

Daniel 5: Living Prayerfully

Daniel 9&10

In the history of the Christian church, there are almost as many ways of praying as there are Christians to pray. Means and methods of prayer vary from culture to culture and from century to century. But there is a pattern that emerges from the study of prayer that cannot be denied. It is those who make prayer a *priority* who most find themselves embraced by an answering God. As we pray, our knowledge of God deepens; we learn to recognise his voice and to discern his will; and we begin to see our own circumstances from his perspective. Whatever style and system of prayer we adopt, there is a rule so basic our faith wouldn't exist without it – *those who make prayer their personal priority will come to know God more fully than those who pray begrudgingly, fulfilling a reluctant duty.*

The last chapter in Jeff Lucas' book '*Singing in Babylon*' that many of us have been reading during Lent is titled 'Over and Out.' It's a great heading to end our journey through the life of Daniel. Lucas encourages us to picture an elderly man, his window open, staring out toward the homeland that he has lost. As our sermon series on Daniel draws to a close with a reading of chapter 9, we realise that prayer was the conduit through which God empowered him to live with such courage. Over the last six weeks, in working through the book of Daniel, we have seen that its message is that God rules, is building an everlasting kingdom, and calls people to live in light of that fact. Whether it's over the big sweep of history, or in the details, God rules and is building his kingdom. Daniel 9 teaches us how to pray in light of God's rule.

One of the first things we read in verse 3 is that Daniel '*turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition.*' 'Turned to the Lord' literally means 'I gave God my face.' Daniel was determined to look to God in prayer until the Lord gave him an answer. The second thing we see is the connection between prayer and the Word of God. Verse 2 begins, '*I Daniel understood from the Scripture ...*' and it's in reading from the book of Jeremiah that after seventy years the rule of Babylon and the Exile will end, that Daniel is moved to pray. This is why it's so important for reading our Bibles to be part of our daily discipleship because what we read will frequently lead us into prayer. Daniel's prayer is both personal and corporate. At one level, it's Daniel, the Lord's servant praying to his God - 'I prayed to the Lord my God' – verse 4

begins but, as we read the prayer, it's clear that Daniel is praying on behalf of God's people. In the verses that follow, he pours his heart out to God as he confesses both his own sin and the sin of his people Israel. Though he identified himself with his people, Daniel certainly hadn't been part of the rebellious majority who had brought the wrath of God upon the nation. Remember, he was just a teenager at the start of the exile and, throughout the whole of his story, we see a man determined to worship his God, irrespective of the consequences, or indeed whether the people of Israel exiled with him were doing the same. Through all the twists and turns of Daniel's life, he was faithful throughout. As Eugene Peterson puts it, *'Faith is a long obedience in the same direction.'*

There is a clear logic and movement in Daniel's prayer. He begins with confession of sin and, in a spirit of repentance, then appeals to God's mercy. Remembering with gratitude God's covenant faithfulness and great mercies, Daniel appeals once again for God's merciful intervention. Finally, Daniel is moved to appeal to God to restore Jerusalem and the temple for the sake of the glory of his own name.

As we reflect on the content of Daniel's prayer, it's important to appreciate the sincerity and emotion expressed in the language he uses. In the way he prays we see a humble man of God. These are words not to impress but simple and sincere words to express a heart deeply aware of where his people had gone so wrong, of their need to be truly sorry and for the city that bears God's name to be great again, not for their sakes, but for God's. And here we get to the heart of what prayer really is. Lucas writes: *'Prayer is far more than an emergency call for help, or the reciting of a wish list; the heart of any relationship is conversation, and prayer is us naturally, freely, faithfully talking to God.'* As Daniel demonstrated time and time again, it is prayer that builds the muscle of faith, that enables us to live courageously. Gerard Kelly writes,

'On seventy-seven occasions Scripture records the command 'fear not', and one of the outcomes of deeper prayer in our lives is that when trouble arises, we are less prone to panic. Our response to pressure is no longer distorted by fear. The opposite of fear, which is not courage but trust, becomes our foundation.'

The answer to Daniel's prayer is that the angel Gabriel comes to him with a vision and one of the first things he says to Daniel is this – arguably my favourite words in this chapter – *'As soon as you began to pray, an answer was*

given. If you want to read on, you'll find he's told the same thing in chapter 10, verse 12 – *'Since the first day you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard.'* How amazing and reassuring is this? That prayer, borne of a sincere, humble heart is heard immediately, even if there's then a delay before the answer is given. God hears our prayers immediately but answers them in accordance with his will and time. The important thing is that we continue to pray, and do so with humble and sincere hearts, and that we speak freely, telling God exactly how it is, particularly in the context of the ongoing pandemic and lockdown restrictions.

Roy Lawrence, who wrote the book *'How to Pray When Life Hurts'* tells the story of a hospital chaplain who was asked to visit a particularly distraught patient. This man, in the terminal stages of cancer, was wracked with guilt because he'd spent the previous night venting his anger at God. Raging and swearing, he'd told God just what he thought of him – and in the morning he felt dreadful. He imagined that his chance of eternal life had now been lost forever, and that God would never forgive one who had so cursed and abused him. The chaplain asked this patient, *'What do you think is the opposite of love?'* The man replied, *'Hate.'* Very wisely, the chaplain replied, *'No, the opposite of love is indifference. You have not been indifferent to God, or you would never have spent the night talking to him, honestly telling him what was in your heart and mind.'* This insight completely changed the attitude of the hospital patient. Not long after his conversation with the chaplain, he died in peace, trusting the God who remains on speaking terms with us even when our only words for him are words of abuse.

God answers prayer because he hears the cry of our hearts; because we dare to ask. James, in his apostolic letter, chides the early Christians bluntly: *'You do not have, because you do not ask God'* (4:2). It's the simple truth that the only prayer God cannot answer is the prayer we do not pray.

The answer to Daniel's prayer in chapter 9 is a vision, usually known as the vision of the seventy weeks or 'sevens'. Clearly in Daniel's mind as he prayed was the end of the Babylonian Exile and the restoration of God's people, the city of Jerusalem and the temple. While the vision he received clearly speaks of these events, it looks beyond that 'exodus' and restoration to the ultimate and final Exodus and restoration. As we celebrate Palm Sunday today, the day when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the final time, riding on a donkey as a King but knowing that the week would end with his death, we would struggle to

find a more succinct and comprehensive statement anywhere in Scripture about what the death of Jesus achieves. Let's hear chapter 9, verse 24 again:

'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.'

Jesus' death will be the final word. It will bring about the ultimate Exodus and restoration. It will bring in the everlasting Kingdom of God. What a wonderful vision to receive in answer to prayer, and truly remarkable that Daniel was given a foretaste of what was to come 600 years before the birth of Christ.

And so our sermon series of Daniel draws to an end. I encourage you to read to the very end as there, in chapter 12, you read some remarkable words. After the stories of trial and triumph; after the long life of faithful service; after the dreams and visions of the future in which the sovereign God wins all, Daniel is told by an angel in Daniel 12: 13 to quite simply get on with his life. Daniel doesn't join the Jews returning to Jerusalem but dies in that strange land of Babylon where he'd lived all of his adult life, and where he'd remain faithful to his God, whatever the cost. What does the angel say? From the Message translation, it's this:

'And you? Go about your business without fretting or worrying. Relax. When it's all over you will be on your feet to receive your award.'

The promise is of a future kingdom – a future resurrection. There is an inheritance to come, but the immediate call is to perseverance and faith. And it's our call too, as we continue to live out our faith in the midst of a pandemic, knowing above all that God rules, is building an everlasting kingdom, and calls us to live in the light of that fact.

To live distinctively.

To live courageously.

To live consistently.

To live truthfully.

And to live prayerfully, to the end of our days. Amen.