

The Prayer of Daniel

Daniel Chapter 9:1–16 · June 12, 2013

The Occasion: A Prophet Who Read His Bible

Daniel chapter 9 opens at a precise moment in history: the first year of Darius the Mede, who had just received the kingdom from the Babylonians. Belshazzar had been slain. The long dominion of Babylon was over. And in this first year of the new regime, Daniel was reading the prophets.

What he found was Jeremiah's prophecy that the desolations of Jerusalem were appointed to last seventy years. Daniel understood that this period was drawing toward its close. And rather than simply noting the fact and waiting, he set his face to seek God in prayer, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.

The detail that Daniel was reading the Scriptures is not incidental. He was a prophet — a man to whom God spoke directly, to whom visions and angelic messengers were given. Yet he searched the written word. He did not assume that his prophetic gifts exempted him from diligent study of what God had already said. If anything, his prophetic understanding made him more attentive to the Scriptures, not less. And finding there a promise whose time of fulfilment was at hand, he turned immediately to prayer.

I understood by the books that the number of the years whereof the word of Jehovah came to Jeremiah the prophet, for the accomplishment of the desolations of Jerusalem, was seventy years. — Daniel 9:2

This is a pattern for us. We do not receive fresh revelation as Daniel did. But we have what he had — the Scriptures — and we have what he did not yet have: the full canon of the word of God, completed and entire. The Holy Spirit who indwells every believer is given precisely to illuminate that word. The right

response to understanding God's purposes from Scripture is not intellectual satisfaction, but prayer — entering into God's heart about these things and seeking Him for their fulfilment.

The Names of God in Daniel's Prayer

It is worth pausing over the way Daniel addresses God in this prayer, because different names are used at different points and they are not interchangeable. He begins by praying to Jehovah my God — a name that speaks of relationship and covenant. God is his God; God is Israel's God. There is a bond that exists, a commitment made, a covenant kept.

But he also calls Him the great and terrible God — a designation that speaks of absolute power, majesty, and the awesomeness of His nature apart from any particular relationship. And at other points the prayer turns to Lord, which carries the sense of sovereign authority and responsibility. Daniel moves between these designations naturally, and the movement is not random. He is addressing God in the fullness of who He is: the one in relationship with His people, the one absolute in His nature, and the one before whom all responsibility stands.

As believers grow in their understanding of the Lord, they typically trace a similar path. We begin thinking of Jesus as Saviour — one we have a personal relationship with. Then we begin to appreciate His authority, and the title 'Lord Jesus' carries weight it did not before. Then we begin to understand something of the Father, and the full Trinitarian reality of the One we worship opens before us. The movement in Daniel's prayer from name to name reflects this kind of deepening. It is not academic — it is devotional. And it is pleasing to God when we take the trouble to enter into who He is.

Confession Without Reservation

The confession that begins in verse 5 is remarkable for its completeness and its honesty. Daniel uses no euphemisms. He does not speak of lapses in judgment or unfortunate mistakes or moments of weakness. He says: we have sinned, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly, we have rebelled, we have turned aside, we have not hearkened. Each term is distinct and each adds something to the picture of complete and total failure before God.

There is a contrast here with the kind of confession that is common even among God's people. In public life, figures caught in wrongdoing will often say, 'I made a mistake' or 'if I offended anyone, I apologize' — words that acknowledge as little as possible while giving the appearance of apology. Adam himself was the first practitioner of this art: when confronted by God, he said it was the woman you gave me who caused the trouble, managing in one sentence to blame both his wife and God. That is not confession. That is deflection.

Daniel's prayer has not a trace of deflection. No one is blamed except the people themselves. No circumstances are cited as mitigating factors. No partial acknowledgment is made in the hope that the rest will be overlooked. Everything comes out. That is what genuine confession looks like — not partial disclosure, but a full and honest accounting before God.

We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even turning aside from thy commandments and from thine ordinances. And we have not hearkened unto 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. — Daniel 9:5–6

Thine Is the Righteousness — Ours the Confusion of Face

Running through the entire confession is a consistent and deliberate contrast: God is entirely in the right; Israel is entirely in the wrong. Verse 7 states it plainly — Thine, O Lord, is the righteousness, but unto us is confusion of face. Verse 14

returns to it: Jehovah our God is righteous in all His works which He hath done, and we have not hearkened unto His voice.

God had given Israel His law. He had sent them His prophets. He had warned them explicitly — as early as Deuteronomy 28 — of exactly what would come upon them if they turned away from Him. Every step He took in judgment was a step He had announced in advance. Daniel's prayer acknowledges all of this and does not attempt to argue with any of it. He hath performed His words. God said it; God did it; God was right to do it.

This is the same spirit as Luke 7:30, where those who refused to be baptized by John were said to have rendered null the counsel of God against themselves. They would not receive what God said about their condition. Daniel received it entirely, and on behalf of his people he agreed with God about everything. That is what it means to justify God.

Thine, O Lord, is the righteousness, but unto us is confusion of face, as at this day, to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel that are near and that are afar off, in all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their unfaithfulness in which they have been unfaithful against thee. — Daniel 9:7

None Escape the Acknowledgment

Daniel is careful to ensure that no class of persons in Israel is left out of the confession. In verse 6 he speaks of the kings, the princes, the fathers, and all the people of the land. In verse 7 he extends the scope further: the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, all Israel, both those near and those far off in the countries of their dispersion. In verse 8 the kings and princes and fathers are named again. There is no remnant of the nation who might feel that the confession does not apply to them.

Guilt before God is not a matter of degree in the sense of some being guilty and others not. All have sinned. The specific forms and intensities of failure varied from person to person and from class to class, but the confession is for all of them. Daniel does not say, well, I'm confessing on behalf of the wicked ones — not the faithful few. He includes himself and all alike under the same acknowledgment.

Mercies and Pardons Belong to the Lord

Verse 9 introduces a turn: With the Lord our God are mercies and pardons, for we have rebelled against him. Having established the totality of Israel's guilt, Daniel now appeals to the character of God — not to mitigate the guilt, but because only in God's character can any hope be found. The mercies and pardons belong to Him precisely as the offended party. There is no other source.

This is an important movement. Daniel does not appeal to anything in Israel — not to their national heritage, not to any residual faithfulness, not to the merit of ancestors. He appeals entirely to what is in God. And God's character as one who shows mercy and pardon is not an arbitrary feature that might or might not apply. It is the deepest truth about Him — the truth made most fully known when He gave His Son at such cost to provide the very mercy and pardon that Daniel appeals to here.

With the Lord our God are mercies and pardons, for we have rebelled against him, and we have not hearkened unto the voice of Jehovah our God, to walk in his laws which he set before us through his servants the prophets. — Daniel 9:9–10

Jerusalem — The Object of Daniel's Heart

As the prayer develops toward verse 16, something becomes clear about where Daniel's deepest concern lies. He does not ask primarily for the relief of the

captive people, or the end of the suffering that Israel had been enduring. His primary concern is for Jerusalem and the sanctuary. Verse 16: Let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain.

Why Jerusalem rather than 'thy people'? Because Daniel has understood what is before God. He has entered into God's affections. The commentator quoted in the previous session said it precisely: as far as the world is concerned, Jerusalem is nothing — a city trodden down, with neither commerce nor riches. But as for God, He ever thinks of it. It is always His house and His city. His eyes and His heart are there continually.

Daniel shares that perspective. And here we see a wonderful principle: where his affections are on that which is in God's affections, God responds. The vision that Gabriel brings to Daniel as a result of this prayer — the great prophecy of the seventy weeks — concerns precisely what Daniel has prayed about: the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the coming of Messiah, and the final consummation of God's purposes for that city and that people. Daniel prayed about Jerusalem, and God revealed to him His great plan for Jerusalem. When our hearts are where God's heart is, He opens to us the secrets of His purposes concerning those very things.

*Lord, according to all thy righteousness I beseech thee, let thine anger
and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain.
For because of our sins, and because of the iniquities of our fathers,
Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all around about us.
— Daniel 9:16*

A Mirror for the Church

The condition of Jerusalem in Daniel's day — the city desolate, the temple in ruins, God's people scattered — is a mirror for the condition of the church today. Christianity in profession is in ruin. There is not the unity that the Scriptures

speak of. There is not the holiness that befits those indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Unbelievers look at the fragmented, disagreeing, often hypocritical spectacle of Christendom and say: there is no two Christians that agree on anything. And they are not wrong.

The right response to this is the response of Daniel: not to say it wasn't us, not to identify with the faithful remnant and disown the rest, but to say — we have ruined it. The church is in the same ruins as Jerusalem in Daniel's day. And the prayer of Daniel is a model for how we might pray about it. Taking the state of things on ourselves. Justifying God. Appealing to His mercies and pardons. Directing our hearts toward what is in His affections.

It was said long ago that those who knew what the church was at the beginning, and see what it is now, and do not weep for the difference — this thought comes from when the returned exiles saw the rebuilt temple and wept because it was so far from Solomon's original. The church today is so far from what it was at the beginning. We should weep for that difference. And like Daniel, pray accordingly.

May we be those who, having read and understood the Scriptures, set our faces to seek the Lord — not for our own comfort, not to prove our prophetic knowledge, but for His name, His city, and His people, who are called by His name.