

“The Prayer of a Penitent”

Daniel 9:1-19

In August of last year, several of us from *Heralds of Hope* attended a media-ministries conference hosted by Trans World Radio at their headquarters in Cary, North Carolina. It was a refreshing and encouraging time of hearing about what God is doing through our media partnership with Trans World Radio.

One of the workshops offered during the conference was titled *Prayer as Strategy*. I attended that workshop and was challenged and convicted by the presentation.

So often we plan a strategy for reaching a goal, whether in business, ministry, or church. We follow the adage, “plan your work and work your plan.” That’s not necessarily wrong. But too often, we make the plans and ask God to bless them. If the plans succeed, we take the credit; if they fail, we blame God!

The workshop leader presented the idea of making prayer our strategy, and he highlighted several steps to help us implement this strategy. First, **delight in God**, Psalm 37:4. “*Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.*” Verse 23 of that same Psalm says, “*The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way.*” God is worthy to be desired, to be sought after. But in order to do this, we need to slow down. (That’s one benefit of the coronavirus; it has slowed down most of us, hasn’t it?) We need to take time to listen to Him in a quiet place, to “*be still and know that I am God,*” Psalm 46:10. The leader reminded us that “ministry is the overflow of intimacy.” Did you catch that? “Ministry is the overflow of intimacy.”

Another important step in prayer as strategy is to **listen**. Too often we’re so busy doing, that we don’t take time to listen. What is God saying about this specific opportunity through His Word and by His Spirit? What counsel do others have to offer? The workshop leader pointed out that “ministry is received rather than achieved.”

The final step was **lead**. The promise of Psalm 34:7 is that if we delight in God, He will direct our paths. He will show us how to lead. Too often, we embrace human strategies rather than seeking God and His plans and strategies.

One of the final, convicting thoughts presented was, “prayerlessness indicates independence.” I find myself there too often! Conversely, “prayerfulness indicates dependence.”

I share those thoughts today as part of the introduction to Daniel chapter nine. Chapter nine is sometimes referred to as “Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks.” But more than half the chapter is a record of Daniel’s prayer. We already know from chapter seven that Daniel’s prayer life was an important part of his relationship with God. His commitment to God in prayer caused him to be thrown into the lion’s den. And here again, prayer surfaces as an integral part of Daniel’s spiritual life and practice.

As we read this prayer, Daniel’s understanding of God’s character and his understanding of the sins of God’s people becomes quickly apparent. I’ve titled this teaching “The Prayer of the Penitent.”

Now, let me read the text, **Daniel chapter nine, verse one to nineteen.**

Let’s begin with a brief look at verses 1 and 2. They provide the setting for Daniel’s prayer. Daniel states the time as being in the first year of Darius the Mede. You may recall that Daniel chapter five ends with the death of Belshazzar and the ascension of Darius to the throne. So, that is where this chapter fits chronologically.

According to verse two, Jeremiah’s prophecies (scrolls) had made their way to Babylon and evidently Daniel had access to them. The date for chapter 9 is approx. 538 BC or about 67 years after Daniel’s deportation to Babylon. By reading Jeremiah’s prophecies, Daniel determines that the 70 years of captivity and the desolations of Jerusalem are nearing their end. One of those specific prophecies is in Jeremiah 25:11 and 12. *“And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, **and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.** Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity...”*

Daniel, read Jeremiah’s words and took them literally; he expected God to fulfill His word. He also understood that God’s promises would be realized through prayer. He embraced the need for confession of sin and repentance as a prelude to restoration.

These first nineteen verses from Daniel chapter nine reveal the STEPS of action that will characterize “The Prayer of the Penitent.” These steps apply in Daniel’s situation and they apply in ours too.

The First STEP is,

Seek God's Face

Daniel has read Jeremiah's prophecies and understands that the captivity is nearing its end. And what is his response? Verse 3 says *"Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes."* Why did Daniel think it necessary to pray? Listen to Jeremiah 29:10 to 14.

*"For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. **Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.**"*

Incidentally, verse 11 is probably familiar to you. *"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."* You see it posted on social media, on home décor, even on clothing. But usually, it's wrenched out of its context as a standalone promise. But the context shows that God's thoughts of peace toward Israel were based on them seeking Him with all their heart! So, remember if you want to claim the promise of verse 11 you can't separate it from the condition of verse 12, seeking God with all your heart.

As Daniel meditates on Jeremiah's prophecy, he sets his face to seek the Lord. This is another way of saying that he's giving God his undivided attention. Remember the blessing of Aaron in Numbers 6:24 to 26? *"The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace."* Setting one's face shows attentiveness.

In order to give his undivided attention to God, Daniel begins by eliminating distractions. In this he demonstrates his faith, his devotion, and his worship. He's actively seeking an answer to his prayers. He engages in fasting, the denial of his bodily needs. He puts on rough sackcloth, the denial of bodily comforts. And finally, he puts ashes on his head, a traditional sign of grief, humility, and mourning.

Many of us in North America, would find these steps very difficult. Most of us are so accustomed to living in comfort that we can hardly deny ourselves anything! Not long ago a friend told me about a conversation he had with another Christ-follower. My friend was talking about camping and the other man said to him, "I don't know if we could do that. I'm not sure my children would be able to do without their "towel warmers." Pampered much?

And we wonder why our prayers often seem so powerless. We know God hears the shortest of prayers - like Nehemiah's prayer before King Artaxerxes when he was asked the reason for his sadness. But if you read Nehemiah chapter one, you learn that the brief prayer had been preceded by a lengthy time of prayer and fasting. Effective, fervent prayer requires adequate time for genuine worship, heart preparation, humble confession, and earnest petition.

Daniel seeks God's face in worship. In verse three he acknowledges God as *Adonai*, Lord and Master. He is sovereign over Israel and the experience of her captivity. And then in verse 4 Daniel addresses God as Jehovah, "*the unchanging, eternal, self-existent God,*" the "*I am that I am.*" He further states that God should be revered because He is awesome, and He is holy. Furthermore, He is patient, He is both Lord and Master, and He is faithful to His covenant promises. Daniel contrasts God's faithfulness to His covenant with Israel and their unfaithfulness to God in that covenant. And then, Daniel models for us the next step in the prayer of the penitent.

The Next STEP is,

Confess Your Sins

Daniel is one of the few biblical characters to whom no sin is ascribed, yet he includes himself with his people by saying "*we have sinned.*" Notice with me the progression in verse five. We have **sinned**, that is, we've missed the mark, we haven't kept your laws, we've committed serious crimes and offenses against you, Lord. We have **committed iniquity**, that is, we've perverted or twisted your laws, we've acted unjustly toward you.

Daniel goes on – we have **done wickedly**, that is, we've engaged in wicked conduct. This term often is contrasted with righteousness. It speaks of the consequences of sin in the community, of ruptured relationships within God's family. And finally, we have **rebelled**, that is, we've steadfastly refused to obey your commandments and have pushed aside your laws. We have broken the covenant you made with us. Even though the prophets spoke to us in Your Name and warned us, we wouldn't listen. This was a multi-generational problem; our fathers were the same way!

The writer of Second Chronicles gives us an illustration of this during the time of King Hezekiah. King Hezekiah had sent out messengers throughout the land, urging the people to come to Jerusalem and keep the Passover. Here was the response of some: “*So the runners passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, as far as Zebulun; but they laughed at them and mocked them.*” Second Chronicles 30:10. This disregard for God’s Word and for the warnings of His prophets is the beginning of all moral disorder.

In verse 7 and 8 Daniel contrasts the righteousness of God and “*the shame of face*” that belongs to Israel. What’s Daniel talking about? Remember what Adam and Eve did after they sinned? They hid themselves. Nothing about God had changed, but their sin changed their perspective of who they were and about who God was. They hid from God because they had “shame of face.” They couldn’t meet God’s holy gaze because of their sin, they had to avert their eyes in embarrassment.

Daniel is confessing that the sin of Israel brought shame to him and his fellow Jews. In contrast to their wickedness God was still righteous. Furthermore, Israel was disgraced in the eyes of their enemies because of their rebellion against their king. They were scattered across the nations of the then known world because they and their fathers had rejected God’s laws. Confusion, disillusionment, humiliation, and brokenness came to them because of their disobedience.

And yet, for all their sinning, God was still the God of mercies and forgivenesses. Interestingly, in verse 9 Daniel speaks to God in the third person. The word translated here as “mercies” is different from the word in verse 4. There, it’s a word that’s often translated as *lovingkindness*. Notice that verse 4 is in the context of God being a faithful, covenant-keeping God and is directed primarily toward those who love Him and keep His commandments. Here, in verse 9, the root of the original word relates to the compassion that a mother has for the child in her womb. The child has done nothing to merit that love; it is freely given without condition. Daniel acknowledges this love as the kind that provides forgiveness for sin.

Another interesting feature of the words, mercies and forgivenesses, is that they’re plural. This indicates God’s extended and continued exercise of these qualities. This understanding of God’s graciousness forms the basis for the remainder of Daniel’s prayer. This Old Testament picture of God’s generous offer of forgiveness reminds me of Paul’s words in Romans 5 where he writes, “*But where sin abounds, grace abounds even more.*” If God is not merciful and forgiving, then Daniel might as well stop praying; and so, should we, I might add.

After highlighting God's mercies and forgivenesses, Daniel plunges into a recital of the scope of Israel's sin in verses ten and eleven.

He says that Israel has not obeyed the voice of the Lord, they haven't walked according to His laws as proclaimed by their prophets. They rejected His instructions on how they were to live. Like he did in verse six, Daniel again stresses that this rejection of God's instructions and refusing to live by them was a pattern for the people of Israel as a whole; it wasn't just a small minority. They pushed God's instructions aside, they ignored them, so they felt no obligation to obey. And because of all this, God poured out judgment upon His people. And yet, they refused to repent. We see a similar pattern in the end of the age when people experiencing the horrors of the Great Tribulation will refuse to repent, Revelation 16:11.

The Next STEP (in the prayer of the penitent) is,

Confess God's Righteousness

The proclamation of God's righteousness is a theme Daniel stresses again and again in this prayer. He acknowledges again, that Israel as a nation has rejected the law God had set before them through the ministry of the prophets. This law was to be embraced by faith, that is, they were to believe God's requirements and His promises and act upon them. That's what genuine faith is. Merely giving mental or verbal assent to the truth without a corresponding lifestyle of obedience is simply an empty profession!

In verses twelve to fourteen Daniel lists the evils which God brought on Israel because of their sin and rebellion. Recall that in Deuteronomy chapter 28 God gave Moses a detailed list of conditions that would result in either blessing or cursing of His people. If they obeyed, God would pour out unprecedented blessings on them, across the whole spectrum of life. But God also promised that if they disobeyed, He would destroy them and scatter them across the face of the earth. And, if you read Moses' words you soon notice that much more is written about the curses than is written about the blessings.

Moses, having dealt with this rebellious people most of his adult life, penned these prophetic, heartbreaking words in Deuteronomy 28:63 just before Israel was to cross the Jordan. *"And it shall be, that just as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good and multiply you, so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you and bring you to nothing; and you shall be plucked from*

off the land which you go to possess.” So, you see, for God to be righteous, He couldn’t ignore Israel’s sin. And, He cannot and will not ignore the sin among His people today.

God, in bringing judgment on Israel, confirmed the truth of His word. His judgment on the spiritual leaders was particularly harsh. They set the example, they prophesied falsely, they led the common people into apostasy and idolatry. Jeremiah records God’s words against the false prophets; *“The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, “Stand in the gate of the LORD’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD!’ Thus, says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: “Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.” That’s Jeremiah 7:1 to 4.*

The lying words were the words of the false prophets. They were implying that no harm could come to the Temple because it was God’s dwelling place. The Jews were proud of their magnificent temple; it was part of their national identity and their security. So, when Nebuchadnezzar’s forces smashed and burned it, that was a devastating blow to the national psyche! Not only that, but the people were driven out of the land and scattered across the nations of the world. Amid all this judgment, there was no repentance, no turning to God. How tragic!

Notice what Daniel says in verse 14. *“Therefore, the LORD has kept the disaster in mind, and brought it upon us; for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works which He does, though we have not obeyed His voice.”* Some other versions say that *“the Lord watched upon the evil...”* The word suggests vigilance or readiness. It’s the same word Jeremiah used in chapter 1, verses 11 and 12 of his prophecy. *“Moreover, the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am ready [literally, watching] to perform My word.”*

Daniel could clearly see from Jeremiah’s scrolls that Jehovah was being faithful in keeping His word - both in the blessings and the cursings. Surely, that must have encouraged him as he anticipated the end of the captivity. And that understanding of God’s faithfulness leads us to the final step in the prayer of the penitent.

The Final STEP is,

Cry Out for Forgiveness and Restoration

As Daniel noted earlier in his prayer, he was addressing the God of mercies and forgivenesses. And he makes his appeal based on God's worldwide reputation that was gained when He miraculously delivered the children of Israel from Egypt. The original Passover was a dramatic illustration of God's ability to separate between the righteous and the wicked. The destruction of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea and the supernatural preservation of the nation during their years of wandering in the wilderness further enhanced God's reputation. And Daniel is now appealing to God to increase His fame by fulfilling the deliverance of His people from Babylon.

Daniel further appeals to God's righteousness. He acknowledges that God was righteous in bringing judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. He had promised that He would do that if His people wouldn't obey Him. But Daniel reminds God that it's also right that He will forgive and restore the repentant according to His promises. Listen to Deuteronomy 30:1 to 6.

“Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God drives you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you. If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you. Then the LORD your God will bring you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

Based on God's promises and His righteous character, Daniel appeals for the reproach of Jerusalem and Judah to be taken away. Yes, Daniel cares about the city and its people, but he's also concerned about how the heathen nations perceive God and His power. He seeks God's forgiveness, in verses 17, 18, and 19, based on God's righteousness.

Remember First John 1:9? *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Where is God's righteousness in that promise? God is “just” to forgive our sins for two reasons: first He is faithful, that is, faithful to His promises, and second, He is just in forgiving us because Jesus' death satisfied the legal requirements of our being made righteous.

Notice in verse 17 Daniel appeals to God to “...*cause your face to shine upon your Sanctuary that is desolate...*” Now remember, back in verse 3 Daniel “...*set his face unto the Lord God...*” I said earlier that this is another way of saying that he’s giving God his undivided attention. Now, Daniel is asking God to reciprocate, to show His divine approval by restoring Israel’s sanctuary, the Temple.

When you and I sin, our physical temple, our body, isn’t usually destroyed (although there can be physical consequences of sin). But our spiritual temple, the place where God dwells by His Spirit is defiled, and God’s glory is diminished. There is an interruption in our fellowship with the Father because sin (temporarily) clouds that relationship. If we persist in that sin, and refuse to repent, then we jeopardize our relationship with Him.

I must admit, as I meditated on these verses, I have seen repentance and confession in a new light. Yes, these actions are about cleansing your guilt and mine; Jesus’ death provided for that cleansing. And I know the spiritual and emotional release that comes to me when I am honest with God about my sin. But Daniel’s prayer suggests the primary reason for seeking forgiveness is for God’s glory to be restored in us. When we are in a right relationship with God, then those around us will see God in our lifestyle and in our responses to them – and they will glorify Him. Jesus talks quite a bit about this subject in John chapter 17.

As I observe the modern church, I see a lot of man-centeredness rather than God-centeredness. Many pastors refuse to talk about sin because it is offensive, it will drive people away. For too many, the Gospel is a 12-step program to a more fulfilling life. Daniel doesn’t make that mistake. He doesn’t focus primarily on Israel, although he clearly enumerates their sins. His primary focus is on God: God’s glory, God’s reputation among unbelievers, and God’s holy jealousy. We need a revival like Isaiah had when he had a vision of God’s glory!

We are in a time of worldwide turmoil because of the coronavirus. I don’t claim to know the mind of God or all the reasons this has happened now. But historically, God has used trials and hardship to arrest the attention of those who are going nonchalantly through life without paying much attention to Him and His Word. This is especially true for those who profess to be the people of God. I personally believe God is calling us to evaluate our relationship with Him through this difficult time.

Here in the west, we have become so enamored with the idols of our age, sports, entertainment, possessions, and pleasure. We have compromised our freedoms and safety for the

sake of cheap goods that fuel our discontent, not realizing the high cost we're actually paying. We may very well be entering a time of economic decline and a curtailment of freedoms we've long taken for granted. Yet, instead of being fearful, we should look at Daniel's prayer of penitence as a model for us to follow.

There are indications that the current difficulties are generating spiritual interest. That happened after 9-1-1 too. But in a few short weeks, people went back to the previous normal and our culture continued "slouching toward Gomorrah." Will it be different this time? Only if God's people get on their faces like Daniel did and confess their sin and seek God's glory above all else.

God judged Israel because of their idolatry, their callous attitude to the poor, and their mistaken impression that because they were the people of God, they were untouchable. We're guilty of the same things, my friend. And God in His grace is giving us an opportunity to repent, an opportunity to declare His majesty and glory to world lost in darkness.

Will we go on our merry way, or will we humble ourselves before God? Will we seek God's face, confess our sins, confess God's righteousness, and cry out for forgiveness and restoration? I urge you my friend to join me in sincerely praying the prayer of the penitent!