

Hear, O Lord, forgive and act

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Julia and Jackson, for reading the Bible for us. If you could turn back to page 892 or 893, that's where we'll be focused on today.

Well, I don't know whether you know me well enough, but I'm a bit of an action man, not particularly at 6 p.m. on a Sunday night, but I'm normally an action man in that I am a problem solver, that whenever something happens or there's a problem, my first instinct is to act.

I feel I need to do something in order to solve a problem. It's only in recent years that God and His patients has started to train me to pray in response to a situation, not jump straight to action or even to think about what to do, but to pray.

Now, I have to say I'm not very good at it still, but by God's grace, I'm learning. But there are times out there that we are forced into a position where we realize that actually no action is possible. We've come to the end of our resources, and that's when we are sort of reluctantly drawn to prayer, to say, hear, O Lord, and act on our behalf.

[1 : 17] And I think this is where Daniel himself is in Daniel chapter 9. I'm not sure whether Daniel himself would call himself an action man, but as we read here in verse 1, he's being prompted to pray by incidents or events in his time.

So we read, Now, you can see that it's not just prayers.

There's an earnestness to his prayer because he's got fasting and sackcloth thrown in as well. And what has prompted this prayer in Daniel 9, as we see here, is the fall of the Babylonian Empire. Now, remember in Daniel chapter 5, that it was Belshazzar who was slain on the night that was the writing on the wall, and it was Darius the Mede who ascends to the throne. That's the Darius that's being spoken of here.

So what Daniel is witnessing is that the conquerors of Judah, the people that conquered Judah and brought them out of their promised land into exile, the mighty Babylonians, have been defeated.

[2 : 46] And so this event reminds Daniel from God's word through Jeremiah that God's punishment of Jerusalem, that is the length of their exile, would be 70 years.

If you want to know more, you can go to Jeremiah chapter 25 and 29. Now, historians have tried to calculate various dates, and they're pretty sure that the fall of Babylon to the Persians is in the year 539 BC.

So this is the date of Daniel's prayer in chapter 9. And you can see that on the slide, that yellow description right in the middle, that's 539 BC.

And this is approximately 60 years after the first deportation of the Jews to Babylon, and that was 597. We're jumping around a bit, but that's the second line in that slide.

There were three deportations. The first one was around 597 BC. Now, other people sort of calculate it from a different date, from the 70 years. They think it starts at 605 BC, because Judah, that was the year in which Judah becomes a vessel of Babylon.

[3 : 54] That is, King Nebuchadnezzar appointed a puppet ruler, a Jewish puppet ruler, to rule in Judah. Still others think it's 587 BC, because that's when Jerusalem finally fell or was destroyed.

Well, whichever way you look at it, if Jeremiah's prophecy were true, and it is, 70 years, if you go back to the slide still, 70 years would end between 535 to 517 BC.

Do the maths, you know, 6 or 5 minus 70, or 587 minus 70. And again, we have events around that time to show that that was the end of the 70 years.

So, in 538 BC, roughly, that was the return of the first exiles to Judah. Or, in 515 BC, that was the beginning of the rebuilding of the walls and temple in Jerusalem.

So, all of these could be markers for the end of the desolation, the 70 years of Jerusalem. And remember again, last week we looked at that word desolation, it was significant, and it is going to

be significant again in chapter 9 and onwards.

[5 : 07] Not this week so much, but next Sunday. Interestingly as well, Jeremiah was a contemporary of Daniel. They lived about the same time. And yet, we read here that in a short space of time, Jeremiah's prophecy was already treated as scripture.

That is, it's not just Jeremiah's spoken word, it was actually his word that was written down, became scripture, and was treated as such by Daniel.

Inspired, authoritative word of God. And it's based on his trust of these promises that God has made, that now Daniel prays. Now, he also prays because he has a longing for Jerusalem.

It may have been a long time, he may be many miles away, he may even be living quite comfortably because he was a high-ranking official in Babylon, but he hasn't forgotten where his hope lies.

In the restoration of the city of God. So, let's have a look at his prayer in verse 4. And so he prays and confesses and says, Lord, Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong.

[6 : 21] 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 ancestors, who spoke in your name, sorry, and to all the people of the land.

Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame. The people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you.

We and our kings, our princes, and our ancestors are covered with shame. Lord, because we have sinned against you. Now, there's actually quite a lot in this prayer, which we could unpack over two or three weeks, but because we're only doing it over one, we're going to have the highlights package.

So, first notice that Daniel's appeal is to God's character. He calls upon a great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love to those who keep his commandments.

Later on in verse 9, he will refer to God as merciful and forgiving. That is, this is a God who seeks reconciliation even when his people have sinned and turn away from him.

[7 : 33] Verse 19, he acknowledges the Lord is righteous in everything he does, just as he says so here in verse 7. And then finally in verse 15, he reminds God of his redemption, that God is a rescuer who brings Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

And so in prayer, Daniel first and foremost reminds himself of who he's calling upon the mighty creator of the universe, sovereign over all things, righteous in everything he does.

And yet, this is a God that is deeply personal, who has entered into an enduring covenant, that is relationship with Israel, his people.

He did that after he rescued Israel from slavery and then called them to be his people, loving them, blessing them in the land.

And so the first thing I'd say to you is when you pray, do you have in mind the Lord that you call upon, his character? That even as you call upon God, you know who he is, what he's like, and therefore the basis on which you're calling out and asking him for things.

[8 : 45] And yet, Daniel here begins by confessing Israel's failure and sin. Now, as I said, it's probably more than 50 years now since Jerusalem has fallen.

And yet, Daniel is still confessing for what was done at that time. That's a long time ago, isn't it? What's 50 years from today? 1974?

Yeah? Nearly. When I was born. Yeah. It's almost like praying for the sins of the Americans in the Vietnam War or something like that, right?

It's a long time. And yet, Daniel is still recalling those sins and confessing. Now, if you think about it and, you know, read Daniel chapter 1 to 6, it doesn't seem, does it, that Daniel himself is the one that's unfaithful to God because we've heard all these stories where he's actually stood up for God, remained faithful in the face of persecution.

So, Daniel's not really praying for himself, I don't think, but for the nation of Israel as a whole. And yet, this is a man who's not proud to identify with his people, to own their sin as though they were his and therefore to intercede for them.

[10 : 05] And so, you notice that he doesn't pray with the word they, but we, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked. We have not listened to God's prophets.

And the we is not just the people, but verse 4, our kings and princes and ancestors. Not just the people of Judah and Jerusalem, but verse 7, all Israel, near and far, and in all the countries where you have scattered us.

So, it's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? It's all of Israel. And what's Israel's sin? Well, he begins in verse 7 by saying, it's them being unfaithful to God.

But, in verse 9, he elaborates further by saying, the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving even though we have rebelled against Him. We have not obeyed the Lord our God or kept the laws He gave us through His servants, the prophets.

All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. Now, Daniel here doesn't really detail the laws that were broken, but key among them is the sin or the transgression of idolatry.

[11:16] Time and time again, they turned to the gods of other nations, offering sacrifices to them, building shrines, bowing down to their images. And this, of all their sins, was the most grievous to God.

Because by doing this, Israel broke their side of the covenant with God. And that's why Daniel calls it unfaithfulness to God. It's not dissimilar to marriage.

Some of you have just recently been married, so you maybe get a sin of that. A husband like me, for example, can get impatient with my wife, right? And I may be unkind or unloving and say things that hurt her.

Now, those are all sinful actions, right? Don't get me wrong. Not good. But the sin that would really tear my marriage apart is unfaithfulness in marriage.

That of adultery. Because that breaks the covenant, doesn't it? It makes a mockery of the wedding vows that I have made. And so that's exactly what Israel has done here with God.

[12:23] At various points in their history, you know, at Mount Sinai, before they entered the Promised Land, every time they anointed a new king, they are asked to affirm the covenant with God. God had promised to love them, to be faithful to His promises, and the people in turn were asked to worship God alone, to keep His commandments.

And you know, they all said, yeah, yeah, we'll do it, we'll do it. But now Daniel acknowledges that actually they failed to do it, abysmally. And so God is right to punish them and send them into exile. But here, notice that Daniel says in verse 11 that even their punishment by God is consistent with God's promises to them. For it's not that God only promised blessings when they obey, God also promised curses and judgment when they failed.

And so in verse 11, keep reading, the curses and sworn judgments written, that is promise, in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us because we have sinned against you.

You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing on us great disaster. Under the whole heaven, nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem.

[13:38] Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us as promised. Yet, we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.

The Lord did not hesitate to bring the disaster on us, for the Lord our God is righteous in everything he does. Yet, we have not obeyed him.

Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned. We have done wrong.

So, God is justified in his actions against Israel, not just on account of his character that he is righteous and just, but also because he is faithful to what he has promised.

Twice, Daniel reminds himself through prayer that God is only doing what he is doing because it is already written and promised in the law of Moses. God is keeping his word fully.

[14:37] He is utterly faithful to bless and to curse depending on how Israel conducts herself. And if you want to read more, you just need to read the book of Deuteronomy and chapter 28 in particular to find those curses.

And yet, the tragedy is that even though the punishment was meant to serve as a warning for Israel to turn back to God, they failed to do so because it says there, yet, we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.

Even when they were being punished, they did not turn back to God. And again, you look back at the Old Testament, this was something that even God foreshadowed back in those days.

And friends, while we may be tempted to look at Israel, you know, and shake our heads and go, we need to look at our own lives too as well, don't we? Because while we may think we worship God wholeheartedly, you know, we've just sung undivided, didn't we?

Single-minded. And I heard you all singing really loudly and very sincerely and I believe you. Yet, when we look at our lives, it's easy, isn't it? Not hard to find areas in our lives where we're not single-minded, where we're half-hearted, where we're not living sacrificial for the Lord, but actually still, you know, chasing our own selfish ambitions, chasing after the gods of prosperity or fame, trying to make a name for yourself or myself as a pastor in our careers or at school.

[16:13] So really, I think we're not that far from the Israelites, are we? We flirt still with the God of our age. And the real test sometimes is that when people look at our own lives, how clearly do they actually see that we are actually following and serving a different God to them?

Can they tell that actually we follow Jesus and not someone else in the choices we make, in the way we spend our time, the way we spend our money?

Not very clear sometimes, is it? Well, all Daniel's really said thus far in this prayer, I think, is just a preamble, an introduction, because it's only when we get to verse 16 that Daniel finally brings the petition that he wants to before God.

And what he says here is that God's people are in the state they are in, not because of the Babylonians, not because of bad luck, not because of random events in their lives, they are in this state because of God.

And it's because of God's sovereign will that Jerusalem lies desolate. Who has led, who has made Jerusalem desolate? It is actually God.

[17:34] Yes, by the hands of the Babylonians, but actually it's God that has willed it. And so, Daniel realizes that if God is the one that has done this, he's the only one then that can change that situation.

And so, in verse 16, we hear Daniel's plea. Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill.

Our sins and iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us. Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant.

For your sake, Lord, look with favour on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, our God, and hear.

Open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your name.

We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. Lord, listen. Lord, forgive. Lord, hear and act.

[18:37] For your sake, my God, do not delay because your city and your people bear your name. Now, firstly, I think we need to see how Daniel frames his petition.

He doesn't request that God acts because they are righteous. Instead, his appeal is to God's character and mercy. In verse 16, he says, do it in keeping with your righteous acts.

Act according to your character, Daniel is saying. Second, notice what Daniel asked God to do. It's right there at the end in verse 19, the three lords. Firstly, he says, Lord, listen and hear.

That is, listen to my prayer. But then he says, here are the two things that I seek. Two acts. First, forgive. Second, act.

And you know, asking God to act is not actually the first thing, is it? Because he knows that what's needed first is for the Lord to forgive. And that's true for all of us as well, isn't it?

[19:43] The most important thing we need in our lives isn't actually for God to solve our problems or to do this or that for us. No, the first and foremost thing we need in our lives is actually to have our relationship with God, our Creator, restored.

To be right with Him. To be in right relationship with Him. Because that's the thing we need before God will act. And the thing that stands in the way, just like Israel, is our sin.

Or worse still, our pride and rebellion when we realize our sin. Lord, forgive us. That has to be the very first prayer of anyone seeking to approach God.

Because we have to come humbly to plead not on the basis of our own righteousness but on His mercy. And as Christians, we can do this confidently because His Son, Jesus, has died for our sins.

And so actually, even though God punished Israel and sent them into exile, we actually escape exile because of what Jesus has done. Instead, it is Jesus Himself who experienced exile from God

for our sake.

[20 : 55] Separation from the Father, right? Through death. When God turned His face away from His beloved Son so that we can be saved. Lord, forgive.

Forgive us because of the righteous acts of your Son. And then, Lord, act. on what basis does Daniel then ask the Lord to act?

And here's another surprise. Act because of your sake. Turn away your anger from Jerusalem. Why?

Because it is your city. It is your holy hill. Yes, Israel has rightly made themselves an object of scorn among the nations because of their sin, but restore us, Daniel says, because we are your people. For your sake, my God, do not delay because your city and your people bear your name. And what's the most repeated word in that sentence?

[22 : 02] Your, isn't it? You see, something amazing happened when God chose Israel out of all the nations in the world. when he did so, he said this, I am your God and you are my people.

And that means God has tied his name and fame and glory to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They bear his name.

His reputation rides on the fate of his people. And, you know, for God to do this with a bunch of sinful, stiff-necked people, is a high-risk strategy.

I don't mean to be nasty to you St. Kilda supporters, but it's like choosing St. Kilda to be your footy team and sticking with them for many, many years hoping that they would win the flag.

Right? You guys are still waiting. Am I wrong? You see, by choosing Israel, God was choosing losers.

[23 : 07] But, friends, in case you become proud, I should say that this is the case with any other human race in humanity as well. Compared with God, we're all a bunch of losers.

And God's name is bound to be dragged through the mud whenever we fail him. And yet, in his grace, God chose to do so anyway.

And with it comes his jealous zeal for us and for Israel. Why? Because of his name. So, God says to Israel in Amos 3, verse 2, for example, You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth. Therefore, I will punish you for all your sins. Or, Proverbs 3, verse 12, the Lord disciplines those he loves. As a father, the son, he delights in.

Because his people bear his name, he has to discipline them to uphold his name. And by the same token, God also restores his people because of his name.

[24 : 17] And for us as Christians, we have this same honor because we bear Christ's name. That's an honor that God gives to us as Christ's disciples.

That's why we are able to pray in Jesus' name. And so, that's why sometimes when I encourage people when you're asked about your religion, don't just say we believe in God.

Don't just say we are Anglicans. Although you can, that's fine. That's pretty good too. But rather say we are Christians. That is, we are disciples of Jesus.

We need to name the Lord Jesus explicitly because we bear his name. It's him that we worship.

And I know that in this day and age, in Australia particularly, it may be a career limiting move or you might break friendships up on the basis of that.

But friends, let's not be ashamed to be associated with Jesus. The world may laugh at us but we ought to hold our heads high because it's on account of Jesus that we are children of God and therefore heirs with him of a great inheritance.

[25 : 34] Now, I really shouldn't be encouraging you to wade into royal gossip but sometimes, you know, I look at Prince Harry and what's happened to him with Magzit. Next slide. You know, and I look at it, it's pretty sad, isn't it?

If you don't know, this whole, you know, this whole Magzit thing was Harry and Magzit's plan to pull away or pull back from royal duties but continue to use their title as the Sussexes to make a living, comfortable living as that, you know, millions, not hundreds of thousands, a living in the U.S.

Now, sadly, they found that once they've severed their ties with the House of Windsor, it's not so easy anymore, is it, to trade on that name? You know, it doesn't help that he, you know, went and saw Oprah and did a TV show criticizing the family but once you sever, once they severed their relationship with the House of Windsor, it's not so easy, is it, to make a living from that name?

Now, I'm not suggesting that we attach our names to Jesus just to cash in on that name. It's not going to work anyway, the cashing in that I mean. But it's the same dynamic in that sense, isn't it?

When we follow Jesus, we take on his name and we have to be all in with that name, isn't it? Not about saying, yeah, we want the benefits of that title, but you know, we don't want to associate so much, you know, when things don't go well with Jesus and the church.

[27 : 05] Because God has bound his name to us through his Son. and the church is Christ's body, his bride, one flesh, as I was saying at someone's wedding, I can't remember which one, one flesh with him.

There's now an unbreakable eternal bond that Christ has with his church and those washed in his blood. And that was in the other reading in Ephesians 1, verse 22 and 23.

Paul says that God has appointed him to be head over everything for the church. All the blessings that flow to Christ is for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

That's an amazing statement that we really need to start reflecting more and more on or keep doing so. His church cannot be separated from Jesus. We are now joined to Christ forever through faith in him.

And so, yes, that means discipline when we sin. God will chasten his church, but not because he hates us, but actually because he loves us intently because of what Jesus has done for his church on the cross.

[28 : 26] We are now too precious to God to be jettisoned. We're too precious to be allowed to keep sinning, to live in unholy ways because of what Jesus has done for us, the blood that was shed on the cross for us.

And so, when we look around sometimes our church, you know, locally, but churches worldwide also get disciplined, that is actually a good thing. We ought to thank God for that because what God is doing is disciplining the church to refine it, to mold us into the image of his son.

And yes, we need to lament, we need to do what Daniel says and does and confess, but actually ultimately, we can then say, God, act for your sake, for the sake of your son.

Do it because we are your people who bear your name. That's a wonderful thing to be able to say and God will hold faithful to that promise because of what Jesus has already done for us on the cross.

So, Lord, hear, forgive, and act. Let's pray. Father, we have sinned against you in many ways and deserve to be punished.

[29 : 47] Yet, the punishment has fallen on your son and we are forgiven. Thank you, Lord. Thank you for your mercy and for his righteousness. and thank you that you hear us when we pray because of Jesus.

You forgive and you act because we are your children and we bear the name of your son, Jesus. Teach us now to live lives worthy of that name, the most precious name of Jesus in whom we pray. Amen.