

The Prayer of Daniel (Part 1)

Daniel 9

How many of you know the promise from the final words of James 5:16, **“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”**? We often quote this verse to remind us that when righteous people call out to God, their prayers actually make a difference. And it is true. We see examples of this throughout the Bible. And some of us as Christians can testify that prayer really works, we’ve seen God answer again and again. It’s a great promise, **“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”**

But how many of you remember what the first half James 5:16 says? Let me remind you. **“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”** What kind of prayers are powerful and effective? James says that it is especially those prayers that involve mutual confession of sin. It is prayers for repentance. It is prayers for healing and forgiveness of our spiritual diseases.

Whenever we dare to come clean with God and with each other about our faults, failures, and personal sins, when we stop playing religious games and cry out for forgiveness, that is when our prayer truly avails much.

I see that principle lived out in Daniel 9. This chapter is especially well-known for its prophecy in the last part of the chapter. And many people, when they study Daniel 9 want to jump right to verses 24-27 that describe the 70 weeks prophecy. And certainly this is a monumental prophecy in Daniel. These inspired words of prophecy speak of the coming Messiah, through whom God will provide the forgiveness of sins and bring to earth the kingdom of God. They speak of the hope which lies ahead for every believer. They speak of those future certainties which put present events in perspective. For the first time in Daniel’s prophecy, the suffering and death of Messiah is introduced.

But all of that comes as an answer to prayer. Daniel chapter 9 is a prayer and its answer. The prayer is a prayer regarding 70 years. The answer is an answer regarding 70 weeks of years. The prayer is a prayer for restoration. The answer is the answer of ultimate restoration in through the coming Messiah.

So the chapter is divided into two parts, the prayer and its answer. Daniel’s magnificent prayer is actually a long, detailed, passionate confession of the sins of Israel. The only requests come at the very end of the prayer. For the most part, Daniel lays out the sins of the nation in the light of who God is, agrees with God that his judgment is righteous, and then cries out to God to restore the nation to its promised homeland.

Such a passionate prayer of confession like Daniel prays is rare in the churches of our day. I want to read his prayer and as I do, I want us to think about this: when is the last time I heard a prayer like this? Or, when is the last time I prayed like this?

- 1 In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—**
- 2 in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the Lord through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.**
- 3 Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.**
- 4 And I prayed to the Lord my God, and made confession, and said, "O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments,**
- 5 we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments.**
- 6 Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land.**
- 7 O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day--to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed against You.**
- 8 O Lord, to us belongs shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You.**
- 9 To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him.**
- 10 We have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in His laws, which He set before us by His servants the prophets.**
- 11 Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him.**
- 12 And He has confirmed His words, which He spoke against us and against our judges who judged us, by bringing upon us a great disaster; for under the whole heaven such has never been done as what has been done to Jerusalem.**
- 13 As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us; yet we have not made our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth.**

14 Therefore the Lord has kept the disaster in mind, and brought it upon us; for the Lord our God is righteous in all the works which He does, though we have not obeyed His voice.

15 And now, O Lord our God, who brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and made Yourself a name, as it is this day--we have sinned, we have done wickedly!

16 "O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all those around us.

17 Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord's sake cause Your face to shine on Your sanctuary, which is desolate.

18 O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies.

19 O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name."

Wouldn't you have to admit that such a fervent prayer of confession and petition for the glory of God relatively comes from your lips? For the most part we're quite content to say "forgive us our trespasses" and then let it go at that.

In this message I want to examine what made Daniel's prayer so powerful and effective. My hope is that these same principals will drive us to pray with the same spirit of fervency and repentance. Perhaps then we will also see our prayer avails much.

First we see Daniel's prayer was one that came recognizing the times.

1. Effective prayer recognizes our circumstances in view of God's plan. (Dan. 9:1)

Here we look at the setting of this prayer in verse 1.

1 In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—

Daniel tells us the events of this chapter occur during the "**first year of Darius.**" This is the same Darius that we saw at the end of chapter 5 and in chapter 6. This is a significant time indicator. It means that King Belshazzar has already died, the Babylonian empire has ended, and the Medo-Persian empire has now taken its place as we saw in the hand-writing on the wall episode in chapter 5. This also informs us that the events of Daniel 9 must have taken place at least 12 years after he received his second vision in chapter 8. It also means the events of this chapter occur at a time very near that described in Daniel 6, probably as

Daniel was rising to power and prominence and as his enemies were conspiring to have Daniel thrown into the den of lions.

We know from Daniel 6 that it was Daniel's custom to pray at his open window toward Jerusalem. Could it be that Daniel's prayers toward Jerusalem three times a day in chapter 6, were like his prayer in chapter 9? We know from that chapter the fervency of his prayer because nothing would keep him from praying—not even the law against it or the threat of death in the lion's den.

Those were the historical circumstances for Daniel. In verse 2 we are told how this fits into God's plan.

2 in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the Lord through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.

Daniel was very conscious of the time because of the prophetic implications. When God created the nation Israel and brought them out of Egypt, He gave them His law and made a covenant with them. He promised to bless His people if they kept His covenant and curse them if they rejected and disobeyed. A part of the curse was the threat of captivity in a foreign land. A part of His promise was Israel's restoration, if they repented and once again kept His covenant.

Listen to the way that Moses prophesies about this in Leviticus 26:

(Lev 26:27-28, 31-34, 40-42 NKJV) **27 'And after all this, if you do not obey Me, but walk contrary to Me, 28 then I also will walk contrary to you in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins. ... 31 I will lay your cities waste and bring your sanctuaries to desolation, and I will not smell the fragrance of your sweet aromas. 32 I will bring the land to desolation, and your enemies who dwell in it shall be astonished at it. 33 I will scatter you among the nations and draw out a sword after you; your land shall be desolate and your cities waste. 34 Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate and you [are] in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths. ... 40 '[But] if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me, 41 and [that] I also have walked contrary to them and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt-- 42 then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land.**

You can read similar things in Deuteronomy and in many of the prophets. God had a plan that even when His people, Israel, sinned and rebelled against Him, God would use destruction and exile to chastise His people and cause them to repent.

Specifically, Daniel 9 tells us that Daniel's prayer was his response to reading one of Jeremiah's prophecies. Jeremiah prophesied right before and during the capture and exile of the Jews. He had warned them for years that God's judgment was coming in the form of the Babylonian captivity. When it came, the false prophets tried to assure the people it would not be for long. Jeremiah told them that the length of Judah's captivity would be 70 years.

We find this in two places in Jeremiah. The first is in Jeremiah 25,

(Jer 25:11-12 NKJV) 11 'And this whole land shall be a desolation [and] an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. 12 'Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, [that] I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,' says the LORD; 'and I will make it a perpetual desolation.

The second is in Jeremiah 29,

(Jer 29:10-14 NKJV) 10 For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. 11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 And you will seek Me and find [Me], when you search for Me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

After the 70 years of captivity ended, two things would happen: first, the Babylonians would be punished for their severity toward the Jews, and second, the Jews would return to Israel where they would rebuild the temple.

Daniel had now lived to see the first of these things happen. Babylon was beaten and overtaken by the Medes and Persians. No longer did a Chaldean sit on the throne in Babylon, Darius the son of Ahasuerus of the seed of the Medes was over Babylon. God had judged the Chaldeans for their iniquity.

So Daniel knew that the second thing should also be near, the return of the Jews to Israel. So this is what he prays for. Daniel's fervent prayer understood his circumstances in view of God's plan and purposes.

Haven't we been learning throughout the whole book of Daniel that God is sovereign over all things? That God directs all the events of this world and its nations for His great glory? God has revealed to Daniel His plans and purposes for the nations and He is about to give even more in the rest of the book concerning His people Israel and their role in His plans. Daniel believed strongly in the sovereignty of God. He believed that God had stated that the captivity would be for 70 years. God would certainly fulfill His word.

Yet that did not keep Daniel from praying. It drove Him to prayer. Sometimes people say, "Why should we pray if God already knows all things and determines His will and purposes perfectly without us?" Listen, Even though we don't understand the relationship of prayer on a human level to sovereignty on a divine level, Daniel somehow felt the responsibility and that's really the issue.

Something about the way God works His sovereign plan among men is still a mystery. I don't understand how God can write the Bible and men can be used as instruments. I don't understand how God can become a man and be God at the same time. I don't understand how I can be saved by my own choice and yet it's God's sovereign will before the foundation of the world. I do not understand how God can do His sovereign work and my prayers have any part in bringing it about. But they do.

When Daniel read of the plan of God, rather than becoming fatalistic about it, and slamming shut the book or closing up the scroll and saying, "Well that's that. God's going to do it soon. It's almost over, there's nothing for me to do." Daniel went immediately to his knees in brokenness and penitence and cried out to God in sackcloth and ashes on the behalf of his people. He prayed that God would do it.

You know why we ought to pray when we find out God's purposes in His Word, not because God needs our prayers to do it, but because we need to line up with God's causes. Prayer is for us, it's for us. We line our hearts up with His causes. We see our sinfulness. We see the need of his grace and power and we submit our self to His plan.

2. Effective prayer is prompted by scripture. (Dan. 9:2)

We have already seen Daniel's prayer was based on scripture. Look at it again in verse 2,

2 in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the Lord through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.

Notice that it was not just the book of Jeremiah, although that one gets the mention. It says he understood by the books, plural. The books are the prophet Jeremiah and other biblical books. Prayer begins with the Bible.

Daniel's prayer begins with the Bible and it is saturated with the Bible. Phrase after phrase comes right out of the Scriptures. There are allusions to Leviticus (26:40) and Deuteronomy (28:64) and Exodus (34:6) and Psalms (44:14) and Jeremiah (25:11). The prayer brims with a biblical view of reality, because it brims with the Bible.

What I have seen is that those whose prayers are most saturated with Scripture are generally most fervent and most effective in prayer. And where the mind isn't overflowing with the Bible, the heart is not generally overflowing with prayer.

This idea is not just something I made up to make a point in a sermon. Jesus spoke this way in John 15:7 when he said, "**If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you**" (John 5:7). When he says, "**If my words abide in you . . .**," he means, "*If my words saturate your mind . . . if my words shape your way of thinking . . .*" Are God's words in your heart so much that they are just as likely to come to your mind as an advertising jingle or a song you continually hear on the radio?

When God's word gets in you, finds a home in your heart and in your mind, then you will pray effectively. Then your prayer avails much. Prayer and the Word are inseparably linked together. For I cannot pray intelligently about his plans unless I understand what his Word says.

George Mueller is known as a great man of prayer. He said that for years he tried to pray without starting in the Bible in the morning. And inevitably his mind wandered. Then he started with the Book, and turned the Book into prayer as he read, and for 40 years he was able to stay focused and powerful in prayer.

3. Effective prayer seeks the Lord with humility. (Dan. 9:3)

Evidently Daniel took prayer very seriously. Verse 3,

3 Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.

"**Then I set my face toward the Lord God.**" In other words, he didn't just take a passing nod, he fixed his gaze on the Lord God. There was a passion, there was a persistence. There was an intensity in his prayer.

Fasting means to be so serious about prayer that you don't have time to eat. You get so focused on the Lord that food no longer matters. Wearing sackcloth meant putting aside his good clothes and putting on rough burlap, signaling his mourning over the sins of Israel. Sitting in ashes recalls the destruction of Jerusalem and declares his solidarity with his exiled brothers and sisters.

Does prayer make a difference with God? Yes, prayer makes a difference with God when prayer makes a difference with us. If you want your prayers to change things, let them first change you—your habits, your schedule, your priorities, your daily routine, and your inward focus. When that happens, your prayers will be like arrows that hit their target in heaven.

I think the Lord is calling us to prayer. These are very trying times. In 1520, Martin Luther wrote an essay which he called "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church." What he meant was that forces and powers that were foreign to Christ and to his Word had captured the mind and heart of the church. She was in bondage to godless forces.

Specifically in his day Luther saw these forces in the Roman Catholic Church. But are they any less at work in our day? John Piper writes this:

Millions of church-goers today think the way the world thinks. The simple assumptions that govern behavior and choices come more from what is

absorbed from our culture than from the Word of God. The church shares the love affair of the world with prosperity and ease and self. Many groups of Christians are just not that different from the spirit of Babylon, even though the Lord says that we are aliens and exiles and that we are not to be conformed to this age. So, like Israel of old, much of God's church today is captive to godless forces.

Today, this message has been for me a call to prayer. I hope it has been for you as well.