

Praying to a Sovereign God

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Date: 08 September 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, as Pastor David mentioned, it's a gift to be here with you today. It's a testimony of God's grace and kindness.

! I'll never forget last year messaging Pastor that I needed to cancel because I was in the hospital for leukemia and didn't know when I was going to be getting out.

And so today it's just such a pleasure to be here with you and it's always an honor to be able to share God's Word with His people. This morning we will be studying Daniel chapter 9, the first 19 verses.

And the message, the title of our message today is Praying to a Sovereign God. As we read through this passage, two overarching questions rise to the surface.

The first is this. If God is sovereign over the kingdoms of the earth and over the course of history, including the events of our individual lives, and He is, then what role do our prayers play in His sovereign plan?

[1 : 14] After we attempt to answer that question, we will spend the rest of our time with the second one. How then shall we pray? I hope you came hungry this morning because this passage is an all-you-can-eat buffet.

And it's impossible for us to exhaust the amazing and rich content of this passage with the time that we have together. And so it's my goal to adequately scratch the surface for us and to send you home with enough to enjoy for the rest of the week.

We have a lot of content to cover, so let's begin. Daniel 9, chapter 1, verse 1. One of the primary messages in the book of Daniel is that God is sovereign over the kingdoms of the world and over the course of history.

In the beginning two verses of chapter 1 of our book, it says that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it, and the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand.

In chapter 2 of Daniel, God prophetically gives both king Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel a panoramic view of the Gentile kingdoms of the world that would rise, starting with Babylon and extending all the way until the end of time when Christ's everlasting kingdom smashes them all and reigns supreme forevermore.

[3 : 19] His kingdom is the stone not cut out by human hands that becomes a great mountain which fills the whole earth.

Daniel, chapter 2, verses 34 through 35. These mighty, terrible kingdoms of man become as chaff which the wind blows away before him.

As Daniel says in chapter 2, verse 21, he changes times and seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings.

He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. And in verse 37, Daniel declares that it is the God of heaven that has given you, O king Nebuchadnezzar, the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all.

Interestingly enough, in chapter 4, this same man to whom God had given the beasts of the field is stricken to become like a beast of the field because he thinks that by his own sovereignty he rules over the world.

[4 : 39] And for the next seven years, we see great king Nebuchadnezzar exercise his free will as he eats grass with the cattle in the field. Still, God preserves his throne.

After all this time, now you and I know politics. The leader of the most powerful empire in the world goes insane, and there's no coup to replace him?

Over the course of seven years? This is only by the sovereign hand of God, and it's because God's intent was to humble him, not replace him.

When the time was right, God restored him, and this once pagan king who gave glory to himself is now giving glory to whom glory is due. For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the hosts of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.

[5 : 43] And none can stay his hand or say to him, what have you done? Daniel chapter 4, verses 34 through 35. Well, we come to chapter 9.

And in partial fulfillment of Jeremiah 25, verse 12, Belshazzar, king of Babylon, was killed on October 16, 539 B.C. Babylon fell to the Medo-Persian Empire.

And as it says in Daniel chapter 5, verse 30, Darius received the kingdom. We are now in the first year of Darius' reign.

So it could be 539 or it could be 538 B.C. when Daniel perceives the 70 years. We're not quite certain who Darius the Mede really is.

No historical documents outside the Bible give record of him specifically. The word Darius is used in inscriptions for at least five Persian rulers, indicating that this is probably a title rather than a name.

[6 : 50] While commentators and historians have different opinions about his identity, there is good evidence that Darius could be King Cyrus himself. For one, historically, there is no interval of rulership between Belshazzar of Babylon and Cyrus who conquered Babylon.

It's also interesting to note that Cyrus was born in 600 B.C., which means he was about to turn 62 when he conquered Babylon. The same age as Darius in Daniel chapter 5, verse 30, when he received the kingdom.

Coincidence or not, whether Darius is Cyrus or Darius is some agent ruling for Darius over the realm of the Chaldeans, the important thing for us to understand is ultimately Cyrus is king of the Medo-Persian Empire and it is Cyrus who in his first year in 538 B.C.

issues the decree for the Jews to return to Jerusalem according to Ezra chapter 1, verse 1. And it is Cyrus or in Ezra chapter 1, verse 1.

This too is by the sovereign hand of the Lord because more than 150 years earlier, God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah. Cyrus, he is my shepherd and he shall fulfill all my purpose saying of Jerusalem, she shall be built and the temple, your foundation, shall be laid.

[8 : 18] I believe that Daniel at this time was already aware of Isaiah's prophecy. In fact, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, it was Daniel as Cyrus' prime minister who shared Isaiah's prophecies with Cyrus, influencing him to make the decree.

I'm sure it was quite a spectacle for Daniel knowing Jeremiah 25 and Jeremiah 29 and Isaiah 44 and Isaiah 45, witnessing the judgment of Babylon by a kingdom inferior to them, the chest of arms of silver, as it were, led by a man named none other than Cyrus.

But here we read in our passage what really arrests Daniel's attention are the words of Jeremiah which he had sent in a letter to the surviving exiles of Babylon. It's recorded in Jeremiah 29 and we don't have time to read both chapters 25 and 29 but we will read 29 verses 10 through 14.

It says, For thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place for I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord.

Plans for welfare and not for evil to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come to me and pray to me and I will hear you.

[9 : 54] You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart. I will be found by you declares the Lord and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. Daniel realizes that the end of the 70 years is imminent.

His entire life was a testimony to the sovereign power of God which drove Israel into exile, transformed the heart of a pagan king, exalted him repeatedly, Daniel, to high positions of influence in a foreign land who shut the mouths of hungry lions and revealed to him divine mysteries and visions of the future.

Here he perceives that God is about to fulfill his word again. So what is Daniel's promise? Does he resign to some form of fatalism and just sit back and wait and say, ah, God's got this?

No. Convinced of God's faithfulness to fulfill his word. By faith, he is driven into fervent, intercessory prayer.

[11 : 13] Why? Because faith moves us to draw near to God and to unite ourselves with him in his purposes. And we do that through prayer.

This is the purpose of true and effective prayer. God responds favorably to our faith. He promises that when we call upon him and come and pray to him, he will hear us.

And he will be found by us when we seek him with all of our hearts. And he will fulfill his promises to us by his sovereign power. God's promise, referenced by Jeremiah, to restore Israel to their land and to fellowship and communion with him are rooted in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.

In Genesis 12, verse 7, he tells Abram, to your offspring I will give this land. And in Genesis 15, God himself passes through the pieces in a covenantal ceremony indicating that the fulfillment of his covenant with Abram and Abram's offspring depended on him alone.

Then in Deuteronomy chapter 28, Moses lays before Israel the promise of blessings from God when they obey his commandments and remain loyal and faithful to him.

[12 : 33] Followed by the promise of curses from God when they turn against him in rebellion and disloyalty, including exile from the land. Prophetically, in Deuteronomy chapter 28, verse 49, Moses warns, the Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle.

It's no coincidence that in Daniel chapter 7, verse 4, Babylon is envisioned as a lion with eagle's wings. This very image decorated the city of Babylon, including the very throne room of King Nebuchadnezzar himself.

For many years, God was abundantly generous in his blessings toward Israel. And tragically, Israel responded with hardness of heart, rebellion, and idolatry.

They suffered the curses God promised for their disobedience. But just as God had promised to curse Israel for their disobedience, he also promised restoration when they repented and turned to him.

At this time, in Daniel chapter 9, God had yet to restore Israel back to their land. And Israel had yet to call upon him and come and pray to him.

[13 : 58] In fact, we see in verse 13 of Daniel's confession, as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us, yet we have not entreated the favor of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by your truth.

So Daniel turns to God in prayer. And God responds immediately. Within that same year, Ezra chapter 1 says that the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, to make the decree for Israel to return to Jerusalem so that the temple may be rebuilt.

Consequently, Israel returns to Jerusalem and the temple is rebuilt. And later, in Ezra chapter 10 and in Nehemiah chapter 9, Israel as a nation turns to God in repentance and prayer, reminiscent of Daniel's prayer in our passage today.

We see in this example before us that through true and effective prayer, Daniel is moved to fulfill God's word by faith and obedience. and through Daniel's prayer, God is moved to fulfill his word by a sovereign power.

Ultimately, God used Daniel as his instrument to fulfill his sovereign purpose. So we see God's sovereignty working divinely through responsible human agency to accomplish his purposes.

[15 : 31] In this, we see the power of true and effective prayer. Jesus said, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives and the one who seeks finds and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Matthew chapter 6 verses 7 and 8. He also says in Matthew chapter 21 verse 22, whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith.

James tells us the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it's working. James chapter 5 verse 18. God moves powerfully in response to faithful prayer not only to change the course of history and the external circumstances of our lives, but also to change the conditions of our hearts.

Reordering our affections, revealing his wisdom and reconciling us to himself. In the end, God's purposes are fulfilled within us, through us, and around us.

If only we knew the greatness of the power of God that works through prayers, we would not be so slothful and casual in our exercise of it. we would pray without ceasing as the Apostle Paul urges us to do and as Daniel demonstrated throughout his life even when he is threatened to be cast into a dead alliance.

[17 : 10] However, not all prayers are true and effective. James also says you ask and do not receive because you want to spend it on your own passions.

And Jesus said when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites. Matthew chapter 6 verse 5. And so we turn now to our next question.

How then shall we pray? In the following verses of our passage Daniel models for us true and effective prayer. The kind of prayer that pleases and moves the heart of God.

We begin with a posture of true and effective prayer. the first thing we notice in our passage is Daniel's faith. Daniel trusted the word of God.

Furthermore, he trusted the scriptures as the word of God. It says in Daniel chapter 9 verse 2 he perceived in the books. In other words, he was studying the scriptures and it was his faith and what he read that resulted in the marvelous prayer that follows.

[18 : 20] Daniel's prayer is informed by God's word and energized by his faith in God to fulfill what he promised. This emphasizes the fact that anyone who wishes to approach God in prayer must do so on the basis of faith.

We know this because without faith it is impossible to please God for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Hebrews chapter 11 verse 6 True and effective prayer is always preceded by faith in God. A firm reliance on the character of God and on his ability to fulfill his promises.

And all true and effective prayer is shaped and guided by what God has already said in his word. The next thing we notice is Daniel's fervency.

In verse 3 it says then I turned my face to the Lord God. We know from Daniel chapter 6 verse 10 that it was Daniel's custom to pray three times daily while he faced Jerusalem.

[19 : 33] But I believe that there is much more to this expression than just his physical position. This speaks of a sincerity of heart and mind of focused determination.

an undivided devotion to his cause. It reminds us of the man in Luke chapter 11 who's knocking on his friend's door for a loaf of bread in the middle of the night.

It's that persistence. It's that attitude that he demonstrates. It also reminds us of the persistent widow who is petitioning the unjust judge for justice.

it reminds us of the commitment and devotion that was spoken of about Christ by the prophet Isaiah. Because the sovereign Lord helps me I will not be disgraced.

Therefore I have set my face like flint and I know I will not be put to shame. Isaiah chapter 50 verse 7. And Jesus fulfilled this in Luke chapter 9 verse 51 when it says when the days drew near for him to be taken up he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

[20 : 51] This expression speaks of unwavering commitment to the will of God. Not even Nebuchadnezzar or Cyrus could command the devotion that God received from Daniel.

This was repeatedly demonstrated throughout Daniel's life and now is being repeated again in his prayer. This fervency was further expressed by seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

God was the chief object of Daniel's pursuit. He fasted so that he would not be diverted from prayer to food by food. He dressed in sackcloth as a sign of abject need and he covered himself in ashes which was a traditional sign of grief and humility.

Is this kind of fervency characteristic of your prayer life? Is it characteristic of your posture before God as you attempt to draw near to him? How easily are we distracted by our prayers, by something as simple as the ding of a text message?

How often do our thoughts wander even while we're in the middle of speaking with God in prayer? God help us to have the fervency of Daniel when we come to him in prayer.

[22 : 24] The last thing we need to quickly note is Daniel's humility. Unlike many major, other major characters of the Old Testament, no obvious sin is attributed to Daniel despite his exile to Babylon.

Now we know he wasn't sinless, but Daniel's life is as blameless as we could ever hope to be. Yet through his confession and pleas for mercy, Daniel humbly!

acknowledges his personal guilt and identifies himself with the sins of God's people and accepts the harsh discipline that God has brought upon them. This is remarkable because we never see Daniel complain about the fact that he was torn from his home and his family at an early age.

We never hear him murmur about the chaotic circumstances of his life or the numerous threats to end his life because of his obedience to the Lord. There is a question that we often want to ask God in prayer, and we can ask it in two radically different ways.

It's this question, God, why are you doing what you are doing? The first way that we can ask it is with the attitude of those in 1 Peter 1:10, where it says, concerning the salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours, searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.

- [23 : 56] God's wisdom is a mystery to us. This first attitude is born of humility and a desire to know God's wisdom and to join ourselves to him and his purposes.

Second way we can ask this question is with the attitude of those in Isaiah 45:9, where it says, woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots.

Does the clay say to him who forms it, what are you making, or your work has no handles? The second attitude is born of pride and a desire for God to join himself to us and our purposes.

It's a rejection of God's wisdom and pursuit to go another way. True and effective prayer can only come from a heart that is humble and we should not expect to receive a favorable answer from the Lord when we approach him in pride.

For God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. James 4:6. So what are the properties of true and effective prayer?

- [25 : 13] With the posture of faith, fervency, and humility, Daniel fills his prayer with worship. And you can also fit thanksgiving under this category as well.

He worships him as the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love in verse 4. In verse 7, to you belongs righteousness.

In verse 9, to you belong mercy and forgiveness. In verse 12, he has confirmed his words, speaking of God's truthfulness and faithfulness to his word.

In verse 14, the Lord has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us, acknowledging that he is just in his judgment upon sin. True prayer and worship are inseparable.

How can you draw near to the most holy God without worshiping him? It is the natural outflow of a heart that loves the Lord and seeks communion with him.

- [26 : 24] As we attempt to draw near to him, we recognize that he is the great and awesome God. He is majestic and holy and therefore there is this infinite chasm that separates us from him.

Do you ever feel that when you try to pray? That you're coming to a holy God and just it's like how do I cross the chasm? If we want to commune with him, something has to bridge that gap.

What else is there except that he is the God who keeps covenant and steadfast love, calling us to the reconciliation and intimate fellowship made possible only by the covenant fulfilled for us in Christ.

Therefore, we are encouraged, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

But who are the benefactors of this covenant and steadfast love? It is those who love him and keep his commandments. Verse 4.

- [27 : 34] The covenant applies only to true worshipers. Unbelievers and hypocrites should not expect to be pardoned or indulged by God. Worship must be true, flowing from a heart of love, not fake ritualism.

We see this from the beginning chapters of the Bible when God was pleased to accept the true worship of Abel but rejected the hypocritical offering of Cain. Unless we love God, we have no reason for concluding that he will approve of any of our actions.

all our duties will become corrupt before him. As Jesus said in John chapter 4, true worshipers are those who worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

They are the kind of worshiper that the Father seeks. True worship pleases God and it also prepares our hearts for confession and repentance.

When we behold God and his majesty and perfection, we immediately become aware of how far we fall short of his glory. True prayer seeks to close that gap and bring us back into fellowship and union with him.

[28 : 51] As J.C. Ryle once said, praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin or sin will choke prayer.

Isn't that true? David is thorough and specific in recounting his sins and the sins of his people. Eleven of the fifteen verses of his prayer are spent in confession.

He is unhurried. He does not minimize the seriousness or number of them. He makes no excuses. He openly acknowledges their culpability and calls their sin for what it actually is.

It was not by accident or by mistake of ignorance that they disobeyed, but their disobedience was willful, wicked, and rebellious. He declares, the Lord is righteous in all the works he has done.

There is no justifiable reason that Israel had departed from the Lord and rebelled. And though the Lord tried to correct them through the prophets, they compounded their culpability by hardening their hearts and refusing to repent.

[30 : 07] To him belongs righteousness, but to us open shame. How often we underestimate the weight and magnitude of our wickedness and guilt before God or try to minimize it.

we can be so slothful in our confession. Instead of taking the time to really name our offenses toward God and grieve over the grotesque nature of them, we try to brush them away with a single word.

But Daniel models for us true penitence in the right way to honor God through confession. True confession then leads us to restoration and reconciliation.

On the basis of God's mercy and righteousness, Daniel pleads for restoration. Of your city Jerusalem in verse 16 and 18.

Of your sanctuary which lies desolate in verse 17. And your people verse 19. This is exactly what God said he had planned to do through the words of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets.

[31 : 23] It was Daniel's confidence in the character of the covenant keeping God that he is able to boldly pray for God to restore these things. As I have said before, true prayer seeks to close the gap between us and God and unite ourselves with him and his purposes.

God stands ready to forgive and to restore us if we will just seek him in true faith and repentance. What stands between you and him today?

What is stopping you from experiencing the restoration that he wants to accomplish in your heart and life? Abandon your idols. They can't save you.

Turn to the one and only sovereign God who saves and restores. This brings us to our last and final point. The pursuit of true and effective prayer.

What is the ultimate goal of true and effective prayer? It's the same answer to the question what is the chief end of man that we read in the Westminster confession of faith to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

[32 : 42] Daniel expresses that at the end of his prayer. Oh Lord, hear. Oh Lord, forgive. Oh Lord, pay attention and act.

Delay not for your own sake. Oh my God, because your city and your people are called by your name. Daniel chapter 9, verse 19.

As long as Israel remained in exile and Jerusalem lay in ruins, they were a byword among all the pagan nations of the world. And the God of Israel appeared to be powerless and without glory.

Daniel wanted to see God's promises of restoration fulfilled. He wanted to see for all of God's people to finally return to him with their whole hearts.

And he wanted to see God's glory fill the earth as the stone not cut with human hands becomes a great mountain that filled the God's love.

[33 : 43] Don't you want that too? I know I do. So let's turn with our whole hearts to God in prayer. Gracious Heavenly Father, you are so holy and you are so good.

Thank you for your mercy and your kindness. God thank you for Christ and for the covenant that allows us to draw near to you with confidence and boldness.

Thank you God for changing our hearts. I pray Lord that you would help us and give us the faith and the fervency and the humility that we need in our prayer life.

I pray God that you would give us hearts of true worshipers and that God you would give us hearts ready to confess and to repent.

And I pray Lord that God you would bring restoration and reconciliation Lord where there still remains a distance between us and you. Align us with your purposes.

[34 : 59] Teach us your will. And Lord I pray that you would be glorified by our lives. Help us Lord we ask in Jesus name.

Amen. Thank you.