

# PRAYER'S HUMILITY

by Ray C. Stedman

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When you mention the book of Daniel to most Christians, they prick up their ears because they think you are going to talk about prophecy. Daniel is the great book on prophecy, on the end days, on the man of sin, the antichrist, on what is going to happen when Russia invades Israel, etc. Everybody gets excited when you turn to this book.

It is really too bad that Christians -- especially young Christians -- get so caught up with prophetic matters. It is a natural tendency, I suppose, but it is a weakening thing, because prophetic matters are really a kind of a graduate course in theology, not the beginning course. When I was a young Christian, in my early twenties, I was handed a great big volume called *Dispensational Truth*, by Clarence Larkin. This book was filled with all kinds of charts, diagrams and depictions of how God was going to work, all of these very fearfully and wonderfully made! I devoured it, but I have since had to regurgitate most of it and reconsider it in the light of other Scriptures. Only after you understand the movements of God as revealed in the rest of Scripture do you ever begin to really understand something of what the predictive passages are saying. It is good to remember that.

Now continuing our series on prayer from the Old Testament, let us turn to a passage which deals with the prophet Daniel himself, and what God revealed to him. This section is tied in with a great prophetic passage, but it comes in answer to a marvelous prayer that Daniel prayed. At this time, Daniel was an old man, nearing ninety years of age. He had served through many changes of dynasty in the kingdom of Babylon, having been the virtual prime minister of the kingdom under three successive kings. His great career behind him, he is looking back over his lifetime now. As the account tells us in the opening verses, he is reading the Scriptures to find out what God is going to do. Daniel 9:1-3:

**In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chaldeans -- in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years which according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.**

**Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. {Dan 9:1-3 RSV}**

Daniel tells us that he prayed this prayer in the first year of King Darius, the general who had captured the city of Babylon. Darius was a Mede who served under the Emperor Cyrus the Great. So in the first year of the reign of Darius as king over the province of Babylon, Daniel made this discovery in the Scriptures.

Most scholars date this time around the year 537 B. C. According to the chronology of the Scriptures, in 605 B. C., almost seventy years earlier, King Nebuchadnezzar had led a great army against the Egyptians in a crisis battle of history, the Battle of Carchemish, fought along the shores of the Euphrates River. There the Egyptians were toppled from their place as one of the greatest military powers of the day. Nebuchadnezzar then went on to capture Jerusalem in that same year, taking captive certain royal princes of the house of Israel, among them Daniel and three of his friends, who are known to us by their Babylonian names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. All that took place almost seventy years before this.

Now, Daniel was reading from the book of Jeremiah the prophet, and he came across these words in the 29th chapter.

**"For thus says the Lord: 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. For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a**

**future and a hope." (Jer. 29:10-11 {RSV})**

Those words must have encouraged Daniel, for he realized that the time was right at hand. Almost seventy years had gone by, yet there was no sign that the Israelites in Babylon were at all interested in returning to Israel. They were treated with great respect by the Babylonians, who allowed them a great deal of freedom. In fact, we know from other accounts that they had settled down and had started businesses. They had been sheep-keepers in the land of Israel, but they became shop-keepers in Babylon. Some of them had gone into business -- Macy's, Gimbel's, the Emporium and various other great stores were already profiting from this time! -- so these people were not at all interested in going back to the desolations and ruins of Jerusalem. For this reason, Daniel and some of his companions fasted and covered themselves with sackcloth, in the Hebrew manner of expressing their mourning, and began to pray.

Now we sometimes miss the fact that God had told them to do this very thing. If you read on in the prophecy of Jeremiah, the very next verses tell us:

**"Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jer. 29:12-14 {RSV})**

That is a very helpful note for us in our own prayer life, for though God announces what he is going to do, he also indicates very clearly that one way he is going to bring it about is through prayer; that as his people begin to pray, he will accomplish what he has announced he is going to do.

I find that many people are very confused at this point. They read in their Bibles what God has said he is going to do, and say to themselves, "Well, God is going to do it. There is nothing for me to do, so I'll just sit and watch it happen." Then when nothing happens they think that God must be faithless to his promise. But God is not faithless to his promise; rather, it is because man has not responded to the part God gives him. One of the things we have been learning in this series is that prayer is God's way of involving us in the program he sets out to do.

We must get rid of the notion that prayer is a way God has given us of making him work for us. Most of us think of prayer that way. We feel we have needs, we have something we want done -- something we find to be beyond our ability to handle with our own manipulative practices -- so we rely on the promises of God. We come before him and say, "You said you would do 'whatever I ask,' now, this is what I want you to do." In that approach we are really saying that God is a kind of heavenly bellboy; that when we push the prayer button he is to show up and take orders for what we want him to do. But that is to totally misunderstand the nature and purpose of prayer. No, prayer is God's way of involving us in what he intends to do.

Prayer is so important in his sight that he tells us he will delay doing what he said he would do until we start responding in prayer, or he will pass us by and raise up somebody else to pray. In the book of James we read, "You do not have, because you do not ask," {Jas 4:2b RSV}. James goes on to say that even when you ask you do not ask rightly, because you just want your own needs satisfied. But here we are reminded that prayer is part of God's program.

Now that is true about the promises of the end days as well. We are to pray that God will bless Israel and open their eyes in the land, and pray that God's purposes will be fulfilled in the kingdoms of the earth. As believers, we have a part in all of God's program. When Daniel read this in the book of Jeremiah, therefore, he obeyed what God said, and began with all his heart to seek God's face in this great prayer.

This is one of the finest prayers recorded in Scripture. Let us see how Daniel began. The first thing he did -- and this is always the right thing to do in prayer -- is to take a look at the God to whom he was praying. Listen to these words in Verse 4:

**I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and terrible**

**God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments," {Dan 9:4 RSV}**

Do not begin with yourself or your problems. Jesus taught us that the way to pray is to begin with God: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," {cf, Matt 6:9, Luke 11:2}. Daniel begins by focusing upon the nature and character of God, and he sees two things:

First, God is a great and terrible God. Those words sound frightening to us because we do not think of God in that way oftentimes. But Daniel has learned something of the awesome majesty of God, of his might, his wisdom and his sovereign power over all the nations of the earth. If you want your view of God enlightened in this regard, I suggest you read the prophecies of Isaiah. There you will see what an awesome Being God is. This too is Daniel's glimpse of him.

But notice very carefully that Daniel links this with the gracious compassion and love of God. He sees God as both a Being of awesome majesty, and a Being of infinite, tender love and compassion. That is what God is like, but many of us fall off on one side or the other.

Some of us see God as a Being of such great majesty and power that we seem like grasshoppers in his sight, and that he could hardly be expected to have any interest in our affairs. There are people who pray with that mentality: "O, thou great and dreadful God who sits upon the rim of the universe," they say. You wonder if they are ever going to get around to calling him Father and asking him for something.

But, on the other hand, we can get palsy-walsy with God. I remember a movie star a few years ago who said, "God is a livin' doll." God is not that. He is a tender, compassionate Father with a great Father's heart and a Father's love for us, and we must see him that way.

But both of these glimpses of God are true. How marvelously Daniel combines these two -- the greatness of God, and the tender mercies of God -- in a true vision of God.

I have with me a quotation from a letter I received this Christmas from Lambert Dolphin, a former member of our congregation. (Many of you know of the terrible stress he has been going through in recent years.) I was struck by these two paragraphs in this letter in which he describes what God has become to him:

On the morning of July 5, 1979, God came back to me. I didn't say I came back to him, because it was he who intervened. [This is at a time when he was estranged from God.] I was driving to work when I had a frightening vision of the back side of God. [He refers to Exodus 33, where Moses saw the back parts of God.] God was furious, and I knew that judgment, God's strange work, had begun in my life. I think this was my first real encounter with the holiness of God. I was crushed like an eggshell, and thrown entirely off balance into a psychotic event. I remember every detail vividly. From that day on, God has been to me not only great, but also terrible. Yet hope returned to me that very hour and life began to turn around in a profound way. Repentance -- that is, seeing yourself in a different light and changing one's behavior as a result -- is very painful, but ultimately very necessary for every Christian. Actually, I believe we should repent daily so that God can mold and shape us less violently and traumatically than is sometimes necessary. Since last July, God has impressed me again and again with images and experiences of his transcendent holiness; and along with the awe and terror have come streams of grace and mercy and deep inner cleansing.

That is the kind of God we pray to. These qualities are reflected so beautifully in Daniel's prayer.

Now there are three elements I want to call attention to in this prayer:

First, and most evident, is Daniel's confession of sin. Daniel begins immediately to confess sin. But the remarkable thing is that this man, according to the record, has no sin charged against him. Never once in Scripture are we told that Daniel did anything wrong. Now, I am sure he did wrong things. Certainly, sin must have appeared in his life, because Scripture tells us that no man is without sin, but the record does not give us any account of it. Yet, listen to how Daniel identifies with the sin of his people. Verse 5:

**"... we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from**

**thy commandments and ordinances;" {Dan 9:6 RSV}**

Listed there are five different descriptions of wrongdoing: we have sinned; we have done wrong; we have acted wickedly; we have rebelled; we have turned aside from thy commandments and thy ordinances. Furthermore, Verse 6:

**"... we have not listened to thy servants the prophets," {Dan 9:6a RSV}**

That is, turning away from the Word of God. Remember how many times Jesus said to the crowds he addressed, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear." Daniel admits, we have not listened to thy servants the prophets,

**"... who spoke in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land." {Dan 9:6b RSV}**

Then, in Verse 13, he says:

**"we have not entreated the favor of the Lord our God..." {Dan 9:13b RSV}**

So in these specific ways Daniel confesses his own sin and the sin of his people:

- We have sinned;
- We have not listened;
- We have rebelled and not obeyed;
- We have not entreated the favor of our Lord.

Now this is pointing up something that is often missing from our own prayers. How many times do we include in them a heartfelt, honest confession of sin? There is, perhaps, nothing harder for us to do than to admit we were wrong. All of us, by nature, are like those people in the book of Judges, of whom it says, "Every one did what was right in his own eyes," {cf, Judg 17:6, 21:25}. When you look at yourself you always seem right, don't you? But only when you have a standard to compare with can you begin to see yourself.

I am convinced this is why God allows us to suffer from bad breath: it is his graphic way of teaching us that there is something about us, which we cannot see or detect ourselves, which is very unpleasant and very difficult to live with. Isn't it amazing that when you have bad breath you have no idea about it until, perhaps, people start avoiding you? At the dentist's the other day I began to feel sorry for the man, because he has to look right down into the mouths of so many people whose breath is very difficult to handle. And isn't it amazing too how difficult it is to tell somebody about it? We hardly dare mention it to our closest friends. If somebody tells us we have it, we feel devastated, humiliated. This is a graphic picture of this whole problem of defensiveness and unwillingness to see something wrong about ourselves.

Now that is why it is difficult to confess sin, yet to do so is an honest and realistic thing. God does not ask us to confess our sins because he is trying to humiliate us or punish us or put us down. Rather, he asks us to do so because we kid ourselves, we are dishonest about ourselves, we are unrealistic about our own lives, and he is an ultimate realist. God always deals with things exactly the way they really are, and he says there is no way we can be helped unless we begin to do the same thing. He asks us, therefore, to start by acknowledging the areas where we have done wrong.

That is why we have the Scriptures. God's Word is like a mirror. Many of us, however, tend to ignore the Scriptures because we know this is true. If you look into the Word of God, into the mirror of the Word, pretty soon you see exactly what you look like, and it is not always pleasant. Other people too are given to us for that reason. Since we cannot see ourselves the way we are, God graciously puts somebody into our life to help us see ourselves. We can help them in the same way also. That is the whole glory of relationships.

This is why it is so foolish to resist what others are saying to you. If one person says something unpleasant to

you, you may be able to dismiss that as coming from a twisted point of view, and you may be right. But, when a half dozen people tell you the same thing, you had better start listening, because they are telling you something that is true that you cannot see. Until you begin to see yourself realistically, you are living in a fantasy world, messing up everything you touch, because you do not see reality, you do not see what is really there. The most helpful thing we can do in our prayer life, therefore, is to take a moment at the beginning of our prayer to face what the Word of God tells us is wrong in our lives -- our lovelessness, our sharpness, our caustic attitudes, our tendency to defend ourselves and put down others. This is where Daniel begins. All this is summed up in one great word found many times in Scripture, the word, "repent." When we repent we begin to set things right in our life; we begin to deal honestly with ourselves and with others. But we have difficulty doing this at times because of the way we feel about God.

Daniel strikes another important note in his prayer, where he goes on in the midst of his confession to acknowledge something more about God. Verse 7:

**"To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us confusion of face, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those that are near and those that are far away, in all the lands to which thou hast driven them, because of the treachery which they have committed against thee." {Dan 9:7 RSV}**

This is an acknowledgment that God is right in what he has done. We human beings, Daniel says, have been wrong. The sign of it is that we are "confused." Actually, the word means, "frustrated" -- nothing goes right in our life, we make plans and they fall apart, we are constantly finding ourselves frustrated. Those are always signs that we have a wrong perspective on life, that we are not seeing things clearly, that our vision has been blinded and confounded by wrong attitudes about ourselves. The result is "confusion of face," and Daniel acknowledges that.

Furthermore, some of the predicted calamities that the Word of God said would happen to Israel if they turned away from him had befallen them. The Bible says things like this to us too. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that we are to agree with our adversary quickly while we are in the way with him lest we be delivered unto the "tormentors" (that is the word he uses), and we shall not come out until we have paid every penny {cf, Matt 5:25-26}. This word, "tormentors," refers to a sense of guilt, confusion and frustration. Jesus is saying that unless we face up to the rightful accusations about our conduct and our behavior we will be given over to inner tormentors which will take away our peace of mind and steal away our sleep at night; we will be bothered by neuroses, psychoses and various neurotic manifestations; we will have butterflies in our stomach and we will develop ulcers. We will have all these "tormentors" because we are not dealing with life realistically.

But notice what Daniel says about God: "To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness."

Again, in Verse 14, he says,

**"Therefore the Lord has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us; for the Lord our God is righteous in all the works which he has done," {Dan 9:14a RSV}**

One of the major hindrances to prayer is that most of us are angry at God. We do not like what God has done to us; we think we have been treated unfairly. How many of us have caught ourselves in one way or another saying, "Lord, why are you doing this to me? Why are you treating me like this? What have I done to deserve this kind of thing?" All of that is a subtle way of blaming God, of saying he is not righteous. This is the one thing we must never say to God. God cannot be unrighteous, he cannot lie, he cannot cheat us, he cannot be unfair to us, he cannot be unloving to us. His very nature is love. Therefore, what he does is loving, and what he gives us also is loving.

Remember that this prayer was uttered by a man who was once a prince of the royal house of Israel. Daniel must have had plans, dreams, and schemes for what he would like to be when he came into his inheritance. But all of these plans were rudely interrupted by an invasion of a foreign army. He was taken captive and carried off to Babylon. There, in a strange country, with all his plans shattered in pieces at his feet, Daniel began to learn to walk as a righteous man in the midst of an ungodly people. He had to watch his three friends

thrown into a fiery furnace because they stood up for the truth in the midst of great pressure. When he was prime minister of the kingdom, Daniel himself was trapped by some of his enemies and thrown into a den of lions. All these were circumstances in which we think it must have occurred to Daniel, "Where is God? Why does he allow these things to happen to me?" and said, as we often say, "It isn't fair. I've been faithful to God and kept his Word, yet he allows this to happen to me."

Have you ever said things like that?

But Daniel has learned that God never does anything wrong. It is we who have to adjust to him. What God is doing is coming to us from a heart of love and wisdom, never anger and hatred toward us. What a tremendous lesson in prayer this is! It is easy to confess your sin to a God whom you recognize to be righteous, not to murmur, complain and argue that God has cheated you or deprived you of some rightful blessing in life.

Daniel is now ready to ask God to act, so he comes to his supplications. Verse 15:

**"And now, O Lord our God, who didst bring thy people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast made thee a name, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, according to all thy righteous acts, let thy anger and thy wrath turn away from thy city Jerusalem, ..." {Dan 9:15-16a RSV}**

Here Daniel comes to the point. He is saying, in effect. "Lord, lift the curse from Jerusalem. Let that city be restored according to your promise made to Jeremiah that after seventy years you would do it. Now Lord, stir people up. Bring this about. Move them back and lift the curse on this great city."

Then Daniel goes further. Verse 17:

**"Now therefore, O our God, hearken to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplications, and for thy own sake, O Lord [Not for my sake, Daniel says. but your sake, Lord] cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary, which is desolate." {Dan 9:17 RSV}**

Daniel's prayer was specifically for the restoration of the city and the temple, the sanctuary.

Now notice how bold Daniel becomes as he closes his prayer. Verse 19:

**"O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, give heed and act; delay not, for thy own sake, O my God, because thy city and thy people are called by thy name." {Dan 9:19 RSV}**

Once we get our own lives straight before the Lord, when we take our proper place before the God of all the earth, then, as the Scripture says, "when we humble ourselves before the mighty name of God, we shall be exalted." That is the promise. God begins to work there. We can come with boldness to ask him to do the great things that are required.

Let us very quickly look at the results. Verse 20:

**"While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy hill of my God; while I was speaking in prayer [he did not even get through with the prayer] the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He came and he said to me, "O Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. At the beginning of your supplications a word went forth [at the very beginning of your prayer], and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the word and understand the vision." {Dan 9:20-23 RSV}**

Then there follows what is perhaps the most important prophecy in all the Bible. It is called the prophecy of the seventy weeks of years, that is, 490 years that were going to be marked out for the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel. These years stretch from the time of the beginning of the building of the walls of Jerusalem

until the time of Jesus, then take a great leap (as almost all Bible scholars agree) to a final period of seven years when the Lord would ultimately return and establish his people and his city in the land.

I have not time to go into this at all, but notice one thing: In Verse 24 the prophecy concerns the city of Jerusalem and the "holy place," which is the temple, so that Daniel's prayer was answered, and more than answered. This is the way God works. He began to stir up Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and those others who were to lead expeditions back to the land of Israel in direct answer to Daniel's prayer. But far beyond that, in a greater dimension than Daniel could ever see, was God's promise that he would deal with the sin of the whole world in the most holy place, in Jerusalem, through the appearance of the Messiah, whom this prophecy speaks of, and build a city (the New Jerusalem, and a new sanctuary, "the habitation of God by the Spirit" -- the church). The greatest fulfillment of this prayer is the church itself, which is now being built by God in this age, so that Daniel's prayer was far greater than anything he ever realized. God used him to pray and to become involved in the greatest program God had ever accomplished on earth up to this time.

I hope this encourages us to remember that humility is the key to touching the heart of God. As we humble ourselves rightly before him, we remove all the obstacles to prayer. God will act in ways far greater than anything we can ask or think or dream, and the fulfillment will go on, perhaps, for centuries yet to come.

James says this word, which I leave with you in closing: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" {Jas 5:16 KJV} -- or, as one translation puts it, "releases tremendous power." That is what Daniel's prayer did, and that is what our prayer can do too.

## Prayer

Our Father, we confess to you that we are but children in this whole matter of praying; we are just barely learning how to lisp out words. Yet your great Father's heart encourages us, offers to teach us and lead us on. Grant to us, Lord, that we will stop all this ungodly murmuring and complaining, and remember that what has been sent to us has been sent from your loving hand as a challenge to us to live a righteous life in the midst of it. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

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Title: Prayer's Humility  
Series: Studies in Prayer from the Old Testament  
Scripture: Daniel 9:1-23  
Message No: 8  
Catalog No: 3742  
Date: Undetermined Date from Fall of 1980 to Spring of 1981

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