

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 7th November 2010

Daniel 9:1-19 – “The anatomy of prayer”

I’m sure you’ll be familiar with those words of A.A. Milne: “Hush hush whisper who dares, Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.” There is a right sense of great privilege and access as we listen to people praying. In a way you never discover the reality of someone’s faith until you have seen or heard them on their knees.

My granny wasn’t well taught as a Christian but every morning and evening she would pray out loud for half an hour or so and because she was quite deaf you could easily hear her and hearing her pray made a huge impact on me – it showed me that she truly knew the Lord and loved him.

The reality of our Christian discipleship is seen primarily in our private prayer to the Lord and so this morning we might paraphrase: “Hush, hush whisper who dares, the prophet Daniel is saying his prayers.”

This morning we can listen in to Daniel speaking to the living God. Of course we must recognise that this is a uniquely historical prayer said, not by any old believer but by a prophet and at a particular time in history and yet this prayer, like all the prayers of Scripture acts as a model for us in our praying. Imitation is a great way of learning in life in general and that is certainly true in our prayer lives.

That’s one of the great benefits of family prayers day-by-day or of saying a bedtime prayer to your children or grand-children. That’s how children born into believing homes will learn to pray. It’s one of the by-products of our weekly and monthly church prayer meeting; it’s a great opportunity to learn from one another.

A couple of years ago I read Arnold Dallimore’s superb biography of the 19th Century Baptist minister Charles Spurgeon. Dallimore comments: *“Throughout his entire ministry many hearers remarked that, moved as they were by his preaching, they were still more affected by his praying. D.L. Moody, after his first visit to England, being asked upon his return to America, “Did you hear Spurgeon preach?” replied, “Yes, but better still, I heard him pray.”*

Well in our passage this morning we have the privilege of listening in on a great saint at prayer. “Hush, hush whisper who dares, the prophet Daniel is saying his prayers.”

We’re going to look at 5 features of his prayer.

First, **the source of his prayer – it was prompted by Scripture**

V2 “...in the first year of his (that’s King Darius) 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 seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition...”

By this time Daniel was an old man – he'd have been in his 80s. He'd been living in exile in Babylon since his teens. And it may be that he can remember back to those times in Jerusalem 65 or so years previously when the prophet Jeremiah spoke God's word, warning of judgement to come and urging people to turn from their evil ways. It may be that he met him –we don't know.

But in exile he was listening to the word of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah. And it's worth saying in passing that even for Daniel who received several visions from God, the chief way in which God spoke to him was through the Bible.

He was reading through Jeremiah and he was struck by something that he read. In fact he would have read it twice. First in Jeremiah 25:11 where we read, **"This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years."** Then for a second time in chapter 29:10 which reads, **"This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place."**

Those are the verses that Daniel read all those years ago. He'd been in exile for a long time, 60 years or so but he reads Jeremiah and realises that the exile is nearly over – the end is in sight.

And notice that rather than sitting back and saying to himself, "well God is sovereign, he's going to do this so I'll just lie back and do nothing" he is spurred into action – the action of praying.

Now there is a mystery here but it is remarkable that the sovereign Lord works out his purposes and plans through the prayers of his people. Armed with the promise of God, Daniel prays.

Last week in chapter 8, and in several earlier chapters and in most of the later chapters Daniel has received visions depicting not just the history of the next 10 years but of centuries to come.

It's a central message of the whole book that God is the true king and he is in control of history – history is His Story and yet in between these visions depicting God's utter sovereignty, we see a man on his knees in private prayer to the living God.

It's a huge contrast isn't it – from those massive cosmic visions of empires coming and going over hundreds of years to one man in prayer. Yet remarkably those 2 scenes are not unrelated. God chooses to work out his purposes for the world by answering the prayers of his people. Very simply prayer works.

You may have heard of the S. American evangelist Luis Palau? It was estimated in 2007 that he had preached the gospel to over 25 million people in 70 countries. He was converted as a young boy and he was taught to pray by an older saint and together they'd meet one evening a week – there'd be a globe in front of them and they would pray around the world – places of great conflict, places where the gospel wasn't much known, they would pray. And you might think, how sad, an old man and a young boy in a room thinking they could influence the world by prayer and yet prayer works, prayer moves the hand that moves the world. In that case Luis Palau became to a certain extent, the answer to those prayers. Prayer works, so keep praying; if you're not in the habit of daily prayer, start praying – it works.

Maybe you're stuck in a rut with prayer; you really don't know what to pray - well we learn from Daniel that Scripture fuels our prayers. Try to find a time day-by-day to read God's word and then let your reading prompt your prayers – perhaps there's a truth to rejoice and delight in, turn it into a prayer of praise and adoration.

Perhaps there's a command to obey – turn it into a prayer of confession and ask God for his special help in enabling you live out that command.

Maybe there's a promise as Daniel saw in Jeremiah, well claim it. As one commentator puts it, Daniel behaves like a man with a cheque from heaven determined to cash it. The Puritans used to speak about suing God for his promises, "Lord you've said x, so please do x." Daniel's prayer was prompted by God's word.

Secondly we see, **the externals that helped his prayer**

V3 **"So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, (here are the externals) in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes."**

Evangelicals today are very clear that it's our heart that matters when it comes to prayer and praise rather than the externals – be it the quality or style of the language we use or our bodily posture – quite rightly we say that they don't matter too much.

We're aware how they can lead to pride. So you may remember the story of the two rabbis in the Temple. One stood in a corner and began to beat his breast and say: "I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing". So the other rabbi stood beside him and began to pray similarly, "I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing". Whereupon the low-caste Temple sweeper caught the idea and he stood beside them, and began to pray, saying: "I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing". At which the first rabbi said to the second, "Who does he think he is, saying he's nothing, like us?"

So we're aware of the danger of externals and yet, scared by the danger of falling into ritualism or asceticism, we've possibly gone too far the other way. About the only time we mention the externals are when we're praying with children perhaps at an All Age Service or an assembly and we say, "Right children we're going to pray – perhaps you'd like to put your hands together and close your eyes." We don't say that because if they do that their prayers will be more special or anything but simply because it may help them to concentrate.

Similarly the fact that Daniel fasted and put on sackcloth and ashes didn't make his prayers any more important or special or likely to be answered. They simply helped Daniel to remember who he was and who he was speaking to.

We don't have to close our eyes when we pray – in fact if, like me, you often pray when you're driving, I'd urge you not to close your eyes! If you go for a prayer walk in the countryside let the beauty of creation fuel your prayers.

But alone in our sitting room or study or in the bath, it's likely to help us to help us to concentrate if we close our eyes – in the same way that turning off the radio or TV will help us concentrate. Similarly it's fine to pray standing up, sitting down, lying down – it doesn't matter. But bodily position may help you as it did Daniel to remember who you are and who you are praying too.

I remember 2 of my spiritual heroes speaking about this; Jonathan Fletcher saying how every now and then in his private prayer times he kneels to pray and Mark Ashton mentioned once how he used to occasionally lie face down on the ground in his quiet times – it just helped them to have the right attitude of heart and to remember the nature of the Person to whom they were speaking and the contrast with their own.

So we shouldn't make too much of the externals of prayer but neither should we totally ignore them; in the Bible they're not irrelevant. They helped Daniel and understood rightly they will help us too so that's something for us to think about.

Thirdly we see very briefly that **Daniel's prayer engages with and is founded upon God's character**

So often I rush into prayer with my shopping list. Lord, help me with this that and the other. Lord do this for me, do that for me. It's great that we can bring all our concerns and needs before God in prayer but it's striking that Daniel's prayer is founded on God's character.

V4 "I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: 'O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands.'

All real biblical prayer starts with who God is – his covenant faithfulness, his love, his power, his holiness and majesty. There's a wonderful model in this prayer of just spending prayer time delighting in God and praising him for who he is and what he's done.

We see two characteristics in particular as we continue through the prayer. V7 "**Lord, you are righteous...**" God's righteousness and then v9 "**The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving even though we have rebelled against him.**" God's righteousness and his mercy are the basis on which Daniel prays this prayer of confession. It's the certainty of God's mercy that gives us joy and confidence in the Christian life but if we don't think we need mercy, we'll never be thankful. If, unlike Daniel we haven't grasped God's righteousness then we'll never be those who see the grotesque nature of our sin and come to him in heartfelt confession.

That brings us to the fourth feature of Daniel's prayer and that is that **real prayer appeals to God's mercy**

The vast majority of this prayer is an extended confession. Throughout it, Daniel recognises the righteousness of God's judgement – he acknowledges that they're in exile because of their sin.

God had rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt, he had given them a good land to enjoy and he'd given them his law so that they would be holy as he was holy. Amongst other things that law warned as we read in our first reading from Deuteronomy that if they disobeyed God's law then judgement must come and in the end they'd be evicted from the land and that's exactly what happened. So in the prayer Daniel moves back and forth from the perfect character of God which we've already seen to the wickedness of God's people.

V5: "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 fathers and to all the people of the land."

And so it continues - so we read v11: **“All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. Therefore the curses and sworn judgements written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you.”**

You might think that of all people Daniel might have distanced himself from the others and pointed the finger at them – he was only a boy at the time of the exile, he’d been faithful throughout the exile and yet he never evades responsibility. He never says, “Lord your people have sinned” he says, “we have sinned” and if we’re wise, we’ll recognise the same truth.

We approach God, not boasting of all the things we have done but pleading to him for mercy.

I remember talking to a close family member a few years back – I’d lent her a few sermons to listen to and we were talking about the Christian faith and she said, “I don’t like all this talk about sin. I don’t want to go to church and hear about how I’m a sinner.” I tried to explain that actually Christianity was a very positive message about salvation from sin but she just didn’t like the thought that she was a sinner. And she showed herself at that time anyway to be far from the kingdom of God.

If we want to receive blessing we must acknowledge facts. Until we acknowledge our sin we’ll never even start as Christians. Maybe you’re a new Christian and you feel you’ve got worse – well that’s the way God works – he lovingly shows us our sin – to truly see it so that we admit it and turn from it.

The appeal is not on the basis of our goodness but on the basis of God’s grace. So Daniel doesn’t say: “Please bless me because I’ve been so faithful to you. Don’t you remember Lord how when I was still a lad in TNG I drew the line and took my stand and I refused to eat Nebuchadnezzar’s food and wine. It’s all there in my book Lord – chapter 1 – that was a serious risk I took for you Lord.

And you must remember chapter 6, Lord, how I refused to pray to anyone except to you when King Darius insisted that only he should be prayed to. I carried on praying to you 3 times a day and I ended up in the lion’s den – so please Lord, bless me because I’ve been so faithful to you.”

Not a hint of that is there. He pleads on the basis of God’s mercy. V9 **“The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving.”** V18 **“We do not make requests of you because we are righteous but because of your great mercy.”** Real prayer appeals to God’s mercy.

Fifthly and finally, we see **Daniel’s concern for God’s reputation**. That above all was what drove him to pray for an end to the exile. Not the miseries of being away from home, not the miseries of being a subject people – there’s nothing in this prayer about the suffering of the Jews. The focus rather is on the glory of God.

V17 **“Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favour on your desolate sanctuary.”** V19 **“O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”**

God’s name was bound up with the city of Jerusalem and with his people. Daniel’s chief concern was for God’s name and that’s the challenge for us. In all our activities at work, at church, in the village, in our family are we seeking to do it for our name or for the Lord’s name sake. As we consider our

aspirations for our children or grandchildren do we long that they establish a name for themselves or that their chief concern be for the honour of God's name?

Think of the state of God's name in the world – some countries where very few people bow the knee before the true and living God, those that do are laughed at and derided. Well we need to pray: "Lord please may more people worship Jesus as Lord and God, for your name's sake."

Or think of God's reputation in our own lives, in our congregation, in our denomination – it should drive us to prayer. "Lord, revive us spiritually – give us a hunger and thirst for your kingdom and your glory. May this denomination submit to the teaching of your word. For your name's sake, do this Lord!"

So we've had this model of prayer from the prophet Daniel; we've seen how his praying was prompted by the reading of Scripture, it was helped by those externals like fasting, it engaged with God's character, it appealed to God's mercy and it was concerned for God's glory.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)