

A Masterclass in Prayer

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Date: 06 February 2022

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 0 0] Hi. This morning's passage is from the book of Daniel, chapter 9. That's on page 895 of the Pew Bibles. Daniel, chapter 9. In the first year of Darius, son of Xerxes, 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 70 years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes.

I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed, Lord, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments. 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 ancestors and to all the people of the land.

Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame. The people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, Lord, 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 on us great disaster. Under the whole heaven, nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem. Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us, yet we have not sought the favour 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 on us, for the Lord our God is righteous in everything he does, yet we have not obeyed him.

Now, 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. Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill.

[3 : 1 3] Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors 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, Lord, look with favour on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, our 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. Lord, listen. Lord, forgive. Lord, hear and act. For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your name. 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, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the word 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 vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place.

Know and understand this. From the time the word goes out 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 put to death 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 the sacrifice and offering. And at the temple, he will set up an abomination that causes desolation until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

This is the word of the Lord. Jackie, thanks so much for reading so well. And if you could keep your Bibles open at Daniel chapter 9, we're going to look at that together. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet that shows you where we're heading as we look at that. So do make use of that. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we look at his word. Father God, we thank you for your word to us in the Bible.

[6 : 31] And we ask, may we hear your voice, and would you search us, O God, and know our hearts. Test us and know our anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting.

For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. So we're in this series in the book of Daniel. Daniel and his friends were living around Babylon, about 550 BC. Before that time, God's people, the Israelites, had been living in and around Jerusalem. God had rescued them under Moses.

He delivered them out of Egypt. He brought them under Joshua into the promised land. But they turned from God, and they went into exile. They were taken into exile. Now in this second half of Daniel, he records a series of visions and dreams that God gave to him to equip him and the people at that time with what they needed to know to keep going with God, and to fill them with more understanding of God's will for them. How should they live far from home and far from God? And for us today, Christians live our lives far from home. Whenever we yearn not to sin anymore, whenever we yearn for there to be a world without sin, whenever we yearn for there to be a day without suffering, we're yearning for home.

When we yearn to be with Jesus, we yearn for home. That kind of feeling is a homesickness, to be with God again. And in Daniel chapter 7, God gave Daniel this extraordinary vision of a son of man going into the throne room of God, the ancient of days, and being given the right, the authority to have an everlasting kingdom. There's a son of man coming, he's told, with a kingdom that will last forever. And in Daniel chapter 6, Daniel was in Babylon, and there was an edict laid down, anyone who prays to anyone except the king for 30 days will be fed to the lions. And Daniel kept praying. And in this chapter, we hear what he was praying, Daniel chapter 9. It's one of the greatest prayers in human history. I mean, most people we would know will have had a go at praying at some point in their life. I think almost everyone we meet has tried praying at some stage. But there's lots of confusion and doubt about prayer.

God might seem very distant to us. We might feel that it's impossible to know things about him. And so we think, well, can I even pray to him? We might feel very unworthy to pray to God and think, well, is it appropriate for me to talk to him? And traditions have built up, haven't they, in church life, of people praying to holy people of old, lighting a candle to reflect a godly person from the past, to think, well, I don't feel I can approach God, but maybe this person will for me.

[9 : 39] There's even a growing industry in celebrity prayer candles. Twelve dollars will get you a Billie Eilish candle, or a David Attenborough prayer candle, or a Harry Styles prayer candle that you can light at home so that maybe your favorite celebrity can somehow get you access to God. So how do we pray?

Daniel gives us a prayer master class, and our first point is the awe in Daniel's prayer. We're going to think first about the setting of his prayer, the setting of his prayer. Let's look again at verse 1.

In the first year of Darius, son of Xerxes, a Mede by descent, he 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 70 years.

So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. So Daniel, he reads a promise from God, from the prophet Jeremiah, from the scroll, and he prays that God will fulfill that promise that he's made. The promise drives him to prayer that God will act on the promise. The 70 years might not be, I think it's more likely to be a symbolic 70

years, rather than looking for a literal 70 years. But the issue there was that Daniel saw in Jeremiah that Babylon's days were numbered. So when he sees Darius the Mede conquer Babylon, he thinks the 70 years are up, and maybe it's time to get home. And he gets on his knees, and he prays. It's a great model.

Just as the whole Bible ends with Jesus saying to John, behold, I'm coming soon. And the response is, Amen, come Lord Jesus. The promise drives God's people to pray. And Jesus calls us to pray for that day that he will come. Not to think, well, he'll come when he comes. To pray.

[11:46] He says, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? And that faith is marked by prayer that he will come. Jesus promises he'll build his church on this rock of the gospel. He promises in revelation that a great multitude will be gathered by him to be with God forever. And they'll be from every nation. And these promises should move us to pray. We hear the promise, we pray that God would act to do what he's promised. That's the setting of Daniel's prayer. Let's think about the revelation in Daniel's prayer. Daniel bases his prayer on what God has revealed in his word, in the scriptures, about who he is. Look at how he addresses God. Again, verse 4. Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Is that the God we pray to on a Tuesday morning? When you make a quick arrow prayer on the way to work, or you have a quiet time with God in the morning, do you pray to the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments? Daniel's whole prayer is shaped by this understanding that God is a God who has entered into a relationship with people through this covenant.

Covenant is a set of binding promises that govern a relationship. And for him at that time, God's covenant was set out through Moses in Deuteronomy. And God's people have been brought into the lands that God had promised them and told, if you keep trusting me and walk with me, you'll be blessed by me in the land.

And if you turn from me and you stop trusting me, you'll be cursed. You'll end up with the curse of exile being taken from the land. So even though the people have experienced a calamity of trauma and siege and captivity, Daniel knows that what the scriptures reveal about God shows that all that's happened demonstrates God's faithfulness and God's righteousness.

So in verse 7, he says to God, Lord, you are righteous. In verse 9, the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving. In verse 12, you have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing on us great disaster. I don't know what you think about that, but I think that's an extraordinary thing to acknowledge. When God withholds his blessing from his people, we tend to shake our fists at him and think, how dare he withhold blessing from us? But Daniel listens to God's word to understand what's going on. And so he knows this calamity, it doesn't tarnish the character of God. Rather, the judgment of God actually demonstrates that God is faithful. God is doing what he said he would do.

Doing what he said he would do shows that he is righteous. He always does what's right. So for Daniel, this is a prayer steeped in the scriptures. To get to this point where he could pray this magnificent prayer, he was a Bible man. Sometimes we separate out prayer from scripture.

[15:09] We even maybe distinguish them as though you've got Christians over here who were really prayerful. They're all about prayer. And then you've got some other Christians over here who were all about the Bible. But Daniel's prayer is so helpful because he knows his God from the scriptures and he knows how God relates to us and it drives him to prayer. And there's nothing academic about that or cerebral or especially brainy. It's a prayer full of passion. It's full of urgency. It's tenacious prayer. He's got a grip on God and he won't let go. And he's got a grip on God's promises and he won't let go.

Knowing God in his word should drive us to this passionate experience of seeking him in prayer. Let's think about the humility of Daniel's prayer. So we thought about what he thinks of God. But then it's so striking, isn't it, what he says about himself. Verse 5, 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. Verse 7, Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame. If Daniel was in our church family, what would we think of him? I would think he's an absolute champion. He's a man of immense courage and faithfulness and godliness and I would long to be more like him. But he prays knowing that before God, he's ruined. All the people are and he is. He goes on to say that even after the exile that God's put them through, they haven't turned back to God. In verse 13, 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. They're like the person who, you know, reads a warning sign at the beach, no swimming, dangerous waters, and they go off swimming, and they have to be rescued. And the coast guard goes and rescues them and brings them back in. And half an hour later, they're back in the water again, and they have to be rescued again. And Daniel begs for mercy.

What kind of person would you become if your prayers were like Daniel's every day? What kind of person do you become, do you get formed into when your spiritual life is like this, shaped by prayers, where you adore God and praise him for who he is?

And then you're full of sincere confession about your own unworthiness. And if we struggle to pray, let's be encouraged that as well as Daniel being a model here of great prayer, he's also praying for the whole nation here. He's standing in the gap between God and the people. And that's a foreshadowing of the one we have standing in the gap for us, that Jesus, risen now, stands before God in the throne room of heaven, interceding for us like Daniel did for his generation. And Jesus pleads his own sacrifice so that we can approach God boldly without fear.

[18:36] So there's the humility of Daniel's prayer. And finally, let's think about the grounds of Daniel's prayers. He pleads on the basis of God's character, verse 18. He says, we do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. And I learned to pray like that from a friend. I didn't know it was from Daniel, but I had a friend that I was in a prayer trip with, and that's how we used to pray. We'd pray for things that we were really concerned for, and he'd say, Lord, we're not praying for this because we're righteous. We're praying because of your mercy. And that's how Daniel prays. And then he goes on to pray for the sake of God's name. So look at verse 18.

Give ear, our God, and hear. Open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your name. And then verse 19. Lord, listen. Lord, forgive. Lord, hear and act for your sake, my God. Do not delay, because your city and your people bear your name. It's like looking at the church and seeing church decline in the visible church and thinking, well, that must be the judgment of God on a people who have turned from him. But what does it say to the world, looking on, about the God of the church, that the church is in decline? Or in Daniel's case, he knows that the exile showed God's faithfulness and righteousness. But what will the nations think of Yahweh, the God of the Bible, when they see the people suffering in exile and Jerusalem desecrated? And so he says, God, act for the sake of your reputation. Your name is your concern, and it's my concern too, and I long for you to act. And let me ask, could we learn to pray better, reflecting that priority? When we're praying for friends with the life mission next month, the passion for life, Lord, what honor it would bring you, Lord, if my son was converted? What praise it would bring to your name? What praise there would be to Christ if this marriage was redeemed and restored? What credit there would be to Jesus' name, Lord, if my friend at church can get through this time they're going through and this suffering they're enduring and grow in their faith in this time? Wouldn't that build up your name and glorify you, Lord?

Lord. So Daniel pleads with urgency. Lord, hear. Lord, act. Why? For your name's sake. There's the masterclass for us in prayer. So we've heard the awe in Daniel's prayer. Our second point more briefly, the grace in Gabriel's flight. So God sends his warrior messenger, Gabriel. He's already appeared to Daniel before and he comes again. It happens in verse 20, while I was speaking and praying.

You see that? While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin. Verse 21, while I was still in prayer, Gabriel came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. And it's remarkable mercy because Gabriel comes to bring, verse 22, insight and understanding to Daniel. He comes to reassure Daniel. And for Daniel, what an encouragement that must have been. God gives him another vision, another word to assure him that God remembers him and that God in his mercy has heard him praying.

And more than that, we heard when Gabriel arrived, as Daniel was praying, he's interrupted. I was really struck this week by seeing when Gabriel set off. Did you notice that in verse 23? As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I've come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. And I think the danger with that phrase, you are highly esteemed, is we think it might be saying, because you're a legend, Daniel, God thinks well of you and he sent me. Other translations just go with, you are dearly loved.

[23 : 06] The ESV, the New King James, you are dearly loved. I think that's a better way of seeing it because God treats us by his grace, he esteems us, not because of anything in us. And he's saying to Daniel, as soon as you began to pray, God sent me, because you are dearly loved, Daniel.

So folks, behold Daniel's God. He's a God who's far more awesome than the gods our minds imagine, so that he's perfectly, perfectly righteous. Nothing contains his character. Even in judgment, his righteousness is displayed. It's a very sobering thought, isn't it? When we look at the world and we wonder why more people don't turn to God and will God really judge and condemn them, that when God condemns people who reject him, he will display, by doing that, his righteousness.

It will display that he's righteous and that he's faithful. He does what he says and he's good. And Daniel approaches him on his knees. He's wearing sackcloth. He's got ashes on his head. And then here's what we see in Gabriel. Such is God's love for people, that as soon as Daniel begins to pray, the word of grace goes out to him.

Gabriel, get going. And I think we struggle with this because for normal people, there is this sort of set distance between how good we are and what we're willing to forgive in other people. So we're more likely to forgive someone for something if we think, you know what, I would do the same. And the people who are finding it hardest to forgive Downing Street right now are the people who most closely abided by the COVID rules. Because it's people saying, but I didn't do that and I would never have done that. So why did you do that? You see? Because if you kind of broke the rules, then can you forgive another person who broke the rules? So with God, it's as though we apply the same kind of thinking that we have about ourselves, about humanity, that there might be this fixed, if you imagine a sort of piece of rope, a tug of war that demonstrates this fixed distance between how righteous we think God is and how much he might be willing to forgive us if we've messed up.

[25 : 29] And the more that we hear God loves you and God is merciful and God just wants you to approach him, the more we sort of take that and we diminish God's righteousness and holiness and think, he's kind of just, he's just like your mate. But then when we open the scriptures and what's revealed to us is a God who is holy and righteous, it pushes him away from us and we think, wow, I could never approach a God like that. He is too far from me. We're like Peter in the boat when Jesus does the miraculous catch of fish and he realizes who Jesus is and he gets on his knees and he says, depart from me, Lord, for I'm a sinful man. So the more we're confronted with the holiness, the otherness, the righteousness of God, the more we think he's too far from us to get near him.

And Daniel 9 wants us to grow, to just smash the rope, to grow in a deeper sense of both those ideas. Magnify your view of God's righteousness. He's more highly exalted than we can imagine. He's more righteous and holy. Tremble before him all the earth. And then we hear Gabriel's, as soon as you began to pray, magnify your own grasp of God's love and God's mercy for you, his capacity for mercy towards you.

There's two things in this chapter that God does not hesitate to do. When Israel breaks the covenant and refuses to listen to God, verse 14, he did not hesitate to bring disaster on them because it shows he's righteous.

When Daniel starts to repent and confess his sin and asks for forgiveness, he does not hesitate to send a word of grace. Maybe one or two of you are here this morning, but you feel you have fallen very far from God.

[27 : 31] Do you look at your life and you know you must have deeply offended God's righteousness? Well, could you see Gabriel being sent and realize that you might feel very far from God right now, but the very moment you start to pray to confess your sin, you'll find he's been standing ready all along for his grace to come and cover everything you've tried to hide from him.

So we've heard about the grace in Gabriel's flight. What about the message he brings? That's our third point, the assurance in Yahweh's plan. Yahweh is God's name for himself in the scriptures, so it's the assurance in the Lord's plan.

Gabriel now gives Daniel this new vision, and the challenge here is not to get lost in the details, but to take away the big message. In the background, what might Daniel be thinking as an Israelite as he prays?

I think, he's thinking, when we get back to Jerusalem, the golden age will begin. We'll be back with God, back in the land flowing with milk and honey, back enjoying the blessings of God, and it can go on forever.

There'll be an end to sin. There'll be forgiveness. We can be with God forever. And God says to Daniel, times are coming when you will have trouble, and those times will not be over quickly. [28 : 55] So look at verse 24. 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 vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place.

In other words, be assured, Daniel, God will surely bring the restoration you long for. These are incredible promises. A day when there is no more sin is coming. When wickedness is not just forgotten, but atoned for. It's dealt with, so that the righteous God can forgive his people. And there will be everlasting righteousness.

So from that time on and forever, people will live God's way. Everything will be done God's way. And the sealing of the vision there isn't so much stopping it and saying it's not for now, so much as either saying there'll be no more need for vision because the fulfillment has come.

Or it's God putting his seal of authority on it and saying this is going to happen. These days are coming. And Daniel needs to hear that. And we still need to hear that today.

[30 : 14] Because we're still waiting for those days. But Daniel also needs to hear, it's a long way off. And that's why Gabriel uses this language of 77.

It's symbolic language. You've waited 70 years for this exile to end. But for God's kingdom to fully and finally come, you'll have to wait 70 times 7. Relatively a long time.

That's the big picture. What comes next in verses 26 and 27 is more difficult because there are lots of different interpretations. Clearly, he says, there will be 69 sevens before the anointed one or Messiah comes.

Before Gabriel will come and visit a maiden and say, you're highly favored and your son will be the most high. There'll be 69 sevens.

There will be this long period. And he divides that into a period of seven sevens and a period of 62 sevens. And I've put on your sheets there a table that is just one of the possible things that those periods might mean.

[31 : 23] One of the ways that I think is plausible to piece this together. But he talks about them rebuilding the temple and the city in times of trouble, that there will be difficulty. And we see that in Ezra and Nehemiah.

And then we get to verse 26 and it's about the last seven. And three things are described in verse 26 as to come later.

That the anointed one will be put to death and will have nothing. And that the people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And that the end will come like a flood. War will continue until the end and desolations have been decreed. And then he says three more things in verse 27. And it might be that those are three more things about this ruler who will come and destroy the temple.

Or it could be, as I put on the table there, that it's a repeat. That the three things in verse 27 parallel the three in verse 26. What we now know looking back is that God's Messiah King, the Lord Jesus, came and he was put to death and he had nothing.

[32 : 35] Verse 26. And he did that so that God could keep Gabriel's promise there that the sin of the people would be atoned for. The anointed one had to die a sin-bearing death and it was promised right here to Daniel.

And that in 70 AD, a generation later, the Romans set up an abomination in the temple, which verse 27 tells us about and that Jesus forewarned his followers about in Mark 13, that they would see the abomination in the temple.

And in prophecy like this, things that are far away from Daniel, they get scrunched together. So it's a bit like when we got the boat from Auburn to Mull, you can see the mountain range of the highlands up to the north and you can see Ben Nevis in the range and it looks like it's right next to the mountains, but it's not.

It's just it's so big that it comes into the foreground. And if you're actually on one of those other mountains, Ben Nevis would seem really far away. And it's a bit like that with Daniel, that he's looking on ahead with Gabriel and everything's scrunched together.

But for us, we live in the second half of the 70th seven. We're in the last days, waiting for Jesus to come in glory, living after the anointed one was put to death and after 70 AD.

[33 : 58] And it seems far away to us, but to Daniel, it was all brought together. And what he's describing, I think at the end, is that the ultimately, the ultimate enemy, Satan, will be destroyed.

The end of verse 26 and the end of verse 27. The end will come like a flood. What Daniel needs to know, big picture, is times are coming that will be really difficult.

And those times will not be over quickly. And for us living in that last seven, we need to hear that as well. That Daniel 9 says, God will keep his promises.

Don't expect it to be like a microwave meal. You know, sometimes when I'm waiting for a bus, I'm not used to waiting for a bus. And I'm terrible at waiting for the bus. I got epilepsy about nine years ago and I had to, I couldn't drive for a while.

And I had to get the bus. And it was, you know, it was before you had displays telling you when the bus would come. And I like to, you know, look in the distance to find the bus that's coming. And when the road was quiet and I had been waiting a bit for the bus, I'd find myself in the middle of the road because I was so, I was so desperate to see the bus.

[35 : 08] Oh, it must be some, I can see further if I cross the road and have a look. As if that makes the bus come any quicker. It's an extraordinary thing to do. But that's life, isn't it, today?

Life in a hurry. We're in a hurry. We don't want to wait for a bus. God is not in a hurry like that. God is patient. So we live in the last days, but these are times to brace ourselves for and to encourage each other in to keep going.

Times when our conversation over coffee shouldn't just be about the rugby or the FA Cup. It should also be how are you going? How are you growing?

What's God teaching you at the moment? Times to brace ourselves for. But let's be assured from Daniel's vision, the end will come. Gabriel is telling us that God has his wall chart up and every single event is marked out on his wall planner.

And most encouraging of all, the Lord has his crosshairs fixed on our last great enemy and he will destroy him. He'll take him down. So be patient.

[36 : 17] Keep busy, as we saw last week. Keep on keeping on and being faithful. And pray prayers like Daniel prayed. Praying in light of God's promises. Praying to the God who is more righteous than we can grasp.

Praying in humility and confession, but because he is merciful. Pray for him to act for the sake of his name. And as we pray, we remember the grace in Gabriel's flight and the assurance of Yahweh's plans.

Amen. So we're going to pray together now and Amy Wicks is going to come and bring our prayers, our concerns for the world and for the church. on the court.

Amen. Amen. Bye.