

Surprised by God's Answer

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

A couple of weeks ago I had quite a learning experience. For some time I had found myself struggling emotionally towards the end of the week. For me, my stress level increases as I get closer to Sunday, and there are times when the pressure feels pretty overwhelming. So I finally decided I needed to share this with our elders. I went to an elders meeting on a Tuesday night and told them how I was feeling and I really just asked them to pray for me, especially Thursday through Sunday. Of course, it felt good to get this off my chest, but I wasn't prepared for what happened later that week. On Thursday I felt great. On Friday, when I always write my sermon, I felt unbelievable freedom and I was done in far less time than usual. Saturday I think I even forgot I was preaching the next day. Now this may not seem like a big deal to you, but it was a very big deal to me. In the middle of this, I distinctly remember thinking to myself, "I can't believe it, prayer really does work!" On Sunday I even said to some of the elders, "You guys won't believe it, your prayers really made a difference!"

You might think I would have already known that prayer works, but I'm a slow learner. I wonder if Daniel was a slow learner. We have seen that Daniel was a man of prayer. In chapter six we saw he prayed three times a day. He was seasoned in prayer, but I wonder if he was ever surprised by the answers he received.

In chapter 9 we see Daniel at prayer once again. Unlike chapter 6, we actually get to listen in as he prays. But best of all, we get to see God answer Daniel's prayer in a way that he never could have imagined.

I. DANIEL'S PRAYER

A. Prompted by the Books: It all started after a great turnover of kingdoms. The Medo-Persian empire had just crushed the Babylonians. Daniel found himself serving a new king named Darius. This must have raised certain questions in Daniel's mind. What will this shift in power mean for God's people? Will we remain displaced from our homeland forever? Will this changing of the guard bode well for us, or will it just be more of the same? These questions caused Daniel to dig into the Scripture. Look at vv. 1-3,

"In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans - in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet for the

completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes."

Even at this point in Israel's history there were the books; a collection of writings they considered God's word. Of course, the NT wasn't written yet, but they had much of what we call the OT. Daniel begins to dig through the books. He's looking for something that will speak into their situation. I find that surprising. Daniel was a prophet. He had visions and dreams in which God revealed things to him about the future. Why does he need the Scripture? Why waste time pouring over the books? He could just go straight to God and ask for another vision. But that's not the way it worked. Even as a prophet, he didn't have a direct pipeline into the mind of God. And so he begins to search the Scripture. He picks up the writings of the prophet Jeremiah. All of a sudden, he's reading about things that he had been wondering about. He reads Jeremiah 25:11 where the prophet had said regarding Israel, **"This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years."** His interest is perked and he reads on. He comes to Jeremiah 29:10, **"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.'"**

Daniel begins to count on his fingers. It was 539 BC when he read this. He counts backward seventy years and that takes him to 609 BC. Daniel himself had been deported from Israel to Babylon in 605 BC. In the next few years, thousands more were exiled as well. Wherever you begin counting, one thing was clear. According to God's word the time of the exile was just about over. Now, if I were Daniel, I'd be getting very excited. I'd begin packing my bags. I'd turn in my letter of resignation. But he doesn't do that. Instead he turns to the Lord and he begins to seek God's face in prayer. He fasts and he puts on sackcloth and ashes as a symbol of sorrow and grief.

Before we look at the what he was so concerned about, let me make one important observation. It was God's word, the Scripture, that prompted and informed Daniel's prayer. People of prayer must also be people of the book. God speaks to us through the book and we speak back to him through prayer. As we speak back to him, we do so with his word shaping and forming what we

say and what we ask for. This whole prayer is saturated with Scripture.

James Gilmour was a pioneer missionary to Mongolia. On December 29, 1890, a short time before he died, he wrote a letter to a friend in which he said, "When I feel I cannot make headway in prayer, I open the Psalms and push out my canoe and let myself be carried along on the stream of devotion that flows through the whole book. The current always sets toward God and in most places is strong and deep."

We all go through times where we struggle to turn on our spiritual ignition. We can't get going in prayer. We feel passionless. We don't know what to say. At times like that, we need to learn to open the book and push out our spiritual canoe and let ourselves be carried along on the strong and deep current of devotion that flows through God's word. Use the Psalms. Use the Lord's Prayer. Use the prayers of Paul.

B. Centered on confession: Now for Daniel, the thing that drove him to prayer was God's promise to his exiled people. It was almost as if Daniel was concerned that his people were not ready to receive God's promise.

I think of a little boy sent to his room by his mother for a ten minute time-out after misbehaving. He has a little clock on the wall and he begins to watch the seconds tick away. It seems like an eternity, but finally the time of his ten minute exile is almost over. He knows he is about to be released, but he also knows that if he is to enjoy his freedom he needs a serious attitude adjustment. He realizes that he offended his mother. He decides to begin his reentry into the world with an apology.

At the core of Daniel's prayer is an apology to God. It is a prayer of confession. Look at vv. 4-10,

"And I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed and said, 'Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Thy servants the prophets, who spoke in Thy name to our kings, our princes, our fathers, and all the people of the land. Righteousness belongs to Thee, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day - to the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near by and those who are far away in all the countries to which Thou hast driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against Thee. Open shame belongs to us, O Lord, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against Thee. To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him; nor have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our

God, to walk in His teachings which He set before us through His servant the prophets.'"

Daniel's confession begins with a recognition of who God is. He is the "great and awesome God who keeps his covenant and loving kindness for those who love him and keep his commandments." Confession takes place in the context of a relationship with a God who loves his covenant people.

Early in 1993 the British police accused two ten-year-old boys of the brutal murder of two-year-old James Bulger. The two boys pleaded innocence, but as the police questioned them it was very clear that their answers were inconsistent and contradictory. The climax came when the parents of one of the boys assured him that no matter what they would always love him. With the assurance of his parent's love, one of the young boys confessed in a soft voice, "I killed James."

True confession grows in the soil of God's covenant love. Confession is not a way of buying off God. It's not about beating ourselves up until God finally says, "Okay, you're sufficiently humble, and now I can start being nice to you." Confession is possible because he loves us. Confession is motivated by the recognition of his undying loyalty and a desire to enjoy our freedom in fellowship with him.

It's in the context of this love that we can be totally open with God. Daniel's confession involves a brutally honest assessment of sin. He uses three or four different words to describe it. He says they've stubbornly refused to listen to God. The idea here is that they knew better, just as we know better. Our problem is not that we don't know what to do, it's that we do know what to do and choose not to do it. He sees this sin as a very personal affront to God. He says "we have sinned against you." He feels bad not because of personal failure to measure up to some standard but because they betrayed their God. As a result, Daniel says twice that their sin has brought "open shame" on them. You can see in this prayer that Daniel is being totally open with God. C.S. Lewis wrote, "We must lay before God what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Daniel's confession is that he includes himself as one of the rebels. He says "**we** have sinned...**we** have not listened...open shame belongs to **us**..." Daniel is one of those guys in the Bible that bothers me a little bit because he seems so perfect. Have you noticed that? He never screws up. With Abraham there was the lying problem. With Moses there was the bad temper. With David there was the adultery thing. I can relate to those guys, but Daniel seems to put the bar too high. Yet Daniel was a sinner just like you and me. And Daniel had a deep sense that he was connected to his people in such a way that he shared in their sin. G.K. Chesterton was a great English philosopher and writer. He read a series of newspaper articles entitled, "What's wrong with the world?" In response, he sent a short letter to the editor: "Dear Sir," he wrote, "Regarding your article 'What's wrong with the world?' I am. Yours truly, G.K. Chesterton.

Many of us have been praying for our country these days, and rightly so. We have a sense that something's wrong. Let me ask you - when you pray for our country, do you say "we," or do you say "they?" Do you say, "God have mercy on this nation, there are so many sinners out there that deserve judgment" or do you say, "God have mercy on us, we have sinned against you?" I'm not talking about just changing our words, I'm talking about changing our perspective. Whatever the sin of our nation is, we share in it. Whatever the sin of our church is, we share in it. Whatever the sin of the Peninsula is, we share in it. To be part of the human race is to be infected with a disease that is common to all and without God's mercy we all are serious trouble.

C. Plea for forgiveness and restoration: Daniel goes on and pleads for God's forgiveness and restoration,

"And now, O Lord our God, who hast brought Thy people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and hast made a name for Thyself, as it is this day - we have sinned, we have been wicked. O Lord, in accordance with all Thy righteous acts, let now Thine anger and Thy wrath turn away from Thy city Jerusalem, Thy holy mountain; for because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Thy people have become a reproach to all those around us. So now, our God, listen to the prayer of Thy servant and to his supplications, and for Thy sake, O Lord, let Thy face shine on Thy desolate sanctuary. O my God, incline Thine ear and hear! Open Thine eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by Thy name; for we are not presenting our supplications before Thee on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Thy great compassion. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Thine own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name."

Daniel was concerned that God's people weren't responding the way they should. Despite the exile, he saw a lot of apathy. I think he was concerned that God's promises would be nullified. And so, Daniel finds another ground for God to forgive and restore his people. He asks NOT on the basis of their faithful response to the discipline, but on the basis of God's commitment to his own name. Over and over he says it: "you have made a name for yourself...listen to our prayer, for your sake, O Lord...see our desolations and the city which is called by your name..." This touches a sensitive spot with God. God loves his name. God cares about his reputation. If God can't restore his people based on their faithful response, he can do it based on his jealousy for his name. It's this that makes Daniel bold. It almost seems like he's ordering God around: "O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For your own sake, O my God, do not delay."

This may seem a little strange to us. When we talk about someone being jealous for their name or concerned for their reputation we usually think of it as a weakness. And it's true, human concern for our own reputation usually does spring from insecurity and vanity. Yet God is never insecure or vain. John White has a helpful illustration about this from his book, *Daring To Draw Near*. He says, imagine you are in charge of a colony of ants. Imagine you have the power to raise ants from their lowly condition to a higher form of life. Imagine you loved those little wretches and you needed their trust if you were to give them a better form of existence. Under those circumstances, you might be very anxious to make them aware of your power and love. For their own sakes, you would be jealous about your reputation among them. The depth of your jealousy for your name would be the measure of your love for those ants. It would be a noble jealousy arising not from your own insecurity but from your own desire for their well being. You see, our God cares about his name because he loves people, and when people learn to trust in his name, they become people who actually begin to reflect his character.

Have you learned to appeal to God not on the basis of anything in you but on the basis of God's love for his name? Do you know where this has helped me? It's helped me pray for my kids. We all want our kids to walk with God. But our kids walk around every day in a minefield. To make matters worse, our kids like the minefield because they inherited this disease from us called sin. I can't always pray for my kids based on what's going on in their hearts, but I believe God loves them and I believe he loves his own name. And so I pray, "Lord, for your name's sake, make my kids to walk with you and enhance your reputation."

D. Greater understanding: That would seem to be the end of Daniel's prayer, but while Daniel is still praying he gets a surprising answer. He is visited once again by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel says he has been sent by God to respond to Daniel's prayer and give him more insight into what is going to happen to his people. It's interesting how prayer can so often lead us into greater insight of what he is doing. Someone has said, "The Christian on his knees sees more than the philosopher on his tip toes." That's what was happening here with Daniel. He started out concerned about the seventy years and he ends up getting insight into much more. Look at what the angel says in vv. 24-27,

"Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place. So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the

sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war, desolations are determined. And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate.”

These are some of the most difficult verses in all the Bible to understand. Once again, we must let the plain thing be the main thing. What is plain in these verses? One of the things that's plain is that God is giving Daniel insight into much more than just seventy years; he's giving him insight into a much longer period of time - 70 weeks of years. Literally that's 70 sevens or 490 years. I think we need to be careful not to take that too literally. Remember when Peter asked Jesus, "How many times can my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but 70 X 7." Jesus wasn't saying that we should forgive 490 times and that's it; he was using that number figuratively. The number seven is symbolic of completeness. The angel is giving Daniel a vision into a long period of time that approximated 500 years.

Another thing that's plain is that somehow during these 70 weeks God would deal decisively with the sin problem that Daniel had been praying about. Remember, the foremost thing of his mind was how God would restore his people in their sin. And what the angel tells Daniel had to do with how God would finally deal with the sin of his people. Verse 24 lists six things that the 70 weeks will accomplish: 1) to finish the transgression 2) to make an end of sin 3) to atone for iniquity 4) to bring in everlasting righteousness 5) to seal up the vision 6) to anoint the most holy place. Whatever is going on here, it's very good news! This is way more than Daniel even asked for! Sin will be done away with and righteousness will replace it forever and ever.

The last thing that's plain is that somehow these 70 weeks will be divided up into three periods. First, there are seven weeks of years, then there are 62 weeks of years, and finally there is one week of years. The first two periods go from the decree to rebuild the Temple and the coming of the Messiah. Indeed, Jesus Christ came approximately 500 years after the decree to rebuild the Temple. The angel says the end of this time will be very difficult - the Messiah will be cut off and the city of Jerusalem will be destroyed. This is speaking of the crucifixion and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The final week will see an evil prince, the Antichrist, making a treaty with many and then breaking

it and putting a stop to the sacrifices and bringing a desolating abomination into the God's house. Some believe this all happened back in the first century. Others believe that there is a large gap in time between the 69th and 70th week and the 70th week may not have even begun yet. The good news is that, finally, at the end of that last week, this ruler will be destroyed.

Now this may all seem very confusing, but the important thing is that Daniel got an answer to his prayer; an answer that was far better than he ever could have expected. God would do much more than just restore his people to the land, he would put an end to sin and bring in everlasting righteousness through the Messiah, whom we know as God's Son. This, by the way, is Christmas in the OT. The angel told Joseph that Mary "**will bear a Son, and you shall name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins**" (Matthew 1:21). The sending of God's Son was the ultimate answer to all of our prayers.

CONCLUSION

Someone once overheard Martin Luther praying. He said, "I overheard him in prayer, but good God, with what life and spirit did he pray! It was with so much reverence, as if he were speaking to God, yet with so much confidence, as if he were speaking to a friend."

That's how Daniel prayed, and that's how we can pray. Come to him in reverence, confessing your sin and pleading for mercy. But come to him confidently, as a friend, because all the obstacles have been removed. In v. 23 the angel tells Daniel he is "highly esteemed" or "greatly beloved." This is why God was giving him more than he even asked for. This is true of all of us who put our trust in him. We are highly esteemed. We are greatly beloved. Because of Jesus, our sin no longer stands between us and God. We can come to him just as we are, and he will give us more than we ask for.