

DANIEL: PROFILES IN COURAGE

VII. “Engaging the Powers of Darkness”

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Ken Peterson

Daniel 9:1-6; 9; 19 and 10:1-14

INTRODUCTION

Is your prayer life an exciting adventure? Or does dull, boring, better describe it? Do you approach prayer with eager joy and attentiveness or reluctantly like a duty to perform? Most of us are probably somewhere between those extremes. If dull, boring, duty is where you are in your prayer life or if you fall anywhere short of prayer being an exciting, eager, adventure, Daniel has great truth to share.

I'm afraid our expectations from prayer often tend to be low. Most of us know the personal benefits of prayer, making us feel better and more at peace. But, in actually transforming our outside world, really changing the way things are and operate, it often remains only a vague hope.

Our problem is, we have little concept of the incredible power available to us in prayer.

I recall Judy, in our first church. She had recently experienced the amazing power of the Holy Spirit in her life and was learning to trust the Lord with everything in her life. Her faith was alive in the immanence of God with her. She was home alone with a baby and toddler one cold winter day. They lived in a terribly run-down old farm house in a remote area, heated only with an oil stove. As she was ironing, to her horror, she saw flames ignite behind the stove. Then she saw that fuel oil had been leaking out the back of the stove and had soaked the carpet out a few feet from the stove. As the flames were quickly leaping up, she cried out, “Jesus, help us!” And as she stood there, she watched as the flames died down and went out.

Prayer is a direct line to the creator of the universe, and indeed things do happen in prayer. I'd originally planned to preach just six sermons from Daniel. But then, I couldn't resist just one more from the latter half on some lessons he teaches us on prayer. Daniel definitely expands our horizons!

As mentioned at the beginning of this series, Daniel divides roughly into two parts. The first six chapters are soul survival, faith stories. The last six are visions and prophecy about the end times.

I'm not going to preach on these prophecies, which will disappoint some of you. But the visions were given in response to a life of prayer. That is the theme I want to pick up on this morning. Many of them happen during the same time-frame as the first six chapters.

ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL— Daniel 9:1-6

God had decreed that the captivity would last 70 years through the prophet, Jeremiah, preaching just prior to the captivity. To most of us, wouldn't that be an invitation to relax since God has decreed it and it will happen? Wouldn't that be the disposition of faith?

But, Daniel has been counting up the time. The end of the 70 years would have to be a bit inexact since you wouldn't know exactly when the counting starts. Did it start when the invasion of Israel happened or when Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed? Or maybe the counting began when the captives actually got to Babylon, a 1,000 mile journey which would have taken a couple of months. And, are we talking complete years or partial years? But Daniel is a careful student of God's Word, and has in his possession the prophecy and sermons contained in the Book of Jeremiah. By Daniel's calculations, the time is getting close and he sees it as a call to intercessory prayer.

This is a wonderful prayer, though we won't look at it in detail this morning. Daniel repents on behalf of the nation for the rebellion that led to captivity. Besides what we just read, let me lift out a couple of other wonderful verses:

The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; (Dan 9:7)

And the prayer concludes with:

We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name." (Dan 9:18b-19)

Daniel seems to know, that even though God has promised their deliverance, prayer is needed to bringing it about. Daniel fasts, humbles himself in mourning for sin— the sins of Israel. The humbling himself in mourning is symbolized by sitting in sackcloth and in ashes. Sackcloth was a rough cloth worse than burlap, worn against the skin to make it scratchy. Sitting in dirty, black ashes, a reminder of mortality, completes the scene of humbling himself and mourning for sin. In addition, he is fasting. We're talking about serious prayer here! Remember, Daniel is a good person, about as good as you'd find on earth. But he is identifying with the sins of his nation and taking them on himself, repenting, because they are his people. He is preparing the way for deliverance.

There are a lot of things that need to happen for the restoration of Israel. The hearts of the Jews need to be humbled and brought to repentance. There are forces of evil that would like to thwart the fulfillment of God's promise. Changes are needed in government and the hearts of bureaucrats need to be softened and turned toward God's people. So Daniel partners with God in prayer to bring fulfillment of God's promises.

Is Daniel naive or stupid in putting himself through all this? Is he prideful in thinking he needs to help God out? The Bible says no. In fact, it tells us that this is the way things work. God has set things up so that we humans through our prayer actually become a part of causing things to happen in accordance with God's will. I like how F.B. Meyer puts it:

God's promises are given, not to restrain, but to incite prayer. They show the direction in which we may ask and the extent to which we may

expect an answer.

They are the mold into which we may pour our fervid spirits without fear.

They are the signed check, made payable to order, which we must endorse and present for payment.

All through the Bible, this truth is proclaimed. Jesus tells us to pray,

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Will Jesus' kingdom come? Absolutely! Will it happen without your prayer? Yes. But our prayer, *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, is more like a combination of prayer and vow. We are pledging our willingness to let God's kingdom be established in and through us. We are praying that whatever our lives touch, whomever they intersect with, it may be a part of God's kingdom coming. We are saying, "Lord, how here, now, in this can I be a channel for your grace and your kingdom to come?" We pray this in: this darkness, this depression, this confusion, this crisis, this decision, with this neighbor, with this co-worker, and in the face of this evil. Jesus has told us, "*The kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:21). We are part of its spread and its coming. Through prayer, we clear obstacles, grease the wheels, and are part of the team in making it happen.

You may be thinking, why does God need us to pray? I don't know. Maybe it is a little like a father or mother who could bake the cake without the little one's help. But participation and involvement are a part of learning and feeling the dignity of being involved in creation. And, just how does all this fit with our wonderful reformed doctrine of God's sovereignty and control in all things? Again, I don't know. There seems to be some contradiction to our understanding, but I'm sure there are things beyond our understanding. God is clear that He is in control and His will will be done but also that we have a crucial role in the way it plays out.

The next Scripture gives more insight regarding what takes place through the power of prayer behind the scenes.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE— Daniel 10:1-14

This scene lets us know a whole lot more is going on in prayer than we ever dream of. An angel has come to Daniel in response to his prayer. It is probably the archangel Michael who came to assist this lesser angel. The Prince of the Persian kingdom is some demonic power over it. To some of you, this talk of angels and heavenly beings in battle sounds more like a fairytale or ancient mythology than reality or like a Frank Peretti novel. But this is God's Word and a trust-worthy account for us. It is one of the few times we're given a peek behind the scenes at what is going on in response to prayer. Daniel's fasting and praying these three weeks sets some big things in motion in the heavenly realms. There is a spiritual battle between the powers of God and the devil. This struggle is intense, takes time and is cited as a reason for a delay in the prayer's answer. Isn't that interesting? Have you ever thought of a spiritual battle waged in the heavenly realms as the reason for an answer to prayer being delayed? Do we give up too easily? What if Daniel hadn't hung in there, continuing to fast and pray

those three weeks?

I won't press this for too much detail. I think it is intended to give us a little hint, not detailed insight into the spiritual realities. But the basic truth is clear. Through prayer, we actually make things happen in a spiritual dimension that is beyond our human limitations in knowing. There is a battle being waged between good and evil— between God and Satan. C.S. Lewis stated the Biblical truth accurately and memorably when he wrote:

*There is no neutral ground in the universe:
every square inch, every split second
is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.*

Our prayers become part of the conquest of evil in its various manifestations. The New Testament expresses this in Eph. 6:10-13:

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.
Put on the full armor of God
so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.
For our struggle is not against flesh and blood,
but against the rulers,
against the authorities,
against the powers of this dark world
and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.
Therefore put on the full armor of God,
so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your
ground,
and after you have done everything, to stand.*

Spiritual entities are designated as rulers, authorities, powers, and forces of evil. There are many things that come to mind that seem to have more power behind them than you would expect in and of the thing itself. They seem to have a supernatural, spiritual power attached to make it so powerful, virulent. Consider pornography. A couple of years ago, *Newsweek* reported that one third of all internet usage are visits to porno sites and 40 new ones are added each day! There is incredible addictive power there! Illegal drugs and their power and control over huge segments of society seem to have dark powers behind them. We can go on and list things like racial hatred. Consider antisemitism throughout history and you wonder why? Why would one group of people be so targeted? Could it be that as God's chosen people the devil has worked overtime giving them a hard time of it? You can think of the incredible, apparently mesmerizing power of Hitler, or Stalin or Pol Pot and the millions and millions of innocents slaughtered. Isn't the evil greater than what one human heart can possibly contain? Can you doubt there is an evil spiritual power at play?

Jesus declares that money is one of these powers by giving it an Aramaic term "mammon" to refer to money when teaches about it in the Sermon on the Mount (Mtt.

6:24). By doing so, he is giving it the character of a rival god. We've seen how money can ruin people and seemingly take control of their lives. And, if we're honest, we too feel it's dark, inexorable power in our own hearts drawing us toward greed and covetousness and away from trust in God. Of course money also has wonderful power for good. It is up to us in prayer to be sure we are wresting its power in this world for good.

Daniel calls us to take seriously our role as believers to wrestle against all the powers of darkness in this world. God has placed power in our hands to defeat the enemy wherever he is at work.

I am so glad to have the Moms in Touch group starting to meet in our church. This is a group that takes seriously interceding for our children and schools that they may be guided by Biblical values. I have a wonderful story of the power of prayer from the Moms in Touch group that met in our previous church. This group began with four moms, all from different churches and began meeting to intercede in prayer for the local elementary school and the children. After a year or so, it did grow some in size to up to eight at times, but the core remained the four original moms. The fourth grade class in the elementary school was a major problem. Every teacher dreaded that class all the way through school. These kids even bragged about being "the bad kids." Some parents took their kids out of that class and transferred them to another school to avoid the atmosphere created in that class.

These moms thought, "What better place to target with prayer?" As they got serious in prayer, they began to feel the Holy Spirit move their hearts to get involved. One mom, a very busy pharmacist, volunteered a number of hours each week to assist in the classroom. In talking to the teacher, they learned many of these children were from very sad home situations. The teacher suspected many of them came to school without any breakfast since their single parent had left an hour or two before school started to get to work. So, these four ladies began bringing in breakfast every morning for the class.

Then they became mindful that there was no safe place for these kids to go after school. Many, with no parent at home, were left to wander the streets at will. As they continued to pray a vision developed of having a library in town where kids could come and use the computers and do homework after school. Now this is a town of under 500, and the county had no interest in establishing a branch library there. These moms started working on establishing a community based library. One of the moms quit her paying job, even though they had a daughter in college, because she felt called of God to volunteer her time to lead this library project. Through their prayers, miracle after miracle began happening in providing a building, raising money to finance it all, and now this little library operated solely by volunteers is celebrating its fifth anniversary. I helped them apply and receive a grant from One Great Hour of Sharing's self-development funds in the Presbyterian Church to fund some of their creative programs such as parenting classes, providing Christian videos, books and other Christian resources in helping the community in the name of Christ. It has ended up doing much

to create a heart and center in that little community— far more than I would have ever dreamed.

Four moms getting serious about intercessory prayer changing their world. Another one of the four felt God calling her to return to school to update her teaching credentials so she could work within the school, spreading the light and love of Christ.

Through serious, united prayer, did those four moms accomplish something in bringing more of God's kingdom into this world? You bet they did. They did serious battle against forces of darkness that had taken hold in that community, beginning with one of the worst problems— a problem causing despair and paralysis in the school. Through prayer, they felt called to radical steps of obedience which the Holy Spirit used powerfully in changing things. We'll never know how many lives are being impacted by such intercession. Four moms serious about praying and obeying God, releasing amazing power to change the world. These are Daniel-type prayers.

CONCLUSION

Don't you like the robust quality Daniel gives to prayer? What a thrill to be working with the Creator of the Universe to accomplish God's will. O yes, the battle with evil is real. But our weapons are greater and they are all launched by prayer.

Let's have none of this resigned, "Well, all we can do is pray..." "All?" What can be more exciting and greater? Let's accept Daniel's challenge to pray truly big, history-shaping prayers— whether it's in your personal history, that of people around you, or on a world scale.

May we catch a glimpse of how much more would be happening if we cared enough to fast and pray, joining with other believers in our intercessions and then stepping out in faith to do what Jesus leads us to do. That is mountain-moving, history-shaping prayer!