics is spreading. You'd better be aware of all this for something badly needs to be done."

God knows all that. You cannot tell God anything He does not know, nor ask Him for any good thing He is not already trying to give you. This is not the function and the purpose of prayer. Prayer is entering consciously into the presence of the Eternal Light, putting oneself in God's presence. It is sloughing off one's own will in an attempt to become a channel for God's will.

Prayer, when it is real, dynamic, Christ-like prayer, is power--the greatest power there is, for it is rooted in God's love which casts out fear. Once fear is gone we can become invincible in the service of God. No man is a wholly free person so long as he is afraid of anything, other than separation from God.

V

A politician once went to his minister seeking some guidance and the minister told him, "Go out in the next rain, lift up your eyes to heaven and it will bring you a revelation." The next time the

politician saw him he complained, "There was no revelation. In fact water ran down my neck and I felt like a fool." "Well now," the minister said, "wasn't that quite a revelation for the first time?"

This is precisely what the highest level of prayer does, it reveals us to ourselves, and it reveals what we may yet become.

The famous Dr. Paul Dudley White assures us of the value of prayer when he says:

". . . Prayer is a form of religious motivation for better ways of life, ethical behavior, and spiritual uplift. What is good for the spirit is good for the body, too; and however one may view life after death, one can assuredly agree with the motto which appears on one of the illustrations in Vesalius' great work on anatomy: 'The spirit lives, all else is mortal.'"

VI

But we must point out that this is a life-long task. Salvation, if we may use that word, is not an event, but a process. It is never finished. Our task is to go on growing forever, even after that event which we call death. Too many of us, like Joash, stop too soon. We think we are good enough, we have gotten tired of the spiritual effort, and besides, the emergency is over. Remember, the good is always the enemy of the best.

Hear these words of Plotinus:

"Withdraw unto yourself and look about. If you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the artist who is creating a beautiful statue. He cuts away, he straightens, he makes this outline less heavy, that one he purifies, until a lovely image shines forth. So should you do. Cut away what is gross, straighten out what is crooked, lighten the over-heavy, labor to bring forth one glow of loveliness. Never cease working until there shines out from the center within you the Divine Splendor."

Prayer is the power to make that possible.