

DANIEL

Part 7: “The Prayer of a Prophet”

Daniel 9

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Summary

This sermon on Daniel 9 explores the prayer of the prophet Daniel and God's revelatory response. Delve into the intricate tapestry of God's covenant faithfulness as Daniel seeks understanding and redemption for his people. The narrative unfolds to reveal a cosmic plan that transforms Daniel's prayer from a plea for the restoration of Jerusalem to an unveiling of God's ultimate answer for all creation—Jesus.

Scripture Reading

“In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, “O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to 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....” While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my plea before the LORD my God for the holy hill of my God, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, “O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding. At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved. Therefore consider the word and understand the vision. “Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place” (Daniel 9:1–7; 20–24, ESV).

Introduction

I don't know if you know this, but we live in a tense and anxious age.

There are war and rumors of war, and it feels like the slightest spark could set the world on fire. Now, some will say that perhaps it has always been this way. Human history is indeed a bloodstained story.

But I do think that we, in our contemporary moment, experience the world's brokenness in an acute and unique way. Quite literally at our fingertips, we have the capacity to witness the worst the suffering and sorrow and violence. And like a passerby who can take his eyes off a traffic accident, too often we so fixate on the brokenness of the world. And if we do this too much, we *only* see the broken, and we lose the capacity to see the beautiful.

In such moments, people of faith have a long history of asking God hard questions. God, why do you allow suffering to endure? When will these sorrows come to an end? When will things turn around? When will your kingdom come?

I want you to know that it is good and godly to bring our tears and fears to God in prayer, especially when it feels like there is nothing else we can do. Though it is at times hard for us to believe, prayer is far more than just a last resort. Indeed, prayer is more powerful than we could ever imagine.

Today, we will explore **"The Prayer of a Prophet."** Daniel 9 is a section of holy Scripture that I will argue has the ability to not only teach us about the nature of prayer. It is a passage that will show us that, through prayer, we can know and experience the God to whom we pray, as well as learn to see the perfection of his plan for our broken world.

Exposition

1.) Daniel's Confession

Daniel 9 begins with a marker in time. It is "*...the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans*" (Dan 9:1.) This is the same year King Belshazzar held his feast and witnessed the handwriting on the wall. It is the same year as Persia's conquest of the ancient Near East, and the Neo-Babylonian Empire was brought to an end.

The prophet Daniel is now a much older man, nearing the end of his life. He has lived most of his life in a land that is not his own. He has survived trial and tribulation, and all the while, he has faithfully endured. Yet his own exile has not ended.

So, he does what we should all do when we need direction and understanding—he seeks wisdom in the words of Scripture. He reads his Bible! And in particular, he reads the words of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was another Jewish prophet who had

correctly foretold the Jewish exile. He also foretold that the Jewish exile would last seventy years.

By Daniel's calculation, the seventy years of exile are nearly complete. Yet, almost an entire generation of Jewish captives have died in exile. In fact, by the time we get to the Persian era, there is no more mention of Daniel's three friends: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. Daniel likely watched as his friends were buried in a foreign land.

Now, a new empire—Persia—has ascended to power. Babylon—the kingdom that caused the Jewish exile—has been brought to an end. Yet, the exile endures.

So, Daniel reads the words and the promises that are recorded in the book of Jeremiah (see: Jer 29:10–14). And the word of God provokes him to pray. He pleads for mercy upon the people of God and restoration for the city of Jerusalem. With passion, the prophet Daniel lays his heart before his God in prayer.

Daniel's prayer is raw; it is honest, fervent, and desperate. But most importantly, it is a *confession*. In fact, most of the prayer is not a request. It is an admission of sin and guilt, a lamentation over evil.

Now, moments like this in Scripture can run counter to a lot of spirituality within American Christianity. Oftentimes, our culture trains us to prefer the happy-clappy, dreamy Christianity that is sanitized of hard emotions and looks good on Instagram. But such a spirituality fails to acknowledge that walking with God sometimes entails walking with him even through the valley of the shadow.

Our worship and our spiritual practices must make room for honest confession and lamentation over our sins and suffering. It is for this reason that before we take the Lord's supper, we practice confession in our time of worship. Together, we read Psalms that often address our sins and cry out for God's mercy. This is why we also practice seasons of longing and repentance like Advent and Lent.

We do not practice confession and repentance to glorify sorrow and suffering. We practice confession and repentance as a way of naming our needs and acknowledging our failures so that we can turn away from sin and toward our God. Likewise, it is only when we can confront our valleys that we can rightly rejoice at the mountain top.

But notice something even more about Daniel's prayer that seems foreign to our highly individualized culture. Daniel is not just praying as an individual—he is interceding on behalf of his people. He is praying a corporate prayer of confession wherein he confesses the sins of the Jewish people. He is confessing the sins of kings and princes and entire generations of people who lived before he was ever born! Yet, although Daniel never personally committed many of the sins he confesses, he owns them and prays in terms of "we." He prays, *"...we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land"* (Dan 9:5–6).

This is the language of *intercessory prayer*—prayer that is offered on behalf of another or even a group of others. And intercessory prayer and even intercessory confession should be a part of the way we pray to God.

For example, consider how we have been conditioned by media and culture to complain about our nation, and especially our government. It is second nature to critique our leaders and condemn the sins of our neighbors.

But what would it look like to be as quick to confess to God the things we are most tempted to condemn in our culture? What if we were as willing to intercede on behalf of others as we are to indict them?

Intercession and corporate confession are habits that heal our hearts of hatred and shield us from the calcifying effects of constant cynicism.

It is understandable to feel a sense of emotional weight when you witness evil and sin and suffering in our world. But you can choose to steward that weight in a way that will cause you to experience hope and feel closer to God, or you can steward that weight in a way that will cause you to feel hopeless.

At the end of the day, that is the major difference between worrying about an issue and praying about an issue. When we worry, we are mentally and verbally rehearsing the long list of things we cannot control. But when we pray, we are relinquishing the things that we cannot control to a God who loves us and is in complete control.

2.) God's Covenant Faithfulness

Another important thing to notice about Daniel's prayer is the way that he acknowledges God's commitment to the promises that he has made to his people. And the type of promise that God has made his people is called a "*covenant*" (בְּרִית). A covenant is an ancient and powerful promise. It is a sacred promise sealed in blood and the most binding promise a person can make.

So, as Daniel prays, he calls attention to the fact that in both blessing and judgment, the Lord is a God who keeps his covenant. Daniel says, "*I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, 'O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments'*" (Dan 9:4).

The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy is all about God's covenant with his people. In fact, most of Deuteronomy records Moses's final words to Israel, which are a reaffirmation of the covenant, given just before Moses dies and the people of God enter the Promised Land.

In one of the final scenes of Deuteronomy (in Deuteronomy chapters 28 and 29), Moses tells the people of Israel that if they are faithful to the Lord and keep his word, then God

will bless them and cause them to flourish in the land in which they will live. But if they forsake God and disobey his word, he will bring judgment and even exile upon them.

And though there were high moments and glimpses of glory, the histories of the Old Testament show us how the people of Israel and Judah broke their covenant with God in a downward spiral of idolatry and injustice. And just like Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden of Eden for their disobedience, the people of God were sent into exile from their Promised Land.

So, despite all the geopolitical chaos and change in Daniel's lifetime, it was Judah's disobedience that was the real reason that Daniel's generation experienced exile. This is crucial because it shows us that God's judgment on Judah was not motivated by emotive or irrational anger. It is motivated by his righteous commitment to the promises he made.

In the same way, Judah's exile is not a sign that God has abandoned his people. It is a sign that God is faithful to his covenant. And that is profoundly good news because the God who is faithful to judge sin is the same God who is faithful to restore his people.

So, Daniel prays for the restoration of his people, his city, and his nation. But in his prayer, he acknowledges that the only hope for blessing rests not in the good works of men but in the mercy of God. Daniel prays, *"O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy"*(Dan 9:18).

Daniel could have accused God and demanded that God end the exile on Daniel's timeline. But Daniel's prayer is not a prayer of bitterness or entitlement. Instead, he is worshipful even in his pain and desperation. And, as we will see, God will answer Daniel's prayer in the most extraordinary of ways.

So, too, it is in our weakness, our brokenness, and our desperate dependency that we are most likely to encounter the steadfast love and mercy of our God. The God who reveals himself in the words of Scripture and is faithful to his covenant has promised to resist the proud but give grace to the humble (James 4:8). He has promised to be near to the brokenhearted and save the crushed in spirit (Ps 34:18).

3.) History's Culmination

We now reach the final paragraph of Daniel 9, which is God's response to Daniel's prayer. It is a perplexing and difficult-to-understand passage, and even among professional biblical scholars, this text has been referred to as *"the dismal swamp of Old Testament criticism."*

So what makes this passage so mystifying?

This is a difficult passage not only because many cannot agree on the interpretation but also because of how vastly different the implications of those interpretations are, especially concerning verse 27.

For example, this is a passage that refers to the so-called “Abomination of Desolation.” Well, some believe this desolation happened as early as the second century B.C. Others believe it is a future event that will only happen at the end of time. That’s a rather large variance in time.

Likewise, verse 27 mentions one who will make a strong covenant with the people. Some have interpreted this as a reference to Christ. Alternatively, others believe that it refers to the Anti-Christ.

And anytime you aren’t sure if a verse is talking about Jesus or the Anti-Christ, it is a *pretty tough passage*.

So, I want you to know there is no consensus among pastors and Bible-believing Old Testament scholars about Daniel 9. With that said, I want to (briefly) work through this passage the best we can.

In short, I’m going to argue these verses begin with a prediction about the restoration of the city of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the second temple. They end with a prediction concerning the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the second temple. And nestled in between these prophecies is a declaration of the redemption that God has brought forth in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Daniel’s prayer was for the restoration of Jerusalem, his city. But the answer God gives to him is about so much more.

As Daniel finishes his prayer, Gabriel, the angel, flies to him and gives him God’s response. In Scripture, angels are often purveyors and interpreters of divine mysteries and messages. They tend to show up at big moments in God’s plan for history. Interestingly, Gabriel only shows up during two moments in history. He appears to the prophet Daniel twice (in Daniel 8 and 9), and he appears when he foretells the birth of Jesus to Joseph in Matthew 1 and Mary in Luke 1.

So what does Gabriel say here? He declares at the beginning of verse 24, “*Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city....*”

The beginning of Gabriel’s message is about seventy *weeks* of years. In other words, the prophecy is about seventy periods of sevens.

This is a weird manner of speech for modern readers who grew up in the norms and thought-patterns of Western culture. We like to think in linear units; we like to plot time like a line on a graph. But people in the ancient Near East often thought in fractals and kaleidoscopic, in which numbers take on both numeric value and symbolic meaning.

For example, in Genesis chapter 1, God creates the heavens and the earth in six days and rests on the seventh. So, within Hebrew culture, seven is a number associated with completion and perfection. Seventy times seven is a picture of God's perfection and redemptive plan for history.

But from there, the message gets complicated, So we will break it down bit by bit. Verse 24 says, *“Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place”* (Dan 9:24).

Daniel’s prayer was just about the restoration of the city of Jerusalem and the people of Judah. But God wants to do something more than just restore the Jewish people to their homeland or bring about a restored Jewish kingdom. His plan for restoration is cosmic in scale.

Despite the seeming chaos of human affairs, God is moving time and history toward redemption and glory. His plan is to find a way to put an end to sin, to atone for iniquity, and bring forth everlasting justice.

So how will this happen? What are the events and road-markers leading up to this act of God?

According to Gabriel's message, first, a word will go forth. And a second temple will be built, and the city of Jerusalem will be restored. Gabriel says, *“Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time”* (Dan 9:25).

As Daniel prayed, and a word went forth to send the angel Gabriel to answer his prayer, so too a word of restoration will go forth. And it does. In 539 BC, Cyrus the Great made a decree for the Jewish Temple to be rebuilt, and the second temple was built under the leadership of Ezra. So too, in 445 BC, King Artaxerxes I decreed for the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. And this happened in the time of Nehemiah.

This is the period of the Old Testament known as the post-exilic era (the time *after* the exile). And it was at this time that the revealed words of the Old Testament came to a close. In terms of Daniel 9, it is the end of the first seven weeks of years.

Many more years pass; centuries pass; the sixty-two weeks of Daniel 9 pass. Nations rise and fall. Wars are waged in this troubled time.

However, as great as it is to have a restored temple and the city of Jerusalem in all of this, something is still missing. Unlike the Tabernacle Moses and the first temple built by Solomon, there is no record in the Old Testament that the presence of God ever filled the second temple (cf. Exod 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:11). Moreover, the Davidic dynasty descended from King David has not been restored (cf. 2 Sam 7).

But God's presence will no longer be found within a temple built by brick and mortar. God's presence will come through a Person (cf. John 1:14). Moreover, the true heir of David will come, but he will not come to restore just a Jewish nation-state—he will come to bring forth a kingdom of all nations that will never end.

This is God's anointed one—the *messiah*. That is exactly what comes next in Gabriel's message: *"And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing"* (Dan 9:26a).

The Hebrew word for "anointed one" is "*meshiach*" (מָשִׁיחַ). It is the exact word from which we derive the term "messiah." And this is one of the few places in the Old Testament where this exact word is used in direct reference to Jesus.

And what will be the sign of this "messiah." Verse 26 says he will be "*cut off*" (כָּרַת). This is a word that has a fascinating double meaning. It is a word that can refer to death. It is also a word that can refer to the cutting or the making of a *new covenant*. And, indeed, a new covenant will be made in the blood of Christ's death on the cross and died to put an end to sin and atone for iniquity.

And that brings us to the final week of Daniel 9, and verses of the chapter. Gabriel declares, *"...And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator"* (Dan 9:26b–27).

From this passage, you could maybe understand why many Jewish people could read this passage and anticipate a political or military messiah who would attack and capture Jerusalem, take the land back for God, and establish an unending kingdom. But that is not what happens.

Instead, later in the same century that Jesus died and rose again, the armies of Rome laid siege to the holy city (cf. Matt 24:15–20; Luke 21:20–24). In A.D. 70, General Titus sacks Jerusalem and burns the second temple to the ground. For Titus, who would later become emperor, this was a great victory that was commemorated in a monument called the Arch of Titus [show [Arch of Titus](#)], which stands just outside the ancient forum in Rome.

On this arch, there is a clear visual record of the destruction of Jerusalem and the looting of the temple [show [Detail of Menorah on the Arch of Titus](#)]. According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, the Romans even lifted the imperial sigil of the Roman eagle within the temple complex, adding abomination to the desolation.¹

¹ "And now the Romans, upon the flight of the seditious into the city, and upon the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the buildings round about it, brought their ensigns to the temple, and set them over

As a result of the destruction of the temple, all animal sacrifices in the Jewish religion were brought to an end. And to this day, all such sacrifices have ceased.

Does this vision also foretell yet another similar cataclysm that awaits either Jerusalem or the people of God? Perhaps, but it is far from certain.

After the sack of Jerusalem, it would seem that the power of Caesar and empires has only succeeded and endured. For a Jewish person, it may have even appeared that everything went right back to exile and square one.

But according to Daniel, something has changed. Indeed, something has changed in the very fabric of creation.

Yes, the temple is gone, and sacrifices have ended. But because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, no sacrifice is ever needed.

Even more, God's Spirit no longer needs to dwell within a temple. Because of Jesus, God's Spirit can dwell within us!

Now, the people of God are no longer defined by ethnicity. Through Jesus, God has made a way to include people from every tribe and tongue into his covenant.

Now, worship is no longer bound to the city of Jerusalem. For the gospel has gone forth into all nations!

So, yes, even though persecution endures and, for a time, the empires of men appear victorious, there is a day coming when the desolator will be desolated, and the power of evil will end forever!

That is the profound importance of Gabriel's message. Daniel's prayer was about the city of Jerusalem. But God's true answer is about the messiah—his true answer is Jesus.

This is not the answer Daniel wanted or expected. He wanted to know about his people. Instead, he receives a vision of God's plan to bend history toward redemption by the work of his messiah.

Conclusion

Daniel 9 is about how, through prayer, Daniel encounters the marvelous mystery of God's providence and the messiah who will restore all things.

against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them, and there did they make Titus emperor, with the greatest acclamations of joy." Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 743.

God didn't have to reveal these mysteries to his servant, but he did. Why? Because he loved Daniel. As verse 23 tells us, "*At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved...*" (Dan 9:23).

This is a hard passage of the Bible. But the first thing the angel tells Daniel is the last thing I hope you hear today. *God loves you, and he hears your prayer.*

Perhaps you are in a place of pain in your life, and you are longing and hoping and yearning for a specific outcome in the same way Daniel was longing to go home. I cannot promise you that God will answer your prayers the way you want him to. But I can promise you that the ultimate answer is Jesus.

He was the one who was condemned to die by God's covenant-justice so that we could receive the grace of God's covenant kindness. He was the one who sojourned in exile within our broken world so that we might be brought home. He is the one who has ended all sin and brought forth perfect righteousness.

So though sorrow endures through the night, know that joy comes in the morning (Ps 30:5). Our God is bending all things toward his glory and our good.

May we rest in the promise that there is a plan for history. That plan may be mysterious, and we may endure pain in the journey. But even against the forces of deepest darkness, God has given us a messiah—and though that messiah, he has made a way for us to dwell with him forever.

AMEN.