

“Daniel’s Prayer”
Daniel 9:1-27
April 24, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We have already read how it was Daniel’s practice to pray three times a day (6:10), a commitment he kept even under threat of death. In today’s passage, we are shown an example of his praying. There is an old saying about prayer that is often attributed to John Owen, the great Puritan writer. “What an individual is in secret, on his knees before God, that he is and no more.” It is easy to admire the more public parts of Daniel’s life. His story is the classic one of someone from humble roots ascending to a place of great influence, not through deceitful cunning but through courage, integrity and faithfulness. If we are to understand Daniel, though, we must appreciate the fact that the core of his life was not his skill as a politician, but his heart for God as expressed through his prayer life. Daniel was a great man because he was great in prayer.

We have seen that the theme of this whole book is that God is in control of all things, even when everything seems to be spinning out of control. The practical expression of believing that is found in this area of prayer. Daniel lived at the center of power of two of the great superpowers of his era, the kingdoms of Babylon and that of the Medes and Persians. But when it came to his heart’s desire to see his people restored to their land, able to worship God in the temple, he appealed first to God in prayer. He did so because he believed that it was God’s hand that determined everything from the movement of the smallest bird in the sky to that of the mightiest kings and nations on earth. We will pray as we learn that God’s hand moves all things and prayer moves God’s hand. Let’s look now at the following four features of Daniel’s prayer.

I. Bible-Based

The prayer we find in this chapter was prompted by something Daniel read in the prophet Jeremiah. Daniel believed that God had spoken through his prophet, Jeremiah, and so he believed that the things written down in what we know today as the book of Jeremiah were to be taken as promises from God. Daniel is referring to passages like Jeremiah 25:11-12. **“This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation.”** And then 29:10 reports what God promised would happen next. **“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.”** Daniel 9 is time stamped as the first year of Darius, making it the year 539 B.C. Though it’s difficult to know the exact date when

the exile began, because it happened in stages, it is clearly nearing the completion of seventy years, and what is clear is that Babylon has experienced the judgment of God in the form of their defeat by the Medes and Persians.

This teaches us something very important about prayer. Prayer is the instrument God appoints for the fulfillment of his promises. When we read of a promise in God's word, we lay claim to it by coming to God in prayer and asking of the thing promised. God promises forgiveness, but the Bible itself teaches us to ask for forgiveness. God promises our daily food, but also teaches us to pray for our daily bread. I remember hearing a Bible teacher when I was in college who taught that we ought not to pray for things that God has promised, arguing that to do so is unbelief. I remember him using the example of people praying for God to be with them, saying that we should never pray that because God promises in the Bible, **"I will never leave you nor forsake you"** (Heb. 13:5). Such reasoning sounds logical, but it is very unbiblical. The exact opposite is the case. When we come upon a promise in the Bible, it should encourage us, like it did for Daniel, to go to God in prayer and claim that promise.

II. Personal

I like what Daniel says about prayer as he begins to pray. **"Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer"** (v. 3). Prayer is when you turn your face to the Lord and look at him. What does that mean exactly? God doesn't come to us in bodily form so that we can make eye contact with him like we do with a conversational partner. Nevertheless, there is something that happens in our relationship with God that is like the personal connection we make with people when we establish eye contact with them.

After the birth of our first grandchild last week, I became curious about what newborn babies are able to see. I wanted to see my grandson's eyes and make that personal connection with him through eye contact. I found out that newborns have a very limited field of vision, able to see only about the distance between their own head and that of the mother nursing her baby. God knows the importance of a baby learning to make that eye contact with his mother, establishing that personal connection with her, so he makes it so that anything further away than the mother's eyes, while mother and baby are in that posture of intimacy, is invisible to the baby. When a child fails to make that personal connection, we call it autism.

I read an essay this week by Patricia Snow in which she made the point that all of us have a type of spiritual autism. She began by referring to a book written about autism in 1993 called *Let Me Hear Your Voice*. The author of that book had a daughter born with autism who was treated with a therapy that

required extensive work for the mother to get her child to look at her and to establish that relational connection that had somehow never happened. The author at first resists the demands this treatment will make on her. Her description of this sounds like it could come straight out of the Bible as a description of God's attitude toward his spiritually autistic image bearers.

I sat down on the floor, back against the wall. "That's not Anne-Marie," I whispered. "I don't have to love her because that's not Anne-Marie."

This frozen hostile calm lasted for a couple of hours. Then it shattered under a storm of grief, doubly violent for having been denied. No, I could never turn away from her. She was lost in her own world, and...I had only to look at her mournful face... to know that wherever she was wandering... it was neither a good nor a happy place. My peace and my happiness were inextricably bound up with her. Her future and mine were one. As she was drawn deeper and deeper into that dark wood, she carried in her small hands my broken heart.

Prayer is when we learn again to look at God, to respond to his passionate, father's heart for us and to see him. We no longer look past him because of a guilty, shame-filled heart. We learn to see God only through repentance, which is the next quality we see in Daniel's prayer.

III. Humble

Daniel's prayer was characterized by the humility of repentance. He understood from the book of Deuteronomy that the reason Israel had been sent into exile was their sin and rebellion against God for many years. Moses had said that one of the curses of disobeying God's commandments was exile to a foreign land (Deut. 28:36, 41), and he now confesses and repents of that sin. Daniel understood that though God had promised to bring the people back from exile, the human instrument he would use in doing so was that of a prayer of repentance and confession.

One of the issues we need to address here is Daniel's use of the first person plural pronoun in his confession. Daniel said, "**we have sinned and done wrong... we have not listened to your servants the prophets**" (v. 5-6). When Daniel said "we", did he really mean "you"? Was Daniel just being kind by including himself in this confession, while all the time assuming we as the readers are going to fill in the blank and exclude Daniel from this acknowledgement of sin? Was he being like the teenager who looks through her closet in vain for something to wear and then says in frustration, "I'm so ugly; nothing looks right"? We all know that the appropriate response to such a statement is not, "You know, you're right, you really are ugly." On the contrary, we know that her words stem from her frustration and that she really doesn't mean it to be taken literally. Is that how we should understand Daniel's confession and his use of the first person plural pronoun?

I don't think so. Daniel is not being dishonest here. All who draw near to God in prayer become aware of their sin. Do you remember how the apostle Paul, toward the end of his life said that he is the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)? It was certainly true that Daniel could have pointed to others who had sinned more than him. But it is also the case that Daniel felt keenly his own sinfulness.

Daniel's prayer reaches its climax in verses 18-19, a passage I find to be one of the most beautiful statements of the gospel in the entire Bible. **"O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act."** As we sing in the hymn, "The only fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him."

The movie *Sabrina* is about a rich man who ends up marrying his chauffeur's daughter, whose name is Sabrina. In the remake of the movie, Harrison Ford stars as the rich man, and in one scene he is talking to Sabrina's father to tell him that he wants to marry Sabrina. The father says, "You know you don't deserve her, don't you?" Harrison Ford responds, "I know, but I need her." Until he knows he doesn't deserve her, he's not fit for her. That's Christianity, and that's the difference between Christian praying and all other praying. Daniel said, "we don't deserve to have you answer this prayer, but we need you to."

Sometimes we think that God will forgive us based on our getting our repentance right. We can make repentance just another good work that we use to lay claim to God's forgiveness. That is not the gospel. It's not a matter of you getting things right. You don't need to get things right; you need to know that you will never get things right, and that's why you need a Savior.

I was in a group text conversation this week when someone texted this quote from Thomas Oden. "Luther taught that every time you insist that I am a sinner, just so often do you call me to remember the benefit of Christ my Redeemer, upon whose shoulders, and not upon mine, lie all my sins. So, when you say that I am a sinner, you do not terrify, but comfort me immeasurably."

IV. Surprising

As Daniel's prayer reaches its climax, he finds himself interrupted by God's messenger, the angel Gabriel. God interrupts his prayer to tell him that his prayer has been heard because he is greatly loved. The answer to his prayer is revealed in the famous seventy weeks passage of Daniel. Daniel's seventy

weeks is the most controversial passage in Daniel. All kinds of attempts have been made on the basis of this passage to date the first and second coming of Christ, or at least to give some kind of statement about the order in which things will happen at the end of the age. I agree with the Old Testament scholar, Tremper Longman, who said, “Attempts to correlate these years, understood as 490 years, with... Jesus Christ’s first coming, his second coming, or any of the countless other special redemptive events that have caught interpreters’ attention, have been unpersuasive to any but a few devoted followers. Such futile efforts work against the purpose of these texts, which is to point to God’s determined timing of the end of sin and suffering without revealing the exact timing.”

What this passage does reveal is that Daniel was asking for too little. Daniel wanted the people to return from exile and for the temple to be rebuilt. God reveals here that he will do far more than that. God will **“finish the transgression, put an end to sin, and... atone for iniquity, [and] ... bring in everlasting righteousness”** (v. 24). God surprised Daniel by doing far more than he asked, hoped or imagined. These are the things that can only happen as God brings his anointed one, the Lord Jesus.

God will indeed bring an end to the exile. But the exile he is most concerned with is not that of Israel’s exile to Babylon, but man’s exile from God. Ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden because of their sin, the human race has been in exile. But God here promises to Daniel that the days of the exile are numbered. Restoration of paradise is coming. Our spiritual autism will be ended, and we will be able to look God in the eye without guilt or shame. Jesus has begun it through his death and resurrection, and he will end it through his return.

CONCLUSION:

Any can join this return from exile. All that is required is to confess with Daniel and to be so bold as to ask God for his forgiveness, not because of your righteousness but because of his great mercy.