

A PRAYER AND A PROPHECY

SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS

By Steve Zeisler

The best-known scene from the book of Daniel is of Daniel in the lions' den. Also compelling are the scenes where he courageously spoke for God in the presence of the kings. But if we would be instructed as to what made Daniel who he was, a less well-known description of actions he took in chapter 9 may be of the most help.

Verses 1-3:

In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes [also known as Ahasuerus], a Mede by descent, who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom--in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

The prior scenes in this book generally opened with unusual activity by God, such as sending a vision of beasts, or writing a message on the wall. Something took place that powerfully announced the presence of God, and then an explanation followed. The scene in chapter 9 opens very differently. We see Daniel alone, studying the Scriptures. (It's one of the few places in the Bible where someone is described as reading the Bible.) Then he begins to wrestle with God in prayer, to cry out regarding what he has read.

To locate this story in the sequence of events, there is a chronological marker. These markers are common in the book of Daniel. This story took place in the first year of Darius. As I mentioned in our study of chapter 6, there are later figures in history named Darius whose identity is quite clear, but this one is a bit of an enigma. Darius may be another name for Cyrus the Great, who established the Medo-Persian Empire and conquered the known world. Or Darius may have been a senior official serving under Cyrus who was given responsibility over the city of Babylon and its near environs. I lean toward the latter. However, in either case, Darius' first year was the first year of Cyrus' reign, which was 539 BC.

Daniel refers to the prophecy of Jeremiah. Jeremiah declared that Judah would be exiled to Babylon for seventy years because of its sins. Daniel and some of his friends, the earliest wave of captives, had been taken to Babylon in 605 BC. If this was in fact 539 BC, or even perhaps the early part of 538 BC, and if the clock had begun ticking when the first captives were taken, then the seventy years were nearly over. These things were in Daniel's mind and they motivated him to pray. Daniel knew that God had made a promise and that he keeps his promises. It was because he believed what he read and counted on God to be true to his word that he was moved to passionate prayer.

Honest confession

Verses 4-12:

I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed:

“O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

“Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame --the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; we have not obeyed the Lord our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets. All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you.

“Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you. You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us great disaster. Under the whole heaven nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem.”

I want to stop here for a moment and note a couple of things. First, Daniel begins his prayer by speaking of God himself. When Jesus was asked to give instruction in prayer, he said to begin like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name....” (Matthew 6:9)

We do well to begin our prayers with God’s glory before we speak of our needs and longings.

Second, this prayer is primarily a prayer of confession. Daniel was concerned about the sinfulness of those who bore God’s name. His confession was serious. He spoke of the problem in several ways. “We have been wicked,” meaning evil, pernicious by nature, choosing what is wrong. “It’s no accident that we are the way we are. We have problems that go deep in our nature. Our preferences are wrong, our enthusiasms twisted.” He spoke of having rebelled and turned away. “We’ve gone off the path and we’re headed the wrong direction. We knew better but we did it anyway.” And finally he said, “We haven’t listened to your servants, the prophets. You’ve made efforts to win us back, change us, direct us, instruct us. But we’ve run from you, refusing to hear.”

Daniel’s cataloging of the problems is not to be taken lightly. He was thoughtful, honest, and hard on those he included in his prayer. He listed himself among those who had sinned. Those who had sinned comprised the widest possible circle: “the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far... we and our kings and our princes and our fathers”--in short, all of the people. They might be at the end of the captivity period, with history about to turn in their favor, but there was no triumph in Daniel’s prayer, no call for retribution or declaration of pride.

Daniel’s primary observations so far refer to the past. “Remember why our city was destroyed and our temple burned.” But now we come to the core problem and the heart of Daniel’s prayer.

Appealing to God's great mercy

Verses 13:14:

“Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth. The LORD did not hesitate to bring the disaster upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in everything he does; yet we have not obeyed him.”

Daniel realized that they were about to end a hard period in history, yet they hadn't learned anything, they hadn't been changed! The godly among the people were still only a remnant. “You have promised to take us back, but who are you going to take back? The same kind of people you exiled in the first place!” He was articulating what may be the core problem of any thoughtful person who loves the God of the Bible. How can a righteous God bless stubbornly sinful people?

Is there any reason to hope for God's mercy? Let's read the rest of the prayer and see what happens. Verses 15-19:

“Now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us.

“Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. 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.”

Daniel observes that God's reputation is tied to the “people who bear your name.” We can appeal for mercy to the God who established a covenant with Israel. With this in mind, let's reconsider what we know of the prayer life of Daniel as one who inherited the promises made to the patriarchs.

First, we know from chapter 6 that Daniel prayed regularly, three times a day, as an act of faithfulness and discipline. We ought to follow his example and pray obediently despite our feelings or circumstances.

Second, Daniel prayed with the Scriptures open in front of him. He believed what God said in his word. He wrestled with the things he read, and when he needed insight or encouragement he turned to the Lord in prayer.

Third, God may answer our prayers in dramatic fashion. We observe this in verses 20-23a:

While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill--while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.”

Let's consider what Gabriel came to say to Daniel.

God's remedy to the cycle of sin and punishment

Verses 23b-27:

“Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision:

“Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up the vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.

“Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens,’ and sixty-two ‘sevens.’ It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two ‘sevens,’ the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.”

Henry A. Ironside, in his commentary on Daniel, translates these sevens “heptads.” Some translations render them “weeks,” but they are not seven days in length. Every commentator recognizes that these are periods of seven years and that they refer to the regulations in the law regarding cycles of work and Sabbath rest.

This vision is a graphic, mysterious declaration of events to come. It is a record of 490 years that is divided into three parts. But the heart of this prediction, and the reason it is an answer to Daniel's specific prayer, is in verse 24: This time is decreed for the Jews and their holy city to “finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up the vision in prophecy and to anoint the most holy.”

Daniel's prayer lamented the failure of the exiles to learn from their mistakes. He wondered before God if sinners could ever be saved. Gabriel's answer points to a time in the future when the Anointed One would both suffer and accomplish a final victory, destroying the reign of sin.

Let me briefly put this in context. Daniel was near the end of seventy years of punishment. At the heart of the reasons for that punishment, according to Jeremiah, was Israel's failure to give the land a Sabbath for 490 years. Moses had instructed them that every seven years, in the sixth year of the seven they would be given a bountiful crop so that in the seventh year they wouldn't have to plant crops and the land could be given a rest. But the Israelites spent the bounty of the sixth year on themselves and planted crops in the seventh year anyway. They did that for seventy cycles of seven, or 490 years. They didn't trust God. Their failure to keep this seventh-year responsibility epitomized their unrighteousness. The land was permitted to rest for seventy years while the people were in exile.

Daniel looked back 490 years into past history, at the end of which God had acted in judgment. His fear was that they would be restored to the land, only to repeat the cycle again. “We're about to be rescued, and we'll be failures again--the cycles will just go on and on forever!” The word from heaven was an answer to his despair. The next period of seventy sevens of years would end with the coming of the Savior.

This remarkable prophecy was important in Jesus' self-understanding as the Lord's Anointed. He was "cut off" (crucified) exactly 483 years (69 sevens of years) from the year Artaxerxes gave a decree allowing some of the exiles to return to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:1-8).

Jesus' teaching on future events, as well as the teaching of New Testament letters and the Revelation of John, recognizes a final conflict between the Messiah and the "ruler who will come" during the remaining seven-year period--the time of tribulation that is still future to us. It is important to know that these predictions are accurate descriptions of history before it happens.

It is also important to note that many times "countdowns to the end" have been started only to dissolve in ridicule. We usually know the triggering event of a prophetic clock only in retrospect. We are told truth about the future to free us from the seductions of the world, to make us bold in proclamation, and to strengthen those of us who live through predicted hardships. It is foolish to ignore prophecy. It is also foolish to imagine that attention to prophecy grants those who study it control of events or unwarranted certainty in matching today's events with particular verses of Scripture.

The ninth chapter of Daniel is remarkable for its prophetic word and for the example of prayer that led to the telling of future things. Daniel prayed passionately about sin and restoration because he believed the prophecy of Jeremiah. He was granted a vision of the future that focused his attention on the Anointed One, our Lord Jesus, as sin-bearer and sin-destroyer. May we learn to pray with Daniel and to find ourselves similarly allowed to see Jesus more clearly.

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