

A Prayer for Mercy

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[0 : 00] Good evening. Good evening. It is warm, so maybe give yourself a little slap to make sure you're really on the ball. You might want to have your Bibles open so you can follow along or have something to read to stop you falling asleep, one or the other. And that's on page 726, Daniel chapter 9. And I have to warn you that I'm about to ask a question that has a dangerous cliché to follow. So what do we learn from this passage? Here it is, read your Bible, pray, and go to church. We hear it a lot, don't we? I mean, that's why it's a cliché in our Bible study groups or in sermons. What's the application to this passage? Read your Bible, pray, go to church, or more of the above. But why is it still so difficult? Why do we start a Bible reading program on New Year's Day every year and then by November we're only up to Exodus? Why do we go down to Courant Christian Bookshop every time there's a sale and buy up big on devotional and prayer books and then have them sit on the shelf or our bedside table gathering a nice layer of dust as the months go by? Why do we say, I'll pray for you? And the next time we see them we go, whoops. Why does it seem like it's all right that we can pray for other people or we can pray for our own shopping list but we can't spend time in our own prayers really developing our relationship with God, just spending time with him for his own sake? And why is it so hard to drag ourselves away from work or off the couch or away from family gatherings on a Sunday to get to church?

Now, don't think that I'm pointing the finger, I get paid to come to church, but the other two I find as difficult as the next girl. And yet as I've come to study this passage in Daniel, I think I've found some clues for us that will help our attitude and our actions when it comes particularly to Bible reading and prayer, but also a little bit for church as well. And as we go through, I want you to see whether you can recognise antidotes to some of your own spiritual issues or disease, if you like, in what Daniel does. Now, I'm not going to spell out each one of them, but I think if we begin with a prayer saying, God, show me if this is an area where I need to ask for your help to change, then we'll see those antidotes for us as we go through. So let's pray as we begin.

Lord our God, it is a cliché that we need to read the Bible and pray and go to church more. And yet, we don't seem to be able to do it as much as we want to. There are so few of us who are happy each week with our consistency in these things, or we haven't even begun. We pray, Lord, that tonight you might reveal to us new attitudes, new ways of reading your word and praying that Daniel can teach us. And we ask that you'll apply these to our lives by your Holy Spirit's power. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, as we begin, let's make sure that we don't think that this guy Daniel was good at this stuff, Bible reading and praying and going to church, because he had an easy life or he had a life without distractions, unlike us. I used to think, I used to look at famous people or models and I used to think, well, you know, they're just given all their clothes and they're just born that way.

But actually, they do, you know, they don't have all the distractions that I have, but they do. And they have to spend a lot of money on how they look and all of that kind of thing. And so we look, we can't look at Daniel and think, oh, he's just got it easy. He's in a situation that really helped him.

[4 : 42] What was his situation? He was a prisoner in a golden cage. He'd been taken into exile from Jerusalem.

We're talking 600 BC. And he was now working in a public service job in Babylon under the king. It was a good job. He was treated reasonably well for a captive most of the time. When he was first captured, he served under a Babylonian king called Nebuchadnezzar. But Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son, Belshazzar, who turned out to be a very arrogant young man. And he really reveled in his power and he loved to mock the exiles, the Jewish people. And we have this story about him in Daniel chapter six, where he's having this drunken party and he decides to get the sacred cups that had been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem when Babylon invaded and to drink

their cocktails out of them and to have all his girlfriends drink their cocktails out of them as well. He was an arrogant mocking man. And so we read in Daniel chapter six that God judges Belshazzar and he uses Daniel to deliver that message. So it was a very turbulent time for Daniel. He was very involved in this message of judgment in the ups and downs of the political life. His own favor was going up and down as the different kings came in and out. On the same night that he interpreted this writing on the wall, for Belshazzar, he was promoted to third in the kingdom and then the king was killed.

It's got to be a distracting time. Furthermore, as we saw last week and the week before, Daniel kept getting these weird visions of animals and strange beasts and things. And they were so disturbing that they physically knocked him out. You know, he was emotionally and physically exhausted and ill for some days after having these visions. This was not an easy time for him. He was watching the power changes in the Near East before they happened. He was encountering angels and we'll hear more about that next week. And now, of course, what had been predicted to him has started to come true.

[7 : 15] The nations of Media and Persia had risen to dominance while the Babylonians had parted. King Cyrus the Persian had become the ultimate ruler, but Darius the Mede, the guy that we hear about in the first verse of this chapter, he rules over the region of Babylon, which is also called the realm of the realm of the Chaldeans. Same diff. So when our chapter begins, this is what Daniel's living in. It's a turbulent, stressful time. It's the first year of the reign of this new king, Darius the Mede. There's lots of work to be done for Daniel. We learn later that he actually gets promoted and promoted and promoted under Darius. And there's lots of changes taking place.

But for Daniel, despite the distractions, despite the hard work, despite the uncertainties, the word of God continues to be central in his life, the scriptures as he had them. Let's have a look at verse two. In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books or the scriptures the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely 70 years. Now I remind you that Daniel's not a young man anymore. And he's been a strict, observant Jew for decades. He's been powerfully used by God. And we could imagine that at this stage of his life, he thought, I know pretty much all there is to know about the scriptures. I mean, he didn't even have the New Testament.

He didn't have his own book, Daniel. He had far less than what we have to get through. He probably had read it all. But we don't see here a man who believes himself to be beyond the need to get into the scriptures every day, even if he had read them before. He's not a man who doesn't expect to learn anything new. He does. He comes with a great air of expectation. He's not saying, yeah, I know the message. I used to get great sermons at synagogue. Plus me and God are like that.

So pretty much, you know, I can just go on without reading the scriptures. He knows that no matter how spiritually he is, how mature in faith, how much he thinks he knows the message, he's always got to keep digging into the word of God. It's his lifeblood. It's a living authoritative word.

And I wonder if you notice from a historical theological point of view, this verse two is actually quite fascinating. We've got a man whose book is recorded in the Old Testament saying that he's reading as scripture, another book in the Old Testament. And this book, Jeremiah's prophecies would have only been written down, you know, we're talking decades before. It's not, this is not kind of really old news. But for Daniel, he knows that it is the word of God and he treats it like the word of God. And he wants to read it and study it. It's not just, you know, the expression, the word of the Lord for him is not just a religious saying. He means it. He expects God to speak to him through the prophet Jeremiah. And, uh, and he does. He does. It says in the scrolls of Jeremiah, he reads that the number of years that must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem were to be 70. Now, remember Daniel's situation. He's in exile and he is far away from his homeland, but he knows what has happened to it. The temple has been destroyed. The land has been devastated. The people are either dead or in captivity, desolated. But we don't know exactly what Daniel would have made of this prophecy that he read in Jeremiah. In terms of symbolism, as we'll see next week in the second half of the chapter, there's a lot to suggest that this number 70 that Jeremiah predicted was not necessarily literal, but a number to, to symbolize both the completeness of time that was fully in God's control. Seven being the perfect number, the days of the week, the time when God rested on the Sabbath,

[11 : 59] Sabbath day, uh, that it would be a time that God knew exactly how long it was going to be and it would be fully completed, but also that it was an enforced Sabbath rest for the land. That's

how the writer to the, uh, of the book of Chronicles sees it that the people in Jerusalem or in Israel hadn't been letting their land rest in a, in their Sabbath years. And so God has, because of their rebellion, they weren't doing that. And as part of the response to their rebellion, God gives the land a Sabbath rest.

However, I think Daniel may well have been wondering whether this number was literal, whether he's talking, okay, 70 years because he's living in that ballpark time. Now don't do another history lesson, but from what we can tell, Jeremiah may have started writing his prophecies around 609 BC.

And that is almost exactly 70 years before Daniel was reading them in the first year of Darius the Mede. However, in terms of the exile itself, there doesn't seem to be an incursion into Jerusalem, an invasion into Jerusalem until 605. And then the temple wasn't destroyed until 586, something like 20 years later. So if you were going from the temple being destroyed as the start, then you've only got 45 years or something between, uh, that and when Daniel is reading it. But if he thought, now I know when Jeremiah, Jeremiah was ministering, I know when he was a prophet, he would have begun to do the maths and thought, hmm, could be the time I could be living around the time. And he'd come to the scriptures searching for a message from God into his situation. And he finds this could be the time.

But even more than the numbers, there's a particular part of Jeremiah's prophecy that I'll read to you that I think, uh, makes Daniel's interest even more pertinent. Jeremiah 25, 11 to 12.

[14:17] This whole land, writes Jeremiah, shall become a ruin and a waste. And these nations shall serve the king of Babylon 70 years. Then after 70 years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

If this is the first year of Darius, the Mede, then Babylon has just fallen as the ruling power as Jeremiah predicted.

So whether the 70 years is symbolic, this completeness or Sabbath, or whether it's literal, calculated from some point, we don't exactly know, Daniel is sure that the possibility of return from exile is just around the corner.

Belshazzar is dead. The Babylonian kingdom has fallen. The Medes and the Persians are on the rise. But even though he kind of gets the vague message here, we just see such an excellent model in what he does next.

Verse 3. Then I turn to the Lord God to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. For Daniel, reading God's word and praying to God to seek its meaning go hand in hand.

[15:55] God's spoken to him through the prophets and now he speaks to God in response. It's just natural for him. And so it is to be with us.

The Bible is a living word and our God is a living God. And he wants to help us to understand it and to respond to it in relationship with him.

God didn't intend the Bible to be this kind of intellectual study book that we marvel over or comment on or debate in a really good argument that gets the blood pumping.

Those things might be necessary. But God gave it as a relational message to make us into disciples of Jesus Christ.

And even when we're really, really into the Bible and we love how stimulating it is, we must never read it without being connected to our Heavenly Father in prayerful communication.

[17:04] Lord, what does this mean? Tell me more. Apply it to my life, Lord. Give me strength to do it. When we pray as we read, we can expect the spirit to open our eyes to scripture's meaning and to open our wills to obedience.

We can expect that. Do expect it. And approaching it from the other direction, if our prayers are feeling a bit lackluster or we really haven't got anything more than just the shopping list, you know, please be with so-and-so and please heal what's-his-name and please save Joe Bloggs.

And the Bible is the place that God wants us to pray in new and more relational ways. Now, let's just stop for a moment.

It's hot. It's sleepy. I want you to just reflect on your own practice of reading the Bible or your own prayer life in the last week.

However big, however small. Just have a think. What did you do in your own time? Did you go to a small group where you prayed with others?

[18:22] Did you pray with someone else in a pair or a triplet? At your house, did you open the Bible? How often did you open the Bible last week?

Did you, when you opened it, read a verse or a chapter or more? Do you remember what you read? Did anything particularly stand out to you when you were reading?

Do you remember being prompted to pray by what you were reading? Did you learn anything from your reading about God's character or his plans for the world or your sin that made you pray in a way that went beyond the shopping list?

Now, I will be honest with you. There are weeks where it is the shopping list and preparation for Bible studies and sermons for me, and that's it.

Last week wasn't one of them. I am just so thrilled to say. Just, you know, it was a really good week. But even on a really good week for me, I still didn't find it easy to open and read the Bible every day.

[19:37] And I think we need to be honest with each other about that. Because if we're just going around pretending that we're all able, we're never going to be able to help each other, to get past whatever block it is in our life that's stopping us from reading the Bible or praying or going to church.

If we're not honest and we can't work through it, we actually end up starving ourselves in our relationship with God.

We starve ourselves of strength to live the life that God calls us to. And we starve ourselves of power to live a holy and satisfying life with God.

Rico Tice tells a story of a man who had two dogs, one black dog and one white dog. And he used to take them out to fights, to, like, show fights every week where people would bet on which dog would win.

And there didn't seem to be any discernible pattern at all about which dog would win. You know, it wasn't like, oh, we know the black one's always the stronger one. One week was the black one, one week was the white one. There's no pattern. But the guy who owned the dogs always bet on the right one.

[20:58] And eventually people worked this out. And eventually someone asked him, how? How do you always bet on the right dog?

And he said, well, it's easy. At the start of each week, I choose to starve one of the dogs. And I know the other dog's going to win. Can you see the parallel for us?

Sometimes we think, if my faith is struggling or, you know, I'm really not feeling the God thing or, you know, I've got all these doubts. It's not really for any discernible reason.

No discernible pattern I can see in my life. I don't know why. Maybe God isn't as good or isn't as real as I thought he was. Maybe that sin that God told me I shouldn't do, actually he was lying.

And that would be really good and fun and, you know, life-giving and important. But a lot of the time, a lot of the time, it's because we have been starving ourselves.

[21:59] We've been starving ourselves of the Bible, of the Word of God. We've been starving ourselves of prayer and our relationship with God. And perhaps we have been starving it because we've had some of these attitudes or actions that Daniel might be providing antidotes to.

And I encourage you just to reflect on this more after you go home tonight and the air conditioning's on. But we've got to be honest about it. Reflect on it and be honest about it.

But there's more to come that will help us with our prayers. If you need to stop and give yourself a slap, do that. Let's look at the content of what Daniel actually prayed.

First of all, have a look with me in your Bibles. First of all, we're looking at verse 4. I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession. So we see it's going to be a confession prayer.

And this is actually quite a surprise, isn't it? Because we might have expected a prayer of thanksgiving. A celebration prayer. That the time of the exile is nearly over. But instead, Daniel knows that the exile was caused by people's sin.

[23:16] It is a punishment from God on their rebellion. And so if there's going to be a return, it's only because there will be repentance.

Every prophet called the people to turn back to the Lord in humble, obedient relationship before, during, after the exile. And yet the people kept believing that they were safe because they had the trappings of being the people of God, of being God's chosen ones.

We might say of being churchgoers, being baptized. But they didn't turn back. They thought they were safe. But they were disobedient.

They didn't listen. But Daniel listened. And he knows that if the exile is to end, there has to be repentance.

And he longs for the exile to end because he longs to be with his people again, back in the place where God dwells. This is your little bit about going to church. Daniel loves the people of God.

[24 : 27] He loves his brothers and sisters who are called by God's name. He loves to be in God's presence. He longs to be in the temple.

And so he desperately wants the exile to end. And he knows that the people need to repent. God's in control of it.

He said it's going to end. But Daniel knows that doesn't negate his need, his responsibility to both pray for it to happen, like we pray your kingdom come, and also to confess and repent.

To turn back to God. But even as Daniel starts his confession, it's so amazing to see that he doesn't begin with his kind of eyes on himself, this internal, internal, navel-gazing kind of woe is me.

He begins with the character of God. Have a look at what he says. He says, Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments.

[25 : 34] That is the first thing out of his mouth. It's such a wonderful way to begin a prayer and to begin a prayer of confession. Because it gives yourself, your own soul, confidence in the biblical character of God.

And there is no fear then in coming to confess your sins to this God. Because you know that he's not fickle. He's not unpredictable.

He doesn't break his covenant. He is loving to those who want to be in right relationship with him. And we actually see, we won't read it all, but Daniel does it throughout the prayer.

Saying who God is, reminding his own soul. Righteousness is on your side, he says in verse 7. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness.

In verse 9. And then you see, more than just giving confidence to come before God in prayer.

Meditating on God's faithful and awesome character then shows up human sinfulness all the more.

[26 : 42] Making Daniel's confession more heartfelt, more genuine. Making our confession more heartfelt, more genuine. And it drives us to God.

Because we know that because of God's grace in Jesus Christ, he is the only one who can do anything about our sin. Then Daniel goes on.

Verses 5 and 6. We have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. 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. There's a temptation for us, and especially if you're used to kind of liturgical church services, or kind of patterns of prayer that you might do every day, there's a temptation when we come to God in confession to be a bit vague or summarised.

Lord, sorry for all my sins. Please forgive me. Amen. We don't often take the time to sit with God and delineate and recognise all the areas in which we've sinned against him.

[28 : 04] And yet Daniel points us to the importance of doing that throughout this prayer. Now, he doesn't go into every single detail here, because he's praying for the whole nation.

But he uses many, if you were reading the original language, but you can still see it in the English, he uses many different words that have different meanings to describe all the ways in which the people have sinned.

If you went through it, you see sin, done wrong, acted wickedly, rebelled, not listened, committed treachery, not obeyed, refused to obey, did not entreat the favour of the Lord, and more. He wants to say that this is a big and detailed and many-faceted thing.

And then he continues to use what's revealed to him in the scriptures as a measure, as a standard against which he needs to measure himself and which will prompt him with things to confess.

So you see in verse 5, the commandments and the ordinances. In verse 6, what was spoken by the prophets, God's servants, the prophets. In verse 10, his laws, again in verse 10, the voice of God.

[29 : 14] In verse 11, the law of Moses. Here is the objective standard against which Daniel and the people of God need to measure themselves.

It's not just, I felt bad about doing that thing. There is a standard, and it's in the scriptures, and God, as we delve into it, will keep showing us what those things are in our lives that continue to be disobedient to him.

But we need to have no fear in coming to him with those things, because he's the God of the covenant. Now the word in the New Testament that we use, that we translate confess, is literally to say the same.

If you broke up the two bits in the Greek, that's what it would be, to say the same. And that's what we're doing when we confess our sins to God.

We are saying the same as God about our sinfulness. We are saying the same as him. We are saying what he thinks about our lives.

[30 : 23] We are confessing and sitting before him honestly saying, I haven't measured up. I know how serious this is to you. I need your forgiveness.

And then Daniel goes on in verse 7 to acknowledge the situation that his people are in because of their sin. Open shame, as at this day falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you.

Lord, we've sinned. We're in exile. But then because Daniel knows the scriptures, he knows exactly why the people are in this situation. We've talked about it before, but now he gets really specific.

In verse 11, All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us because we have sinned against you.

He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and our rulers by bringing upon us a calamity so great that what has been done against Jerusalem has never before been done under the whole heaven.

[31 : 53] Now that language that he uses there must cut him to the heart because that type of language was how the Israelites used to describe what God had done for them in the Exodus when they came out from Egypt through the Red Sea.

Nothing like this has ever been done before under the whole heaven. It's so great. And now nothing like this has ever been done before under the whole heaven.

It is so bad. And we know exactly why it's happened because Moses, writing centuries before, said it would.

In Deuteronomy 28, he sets before them blessings and curses, asking them to choose either life or death.

with obedience or disobedience. And he even says this, all these curses shall come upon you, pursuing and overtaking you until you are destroyed because you did not obey the Lord your God by observing the commandments and the decrees that he commanded you.

[33 : 03] They shall be among you and your descendants as a sign and a portent forever. Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you.

And he goes on and describes so clearly what actually happens, excuse me, in the exile. And the people ought to have known. The people ought to have known.

But they didn't listen. They ignored it. But in verse 14, Daniel concludes, the Lord our God is right in all that he has done.

We have disobeyed his voice. There is nothing unjust about what God has done in sending the people into exile, even though many of them would have complained and said, how come?

Why? What's going on? Has the Babylonian God finally conquered our God? What's going on? No. God gave the people every warning they needed.

[34 : 10] As we said, centuries before with Moses. And then, he didn't just say, well, you had that bad luck. He kept sending them prophets over and over and over again.

Turn back, turn back, turn back. Can you see the grace? Can you see the love in that? Turn back. Similarly with us, friends.

We actually, I was reflecting on it, we are the most privileged people on earth, I think, in terms of opportunity to get right with God.

We have the whole of the Bible in our language, in a modern translation that anybody could read. we have stacks of books and people who are able to talk about it pretty clearly, pretty simply.

And more than that, we are in the time in history where we can see that God has not only acted in the Exodus, he has in fact come in Jesus Christ, died on a cross, risen to new life, as the one true sacrifice for sins.

[35 : 21] The absolute, most magnificent declaration of God's love and power anyone could ever see. we are in the most privileged position and we ought not to take that lightly.

If we haven't worked out what it means to have a relationship with God, we've got no excuse now because there is so much available. And we ought to pray that people who don't have the privilege that we have do have it one day as people work to translate the scriptures as they go and visit and preach.

Finally, despite knowing how utterly sinful the people of God have been, Daniel then has the guts to turn and ask for forgiveness.

Isn't that presumptuous? Does it make sense to rehearse the righteousness of God and talk about his great acts on their behalf and then say in verse 16, in view of those very things, in view of how good you've been and how obvious our rebellion is, in view of your good things, how can you then ask God to turn his wrath away?

For many who've grown up in traditional nominal Christianity, particularly maybe in a Roman Catholic background, this wouldn't make sense. Not at all.

[36 : 55] How could you ask God with confidence to forgive you when you have so clearly not measured up? No, you couldn't do it. It's presumption. Your only option would either be to believe that your sin wasn't as bad as it was, so, yep, God will probably get me in, or that there'll have to be an opportunity for you later to make up for your sin in between when you die and hopefully get to heaven, what is known as purgatory.

But on the other hand, those who haven't been in church much at all or who've kind of been fed a diet of American TV church, they might answer, well, of course it makes sense.

Get in God's face and say, God, you love me. I'm the centre of your universe. Forgive me. I know it's fine.

You know, it was nothing and you're good and it's all good between us and I'll see you soon. Our forgiveness, we think, is assured because God's holiness is far less important to God than our happiness.

But both of those attitudes are wrong, aren't they? Daniel comes to God with confidence asking for forgiveness because when God forgives his covenant people who are called by his name, he glorifies himself.

[38 : 30] Now, I don't have time to do a big talk on this tonight. Wayne did an absolutely superb sermon on this this morning from Acts chapter 13. I urge you to get the CD.

that God, God's number one priority is the glory of his name, not because he's arrogant, but because he's beautiful and good and right and the king of the universe.

And so, when he has a people who are called by his name, the people of Israel, and now those who put their faith in the Lord Jesus who are called Christians, who bear the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, it glorifies God to save us because it shows what a marvelous, majestic, forgiving, loving, powerful God he is.

It shows how powerful Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was. It shows how good God's plan for all eternity is. God saves us, forgives us, not because of our merit, but because of the merits of Jesus Christ, his only son, and to glorify the merits of Jesus Christ, his only son, glorifies him.

So Daniel concludes his prayer with the attitude in which we should conclude all our prayers and in which we should come to communion as we will do later tonight.

[40 : 08] I love sharing in the Lord's Supper because it's a great opportunity to show ourselves, to throw ourselves prayerfully and confidently on the grace of God, knowing that he forgives us because of the body and blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross.

But I have been in communion services in Roman Catholic churches where there's much that I can say amen to, but the priest at the end of the mass says to God, look not on our sins, but on the faith of your church.

And I always think, no, don't look on my sins and don't look on the faith of your church. both are completely flawed. Instead, look on the Lord Jesus whom we have remembered in communion, whose death we have celebrated in communion, whose forgiveness has been won for us in that death.

Look on the Lord Jesus and see how it will glorify him to save me as I trust in his name. look on your merciful gift of forgiveness won for me in Christ's death.

And that's what we'll do when we share communion tonight. And that's exactly how Daniel ends. He says, we do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies.

[41 : 44] O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act and do not delay. For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name.

And that's a great foundation for confidence and motivation in prayer. Amen.