

Expecting Nothing from God

by Frederick Sneesby

There have been times in my life when I felt stupid praying. One of those times sticks out in my memory more than any other, and that is during the months when my mother was dying of cancer. From the moment she was diagnosed I prayed. I prayed for a cure. I prayed that the doctors would be guided to find the best treatment. I prayed for her emotional and spiritual health.

The treatment wasn't working, and each passing day made my prayers seem stupid. I didn't really know what to pray for. I didn't want to abandon hope, but I didn't know what to expect from God. My mother admitted sooner than anyone else that the chemotherapy was yielding nothing except side effects, and so she came to the point of telling us, her family, that she was abandoning treatment and would wait for death. It was in the few weeks before that decision was made, as the inevitability of it all was dawning on me, that I struggled with how I would pray or what I would say to God.

I am realizing today, as I am writing this, that it must have been at exactly this point in the liturgical year of the Catholic Church – Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent – that, in the midst of all that was happening, I read the passage assigned for the day from the Book of Daniel that showed me how to pray. The long story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's near deadly encounter with King Nebuchadnezzar can be found in Daniel 3:14 and following. Some might even remember the story put to song; a recording of it by Brook Benton even hit Billboard's Top Forty.

The story is pretty simple. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon wanted the three men, who were faithful Jews, to bow down and worship the idol he had made from gold. They refused and so the king threatened them with death by fire. They still refused and so the king not only raised the stakes by increasing the heat in the furnace, he also taunted them by asking them, "who is the God that can deliver you out of my hands?" It is at that point that the three men give an extraordinary and profound answer. "If our God, whom we serve, can save us from the white-hot furnace and from your hands, O king, may he save us! *But even if he will not*, know, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the golden statue which you set up."

The italics are mine because those words struck me from that day forward. They would ask God to be saved but were not so much concerned about the results. What was more precious, rather, was their relationship with God. Regardless of the outcome, they would stick with God.

I was overwhelmed by their faithfulness and their trust. I was amazed by the absolute value they placed on their relationship with God. I was surprised when it occurred to me

that this sort of commitment to a relationship regardless of the outcomes is within our experience. The friendships and loves in our lives are not outcome driven. We enter these relationships, nourish them, suffer and rejoice in them, because they are vital to us in themselves. And so it is with God. And so it is with God when facing sickness and death.

Our prayer has to be honest, laying out what is in our hearts and minds, even relying on the intimacy of the relationship to say to God what we may never say to anyone else. But our prayer is one of trust and faith and not the prayer of a magician who knows that his words will produce the desired results. We may pray for deliverance from whatever it is that threatens us and ask God to save us, *but even if he will not*, we stay with God.

Mortal threats and dangers appear on many levels, personal and global. We currently face a global plague, and that worldwide crisis becomes personal when we know people who have become ill or experience debilitating anxieties. Along with taking the practical measures that the experts recommend to stay healthy, we do need to pray. In the face of such a far-reaching and mysterious microscopic enemy that claims a growing number of victims, we may feel stupid praying. Think of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Read the story in Daniel if the Spirit moves us. And remember that the relationship with the One who created us is more precious than life itself and stronger than death. Express to God what is within without holding back the anguish over the many who suffer. And then, if we dare, say that we are sticking with God regardless of the outcome.