

PRAYING DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

SERIES: PRAYERS FOR THE
MOMENT



Catalog No. 20200809
Daniel 9:1-19
Fourth Message
Andy Burnham
August 9, 2020

Daniel 9:1-19

A couple of months ago, Scott Grant asked me if I would like to be part of an upcoming preaching series where multiple speakers would each talk about a different prayer in the Bible. I was, of course, glad to accept the invitation. However, given the many prayers in the Bible, there was a question about which prayer to select. Which prayer did the Lord want me to speak about?

As I was mulling that over, I began thinking about the times in which we are living. I started thinking about the pandemic, the millions who are out of work, the racial tension, and the political polarization. In my lifetime—nearly 70 years now—I cannot remember a more challenging time. The present is very unsettled, and the future is very uncertain. Many are anxious, fearful, exhausted, and even depressed. Addicts and alcoholics are relapsing, and suicide rates are on the rise.

As I was considering the times in which we are living, I remembered a prayer in the Bible. I remembered Daniel's prayer recorded in Daniel, chapter 9—Daniel's prayer during his own unsettled and uncertain times. The Jews were in captivity in Babylon, removed from everything they had once considered normal and secure. The future was unclear and discerning the way forward was difficult.

I believe Daniel's prayer has much to say to us today, especially about how to pray during unsettled and uncertain times. Daniel's prayer will hopefully provide us with guidance and direction as we approach God, particularly as we seek to discern what the future will hold.

By way of providing a framework for looking at Daniel's prayer, today's verses answer three basic questions. They answer the why question, the how question, and the what question. They answer the question of why Daniel prayed, how Daniel prayed, and what Daniel prayed. They answer the question of why Daniel began to pray in the first place, how he approached prayer, and what he specifically prayed for.

Why?

In verses 1-2, we get an answer to the first question: why? We get an answer to the question of why Daniel felt compelled to pray.

Daniel 9:1-2:

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— 2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

To begin with, Daniel was reading the Scriptures. He was immersed in God's Word—as we, of course, should be as well, whether the times are unsettled and uncertain or not. In particular, Daniel was reading Jeremiah, where he encountered a prophecy. Most likely, he encountered the prophecy recorded in Jeremiah 25:11 or 29:10, which both reveal the length of the Babylonian captivity. They reveal the Babylonian captivity would last a total of 70 years.

Clearly, Daniel was a Bible literalist. The number 70 may well have symbolic meaning. However, Daniel took the number literally. He did not view it from an allegorical or metaphorical standpoint. Rather, when Jeremiah said 70 years, he meant 70 years. He meant 70 years that would actually take place in the history of the Jewish people.

With that literal view, Daniel simply did the math. He did the math, most likely starting with the time of his own captivity—the time when he and his friends Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego were taken to Babylon with the first wave of Jewish captives, which occurred in 605 B.C. Using that starting date, it would have been 66 or 67 years to the first year of the reign of the Medo-Persian emperor Darius—the emperor mentioned in the first verse above.

In other words, after doing the math, Daniel realized only 3 or 4 years remained until the Babylonian captivity would be over. Only 3 or 4 years remained until the Jews would be allowed to return to Israel, as the prophecy in Jeremiah 29:10 declares.

This realization, as we will discover, filled Daniel with a sense of urgency. It filled him with a sense of urgency, knowing the time was growing short—the time until a new chapter in the history of the Jewish people would begin. As a result, Daniel was moved to prayer. This is why he began to pray. He began to pray because he knew changes were ahead and he felt compelled to seek God about the future. He prayed because he wanted more certainty about the next chapter in Israel's history.

For us, the question is, during our own unsettled and uncertain times, do we feel the same sense of urgency about seeking God? Do we feel that changes—perhaps major changes—may lie ahead in our own near future? Do we feel the new normal may be far different from the old normal? If so, it should fill us with a sense of urgency. It should fill us with a sense of urgency similar to Daniel's.

How?

This is what we see in the following verse—verse 3. We see the answer to the second question—the question of how Daniel prayed. We see how Daniel's sense of urgency impacted how he approached God.

Daniel 9:3:

Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

A bit later, we will talk about what Daniel prayed. We will talk about his actual prayer and his pleas for mercy. However, here, I would like to focus on two things. I would like to focus on fasting, and I would like to focus on sackcloth and ashes. These two things are critical because they tell us how Daniel prayed. They tell us about his heart—the heart from which his prayers emerged. Also, they tell us how we ourselves might pray, especially when approaching God during times that are unsettled and uncertain.

Fasting

Fasting has to do with not eating for a period of time. However, on a deeper level, fasting pictures an attitude of the heart. It pictures a heart that is willing to set everything else aside for a period of time, even basic necessities like eating. It pictures a heart that is willing to set everything else aside in order to seek God. It pictures a heart that not only makes seeking God a top priority, but, for a period of time, it pictures a heart that makes seeking God its only priority.

By way of personal example, I remember a time when I sensed God calling our family to something new. I sensed that God was about to begin a new chapter in the life of our family. However, I wasn't sure what that new chapter would be. So, I decided to set everything else aside and seek him. I decided to go to Point Reyes with just a sleeping bag, a Bible, and some water, dedicating the time entirely to praying and fasting.

As a result of prayer and fasting spanning parts of two days, I emerged with a clearer sense of God's will. I emerged with a sense that God was calling us to move from Berkeley to Palo Alto. In other words, the reason we are here at PBC today is the result of time spent in prayer and fasting. It is the result of time spent setting everything else aside in order to seek God.

It says in Hebrews 11:6, "God is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him." It also says in Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God." We need to intentionally make time to diligently seek God, and we need to intentionally make time to become still enough—quiet enough—to actually hear what God might be saying to us. Perhaps this means going without food, television, cell phones, computers, and other things for a while. One way or the other, I would highly recommend dedicating time to diligently seeking God and listening quietly for his voice.

Sackcloth and Ashes

In addition to fasting, we are told that Daniel prayed in sackcloth and ashes. How did Daniel pray? He prayed fasting and sackcloth and ashes. Sackcloth and ashes have always represented brokenness and humility. Daniel did not approach God arrogantly. He did not approach God, demanding that God reveal his will for Israel's future. Rather, Daniel came to God broken and humble. He came to God with the attitude Jesus describes when he instructs us to "learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29).

This is how we too should pray. We should pray as Daniel prayed. Our sense of urgency should lead us to pray with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. It should lead us to seek God as our only priority and to seek him in brokenness and humility. If we are unable to pray in this way, I would suggest our initial prayer should be a prayer asking God to change our hearts so they might be like Daniel's.

What?

The third question has to do with 'what'. It has to do with what Daniel actually prayed. It has to do with the content of Daniel's prayer—with the actual words that flowed from his heart. I am not going to read the entire prayer, which is fair long. However, I would like to select certain verses that I believe convey the main ideas—the main ideas he is expressing to God.

Confession

First, Daniel expresses the idea of confession. He makes a confession to God.

Daniel 9:4-5, 14:

I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 5 we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules.

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 that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice.

Daniel begins the prayer saying he "made confession." Interestingly, he is not making a personal confession. He is not making a confession about his own personal sins. Rather, he is confessing on behalf of the nation—on behalf of the Jewish people.

In our highly individualistic culture, this can be difficult for us to understand. It can be difficult for us to understand that we are actually part of something bigger than ourselves. In addition, it can be difficult for us to understand that we bear responsibility for the larger group to which we belong, whether it is the nation or the church. There is not simply individual guilt, there is also collective guilt.

The Hebrew word for confession, *yadah*, literally means 'an extending of the hands.' When we are extending our hands—when he are placing our open hands, outstretched, palms up, in front of us—we are conveying that we are concealing nothing. We are coming clean. We are being open and transparent about the way things truly are.

In particular, Daniel is confessing the truth about two things. He is confessing the truth about God, and he is confessing the truth about the people to whom he belongs. On the one hand, he is confessing that God is great, awesome, faithful, and loving. On the other hand, he is also confessing that the people to whom he belongs are wicked, rebellious, unfaithful, and sinful. In other words, the truth is, none of the blame for Israel's calamity falls on God. All of the blame falls on the Jewish people.

Embedded in this is the idea of reaping and sowing. As Paul says in Galatians, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). We will reap whatever we sow. There will be consequences resulting from whatever we do, both individually and collectively. If we turn away from God, things will not go well. If we turn toward God in confession—confessing our sins—they will start to head in a better direction.

God does not merely judge individuals, he judges nations. As it says in Joel, "I will gather all the nations and bring them to the Valley of Judgment" (Joel 3:2). This was essentially the message Jonah brought to Nineveh—the message that God was about to bring down judgment on the Assyrian empire unless they repented. It is an incredibly sobering idea—the idea that God will judge nations, the idea that nations will reap consequences for their collective actions.

Some may disagree with me on this point. However, I believe much of the turmoil we see in our nation today is the result of our collective turning away from God. We are reaping as a nation what we have been sowing. We have collectively turned our back on God and, as a result, we should not be surprised things are not going well. We have imagined we can pursue sexual immorality, can tolerate injustice, and can take the lives of tens of millions of unborn boys and girls without there being any consequences. I believe this is utterly delusional.

In my view, we need to confess as a nation that we have sinned—that we have turned our back on God. We need national confession and repentance. Otherwise, we are deluded. We are deluded if we expect things will

get any better. Indeed, in my view, it is an incredible testimony to the patience and long-suffering of God that he has not brought down the curtain on this nation already. Moreover, I believe we need to do soul-searching as the church. We need to ask if, by our silence and lukewarmness, we have in fact become complicit—become accomplices—in the spread of evil.

Mercy and Forgiveness

What then is to be done? What is to be done after confession? We see the answer in Daniel's prayer. We see what Daniel prays for second. Namely, following confession, Daniel calls out to God for mercy and forgiveness. As he declares, "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness." Yes, the Israelites had reaped what they had sown. They had suffered the consequences for their collective actions by being taken away into captivity in Babylon. And yet, thankfully, there is something else—something else that can override reaping and sowing. There is something else that can override the consequences of our sinful and rebellious actions.

As Daniel tells us, "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness." Yes, God is a righteous God who dispenses justice and allows us to reap what we have sown. However, he is also a merciful and forgiving God. As it says in 1 John, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). As it says in James, "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). And, as it says in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." May God help us to do that, both individually and collectively—to pray, to seek God's face, and to turn from our wicked ways.

Supplication

After confession and after approaching God based on God's merciful and forgiving character, we see what Daniel prays third. Daniel's prayer turns into a prayer of supplication. He makes a request. And what does Daniel ask for? What does he request God to supply? Quite simply, he asks God to act and not delay—to act and not delay for God's own sake.

Daniel 9:18-19

For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. 19 O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name."

What does Daniel mean? What does Daniel mean that he wants God to act for his own sake? It means, he wants God to act so that God himself might be glorified. He wants God to act and bless his people who are called by his name so that God's name might be lifted up and praised. What Daniel wants more than anything else is for God to be exalted. He wants the Jewish people to be delivered so that the Deliverer might ultimately receive the glory.

This is a similar idea to the one conveyed by the verse that has long been on the wall at PBC—the verse from 1 Corinthians 6: "You are not your own, you are bought with a price." (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a). Our lives are not about us anymore. Because we have been purchased by the Lord's blood—because we have been redeemed by Jesus' sacrificial death—our lives no longer are our own. The purpose of our lives is not to make ourselves known but to make Jesus known. As John the Baptist said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). What should we be praying for? More than anything else, we should be praying for is for the name of Jesus to be lifted up—the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:9).

As followers of Jesus, I pray this would be our prayer as well. I pray we would long not simply to be delivered from our unsettled and uncertain times. I pray we would long to be delivered from our unsettled and uncertain times so that the name of Jesus might be lifted up—in order that Jesus might receive the glory as the healer of our land.

May we come to God today with the same sense of urgency that Daniel did. May we come to him diligently seeking him in true humility and brokenness. May we confess our sins, may we cry out for mercy and forgiveness, and may we ask God to act so that he might receive the glory. This is the example provided for us in Daniel's prayer. May in one day be said to be true of us as well.