

Series Daniel

Scripture Daniel 9:1-19

Israel had an “up and down” relationship with God throughout its history. After the Israelites had been rescued from their slavery in Egypt, God made a covenant with them and gave them His law. He promised to bless the people if they carefully followed all His commands, and He also said they would be cursed if they rejected Him and were not obedient. The blessings and the curses were explained in detail to the Israelites by Moses. One part of the curse was the threat of captivity in a foreign land.

From our previous studies in this book we know that God had guided the military forces of Nebuchadnezzar against Judah and the city of Jerusalem. This was His response to the decades of rebellious behavior and idolatry of His people. God even announced ahead of time, through the prophet Jeremiah, what He was going to do. “Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: ‘Because you have not listened to My words, I will summon ... my servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, ... and I will bring him against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years’” (*Jeremiah 25:8-11*).

The prophet Jeremiah also predicted what would happen to Babylon after the seventy years of Jewish captivity. “But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt,” declares the LORD, “and will make it desolate forever” (*Jeremiah 25:12*).

These verses from Jeremiah provide important background information for the passage we are going to look at today, Daniel chapter 9.

Read Daniel 9:1-3

These verses indicate that Daniel had somehow obtained a copy of Jeremiah's writings. Jeremiah had been called by God to be a prophet during the spiritually dark days just before judgment fell on Judah. He boldly declared that Babylon would come as a "destroyer," bringing disaster on the land.

Jeremiah was a member of the generation which preceded Daniel. He was a prophet for nearly 50 years. He survived all three of the Babylonian military campaigns into the land of Judah (605, 597, 586 BC). Near the end of his life, he witnessed the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. The book of Lamentations was his description of what happened in 586 BC.

What caught Daniel's attention were the references by Jeremiah to the length of the desolation of the city of Jerusalem. Daniel had been a captive in Babylon for almost 70 years when he read the words of Jeremiah. Verse 1 indicates that the events in chapter 9 occurred "in the first year of Darius, the Mede;" in other words, just a few months after the capture of Babylon by the Medo-Persian army. It was probably a few months before Daniel's experience in the lion's den. It was also a short time before Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return to their homeland. All these facts, taken together, meant that the first year of Darius was a very significant time of transition for Daniel.

From the writings of Jeremiah, Daniel learned about the circumstances in which the Jews would be able to return to and rebuild Jerusalem. "This is what the LORD says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place (that is, Jerusalem). For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile'" (*Jeremiah 29:10-14*).

It was that passage that motivated Daniel to prayer. He was burdened for his countrymen, and for the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple, and for the honor of God to be recognized. And he also recognized that the 70 year period of captivity might be coming to an end. The LORD had described through Jeremiah the appropriate attitudes of prayer which were necessary: "When you call upon me, I will listen." "When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you."

Verse 3 explains how Daniel prepared himself to seek the LORD. He fasted, put on sackcloth, and sprinkled ashes on his head. Only then did he begin to “plead in prayer and petition.” The emphasis in verse 3 is on Daniel’s attitude. When it comes to prayer, we all need to understand that our attitude toward God is more important than words. We can all learn about prayer from Daniel. His concern for his people was deep and sincere. His prayer was a response to his reading of Scripture.

The word “prayer” means “to intercede on behalf of another,” and the word “petition” means to “entreat for mercy.” These must be important aspects in our conversations with God. Daniel was so serious about how he wanted to present himself to the LORD God that he deliberately suppressed his own physical longings by fasting, a discipline whereby concerns for one’s personal needs are suppressed in order that the person’s mind might become more tightly focused on God.

Daniel showed his grief for the circumstances of his fellow Jews by wearing sackcloth. We will probably not do that when we pray, but it is important that we give up our sense of entitlement and our personal rights, and instead take on the humble contrite disposition of a beggar.

Daniel didn't do these things to draw attention to himself, and neither must we. Our prayers and petitions must express our concerns for the people and the conditions around us. For Daniel, that was a concern for the condition of Jerusalem and the sins of his own people.

In his prayer, Daniel focused on the promise of God to limit the desolation of Jerusalem to 70 years. It was in the year 539 BC that Daniel read about this promise. He knew that he had been taken captive in 605 BC. Therefore, he concluded that the 70 years would soon be completed if the time of his exile was the starting point.

Daniel also understood that there could be two other possible starting dates. The Babylonian armies had assaulted Jerusalem in 597 BC after which there was a second phase of the captivity of the Jews, but no destruction. There was the third phase in 586 BC, and that was the time when the temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed. Jeremiah had written that the desolation of Jerusalem would be 70 years. Therefore, the most logical date for the rebuilding of Jerusalem would be 516 BC, $(586 - 70 = 516)$.

The question in Daniel's mind when he went to prayer was whether the starting and ending points in Jeremiah's prophecy were related to the time of his captivity or the destruction of the city. However, we will notice in reading the prayer that his emphasis was not on time. Rather his emphasis was "intercession on behalf of others" and "pleading for mercy."

Read Daniel 9:4-19

There are two important thoughts at the beginning of verse 4. First, Daniel prayed to the LORD God, literally, "Yahweh, God." (*Whenever the name "LORD" is printed in capital letters, it refers to "Yahweh" or "Jehovah."*) This name "Yahweh" is used several times in this chapter. "Yahweh" is the most personal of all the names for God. It is the name associated with the covenants and promises made by God with the people of Israel.

Secondly, we discover that this prayer is primarily one of confession. The prayer is a long acknowledgement of the corporate sins of Israel. We know from our studies that Daniel had not been involved in the wicked behaviors of the Jewish people, but he identified himself with them as though he were as blameworthy as any.

The prayer itself began with Daniel's acknowledgement of the greatness and awesomeness of God. He then turns to the acknowledgement of God's love and faithfulness. There is an interesting contrast in these two thoughts. God's greatness exalts Him far above mankind, and His faithfulness brings Him near. In the Old Testament, the transcendent God made covenants with His chosen people, but then He had to bend to the human level in order to show love and mercy because His chosen people so often fell short of meeting their responsibilities in the covenants. Daniel correctly acknowledged that Yahweh's covenant relationship and love applied only to those who "love and obey His (God's) commands," even if imperfectly. And this leads into Daniel's recognition of why Israel had been held captive.

Notice the four statements in verses 5 and 6: "We have sinned and done wrong," "We have been wicked and rebelled," "We have turned away from your commands and laws," and "We have not listened to your servants the prophets." Daniel understood that the Jewish people were deserving of God's wrath. They had done nothing to merit mercy and forgiveness. They had brought judgment on themselves.

The result of Israel's behavior is given in verses 7 and 8. The people of Israel were "covered with shame" because of their sin. Their shame and humiliation was experienced in several ways. They had been taken captive, their homeland was in ruin, and they were under the domination of false gods and pagan people.

Back in the days of Moses, Yahweh had promised the Israelites that "the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you" (*Deuteronomy 28:7*), and that all nations would respect them, promising, "All the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Yahweh, and they will fear you" (*Deuteronomy 28:10*).

But God had also promised that those blessings would be reversed if the people rejected Him, and that is exactly what happened. Instead of respect from the pagan nations, the Jews became objects of scorn and were derided for their claim to know the one true God, all because they had "rebelled against" and "refused to obey" their "righteous," "merciful, and forgiving" God.

The consequences of disobedience had been clearly stated in the Mosaic Law. God had to follow through on His promises if He was to maintain His integrity. His actions in bringing foreign armies into Judah, destroying the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and removing the people from their homeland, was actually a vindication of His holiness and righteousness.

Daniel did not try to defend or offer excuses for his people. He readily acknowledged that the Jews deserved all the punishment that they were receiving. Verses 4 through 14 were confession. "Confession" means "to agree with." When we confess our sins, we are merely agreeing with what God already knows. Daniel was one of the few Jews of his generation to acknowledge rebellion and sin.

Finally, beginning in verse 15, Daniel makes his specific appeal to God. The appeal is most clearly stated in verse 16: "O Lord, ... turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill." It is repeated in verse 17: "Look with favor on your desolate sanctuary" and verse 18 "See the desolation of the city that bears your name," and verse 19 "Do not delay because your city and your people bear your Name."

These requests are based on God's own reputation and glory. Jerusalem was God's city. The sanctuary was God's sanctuary. The people were God's people. In Daniel's mind, the worst consequence of the judgment of the Jews was damage to the reputation of God. The city had been unable to defend itself against the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. As a result, pagan forces exulted over the fact that the God of the Jews had been too weak to protect what was His. The nations concluded that Babylon's gods were more powerful than Israel's God. This was a reproach to the name of Yahweh and the reason God and His people were the objects of scorn.

Daniel wanted God to take action in order to enhance His reputation in the world. When God brought out His people from Egypt, it was obvious to all that He was more powerful than the most powerful of human entities. The Lord had "made for himself a name when he brought the people out of Egypt" (verse 15). Daniel wanted the Lord's actions to be "in keeping with all his (previous) righteous acts" (verse 16). Two times Daniel asked God to act "for his own sake."

Daniel wanted God to respond to his prayer in two main concrete ways: "Now, O God, hear my prayers and petitions," and "look with favor on your desolate sanctuary." These requests were immediately repeated: "Give ear and hear," and "open your eyes and see." In verse 19 they are repeated again in similar words: "Listen," "Forgive," "Hear and act," and "Do not delay." These words are the climax of the prayer.

This chapter began with Daniel's curiosity about the 70 year duration of the desolation of Jerusalem. Remarkably, Daniel did not mention the 70 year interval anywhere in his prayer. The only intimation of time is the very last request, "do not delay." Daniel wanted the captivity of the Jews to end as quickly as possible, and he wanted God to reckon the 70 year interval from the first phase of the captivity, 605 BC. His desire was, in fact, granted a few months later when Cyrus issued the decree for the Jews to return to their homeland. However, since the desolation of Jerusalem and the temple did not occur until 586 BC, the year 515 BC was the year of fulfillment. God provided a double fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy.

That's the lesson from history in Daniel chapter 9. I want to close this message with some reminders about prayer which can be gleaned from Daniel's prayer. We learned that preparation for prayer is important. We must not rush into prayer in a casual way. Daniel was very deliberate in his approach to God. He wanted his mind to be tightly focused on God. Attitude is important.

Daniel was humble before God. He identified himself with those who had rebelled against God and who had engaged in sinful behavior. He undoubtedly recognized that God had been incredibly gracious to him, giving him a privileged status in the government of Babylon, endowing him with remarkable gifts of spiritual understanding, and protecting him in times of danger. He did not have a proud attitude nor assume that he was specially entitled to favors because He knew that God had made him who he was.

In his prayer, Daniel did not make any requests for himself. His prayer was one of intercession for others and, most important of all, for God's own reputation. He was concerned for the Lord's people, and the Lord's temple and city. He was concerned about the impressions of pagans toward the one true God who was really over all, yet not acknowledged as such.

A third characteristic of Daniel's prayer was that it was Scripture based. We need to think of prayer as a dialogue between two friends. God speaks to us through His word; our response to God is called prayer. God wants to have a conversation with us. Our Bible readings can be the basis of our prayers.

There are certainly a lot of conditions in the world at large, and in our communities, within our circles of friends and family members, that invite our intercession and "entreaties for mercy." I hope that our prayers will be like Daniel's.