

## Prayer that Moves Heaven and Earth

Daniel 9:1-23

The British evangelist, Leonard Ravenhill, who was used by God in revivals in Great Britain and is well known for his book, *Why Revival Tarrys*, wrote: “No man is greater than his prayer life. The pastor who is not praying is playing; the people who are not praying are straying. We have many organizers, but few agonizers; many players and payers, few pray-ers; many singers, few clingers; lots of pastors, few wrestlers; many fears, few tears; much fashion, little passion; many interferers, few intercessors; many writers, but few fighters. Failing here, we fail everywhere.”

Why is it true that if we fail in prayer we fail everywhere? Prayer is our first ministry which gives all other ministry its power and effectiveness. Or as Mark Batterson put it, “Prayer is the difference between the best you can do, and the best God can do.”

Most Christians don't deny the importance of prayer. We understand that prayer can effect change in the world and that it's the primary means of cultivating communion with God. But most Christians who know this would also confess failure to develop and sustain a vibrant prayer life.

So why, if we understand the importance of prayer, do we fail to pray as we ought, which, as Ravenhill suggested, leads to failure everywhere else? I want to submit to you that we often fail to pray as we ought because we lack the proper motivation.

We often pray when we sense a need either in our own life or in the lives of others. Although sensing our needs and the needs of others is important, an effective prayer life doesn't begin with our felt needs. Rather it begins with a greater sense and awareness of who God is. Or as our friend Daniel Henderson puts it: The highest and most enduring motivation for prayer is that God is worthy to be sought.

Do you wait until you sense a need before you pray? Waiting to sense a need will not cultivate a vibrant prayer life. If we start with our needs,

more often than not, prayer will be our last resort not our first resolve. But if we start with focusing on God and His purposes as revealed in His word through the Spirit, we will see our truest needs in a proper light and pray accordingly. Moreover our greatest goal will be His will being done on earth, as it is in heaven.

As we will see in chapter 9, it was not Daniel's felt needs, but what was revealed to him about God and the purposes of God through the word that kept him on his knees and allowed him to remain faithful to God over decades, even as one dark empire replaced another (Daniel 9:1-3).

**Main idea:** Effectual prayer is anchored in the purposes of God, is in awe of the person of God and seeks the praise of God.

This morning we are going to learn from the life of Daniel, a man of prayer, 3 foundational principles of effectual prayer.

## **1. Effective prayer is anchored in the purposes of God.**

The first foundational principle about prayer that we learn from Daniel is that effectual prayer is anchored in the purposes of God. Beginning in verse one we read: *"In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— 2 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. 3 Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes."* (Daniel 9:1-3).

Before we see how God's word prompted Daniel to pray, it's important to note that the events recorded in chapter nine took place in the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede. The Israelites, along with Daniel, were brought into exile in Babylon around 605 BC. In 538 BC, the Medo-Persian empire conquered Babylon, which was the ancient capital of an empire that covered modern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

Daniel, who outlived the Babylonian empire and is serving under the Medo-Persian empire, is now around 80 years old.

It was during this regime change that Daniel was moved to prayer after learning from the book of Jeremiah that the desolation upon Israel would last 70 years (v.2b). The predicted time when the Israelites would be allowed to return to Jerusalem and eventually restore the worship of God in the temple, was drawing near.

Remember that chapter 8 records another vision some 12 years earlier, which included the rise of the Medo- Persian empire. This vision troubled Daniel because he still didn't fully understand the time line of these events. It appears that he wanted to understand how much longer his people would be under judgment and when the restoration of the temple would occur. But while he longed for that day, he continued to serve under the powers that be to the glory of God trusting that where man rules God over rules.

Now after the regime change, it appears that Daniel, who wants to know what God is up to, begins to read and meditate upon the book of Jeremiah and specifically chapter 25:11-12 which prophesied the 70 years of exile. Once again, it was during this time that he discovers the length of God's judgment upon Israel, which in the first year of the reign of Darius, was coming to an end.

So after discovering the plans and purpose of God, we read in verse 3: *"Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes"* (Daniel 9:3).

It was not long after Daniel prayed about the revelation in Jeremiah, that Cyrus, the Persian King, issued a decree that allowed the children of Israel to return to the desolate city of Jerusalem in 539 BC.

Do you know, Christians, who understand that God is Sovereign over all and that all His purposes will ultimately be fulfilled, often struggle to grasp the significance of prayer. They question, "if God's purposes will ultimately be fulfilled, then why do our prayers matter?"

Our prayers matter precisely because God is sovereign and He has ordained that He works out His plans in the world in answer to the prayers of His people. Comprehending God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in relationship to how His plans get worked out in the world, is certainly a divine mystery.

Concerning how God's sovereignty and man's responsibility can co-exist, J.I. Packer wrote: "C. H. Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. "I wouldn't try," he replied; "I never reconcile friends." Friends? — Yes, *friends*. This is the point that we have to grasp. In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbors; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are *friends*, and they work together."

Daniel, who with his finite mind certainly struggled to understand the workings of an infinite God, was convinced, as we should be, that God works in the world in answer to the prayers of His people. That God's sovereignty and human responsibility were not at odds with one another, but in fact worked together to accomplish the plans of God.

As one commentator also explained, "Daniel realized that the Word of God would be fulfilled only on the basis of prayer, and this occasioned his fervent plea as recorded in this chapter. On the one hand, Daniel recognized the certainty of divine purposes and the sovereignty of God which will surely fulfill the prophetic word. On the other hand, he recognized human agency, the necessity of faith and prayer, and the urgency to respond to human responsibility as it relates to the divine program. His custom of praying three times a day with his windows open to Jerusalem still in desolation revealed his own heart for the things of God and his concern for the city of Jerusalem." John F. Walvoord

Now in light of Daniel's prayer being tethered to the sovereign purposes of God, let me ask you, what is the primary motivation of your prayers? Is it the purposes of God as revealed in the word of God? Is it for God's Kingdom to come, and His will to be done on

earth as it is in heaven? Is it to bow to His rule, know His plans and fulfill your role in His divine program? Or are your prayers primarily about advancing your own kingdom, and seeking God to bless your plans for a more comfortable lifestyle on this earth?

Daniel prayed in response to God's word. In other words, God was the initiator and Daniel was the responder. God talked to him first and then he talked back to God in response. I want to submit to you that unless we are in the habit of seeking God's heart first and responding as we ought to, as opposed to just talking to God about what's on our hearts, we will not have an effective prayer life (John 15:7).

Calvin Miller put it this way: "Too often, we go into God's presence with a list of pleas, making us 'one big mouth' and God 'one grand ear.' But when we pray the Scriptures, it makes God the voice and leaves us as the ear. In short, God gets His turn at getting a word in edgewise." Calvin Miller

This brings us to a second foundational principle of prayer.

## **2. Effective prayer is awestruck by the person/power of God.**

Effective prayer is not only anchored to the purposes of God, effective prayer is awestruck by the person of God. Understanding more clearly the plans of God as revealed in the word of God, Daniel turned his face to the Lord in prayer with fasting, sack cloth and ashes. The expression in verse 3, "*Then I turned my face to the Lord God*" expresses the earnestness and devotion of his prayer to God. He's turning from all other things to seek the face of God. *Fasting* expresses that his need for God is greater than his need for food and the sackcloth and ashes are outward symbols of the posture of his heart as he prayed in humility and repentance. Because Daniel's prayer was in response to the revelation of God in His word, he approached God with great reverence.

Too often we come before the presence of God to present our needs before Him with little reverence for God. There may be times when we pray in earnest because we are overwhelmed by life's circumstances.

But how often do we come before God overwhelmed by who He is? Both the earnestness and contriteness by which Daniel approached God in prayer was the result of a high and holy view of God.

Beginning in verse 4 we read: *“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..,”* (Daniel 9:4). Notice that Daniel begins his prayer by exalting the greatness and awesomeness of God. And in particular, he exalts God for being a covenant keeping God who demonstrates His steadfast love with those who love Him. Daniel prayed with great reverence and earnestness because He knew God was true to His word and promises to His people.

In this same way, if we are going to pray effectively, we must get into the habit of reflecting deeply on the attributes of God as revealed in His word until our hearts are filled with reverence and worship. We must seek His face before we seek His hand. As Daniel Henderson often says, when we seek His face first, He will gladly open His hand.

Like Jesus taught His disciples to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9), Daniel started with a right conception of God. And because he did, he saw his needs and the needs of his people in the light of God's word and God's character. Therefore, before he made his request to restore Jerusalem in verses 15-19, his first response was to confess the sins of his people in view of the greatness of God's righteousness and grace (v.5-14).

After exalting the greatness of God, Daniel begins his confession in verse 5: *“we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. 6 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. 7 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. 8 To us, O Lord,*

*belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. 9 To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him 10 and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. 11 All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him. 12 He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity. For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has been done against Jerusalem. 13 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. 14 Therefore the Lord has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us, for the Lord our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice” (Daniel 9:5-15).*

To summarize this prayer of confession, Daniel did not make any excuses or try to justify the sins of Israel, which incurred God’s righteous judgment. He acknowledges throughout the confession that they transgressed the law of Moses and turned a deaf ear to the prophets of God. And because they refused to obey the voice of God, the judgments written in the law of Moses deservedly came upon them (v.13).

Notice also that when Daniel was confessing the sins of Israel he repeatedly used the word “we” and not they. Regarding the repeated use of the word “we” as he confesses the sins of God’s people, Bryan Chapell explains: “Daniel confesses the reality of his sin and the people’s sin because he has been called to carry their burden as his own even though he did not cause the burden, he feels responsible for the people under his care.”

Now how many of you know, when we have a right view of the greatness of God’s righteousness and grace, we won’t ask God to bless us in spite of our sins. We won’t say, “Lord, I know that I’m living

in sin, but because You are love, would you overlook that and bless me anyhow.”

The cross of Jesus, which was foreshadowed in the blood sacrifices of the law of Moses, displayed both the holiness of God and His great love. His holiness is displayed in that Jesus absorbed the justifiable penalty of sin that God’s holiness demands. His love was displayed on the cross in that the justifiable judgment of God, which Jesus absorbed, was not for His own sin but for man’s sin so that all who believe can be forgiven.

Now when you know His saving grace—when you truly know the redemption that is found in Christ—when you have a right conception of God as Daniel did, you won’t be shacking up with the devil and expecting God to pay the rent. Rather you will pray as the Psalmist: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!<sup>24</sup> And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”* (Psalm 139:23-24).

It’s important to note that the right conception that Daniel had of the righteousness of God which led to confession of sin, was also the basis for his pleas for forgiveness and restoration. As Sinclair Ferguson explains: “The same righteousness of God is made the ground for Daniel’s appeal for mercy because he knows that God has promised to receive His penitent people and to restore them to fellowship with Himself. His covenant righteousness holds out the hope of His forgiveness, and Daniel clings to this with his whole heart: *“O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem...”* (Daniel 9:16).”

Daniel’s prayer, which was saturated with God’s word and promises, was given not with confidence in his own righteousness. Daniel’s confidence was in the trustworthy word of his covenant keeping God.

This is evident as Daniel’s prayer, which began with reverence for God, followed by confessions of sin, transitions into making requests to God. While making his requests to God, Daniel continually appeals to the name of God.



This leads us to a final foundational principle of prayer:

### **3. Effective prayer is aimed at the praise of God.**

Effectual prayer is not only anchored in the word of God and is awestruck by the worth of God, effectual prayer is aimed at the praise of God.

Beginning in verse 15 Daniel prays: *“And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and have made a name for yourself, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly”* **16** *O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us.* **17** *Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate.* **18** *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.* **19** *O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name”* (Daniel 9:15-19).

Once again, as Daniel makes his petition to God to bring back the people to the holy land and restore Jerusalem, notice how aware he is of the glory of God and how many times he invokes the name of God. He begins his petition in verse 15 by pointing to the fact that God brought his people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and by doing so made His name famous. Making God’s name much more famous in this world was the aim of Daniel’s prayer.

In verse 17 when he petitions God for mercy and the restoration of the sanctuary in Jerusalem, he asked God to do so for God’s sake and because it’s the sanctuary of the Lord. As he asked the Lord to open

His eyes to the desolation in Jerusalem, he refers to it as the city that is called by your name (v.18). And as he pleads to God to forgive, to pay attention and to act without delay, he again asked the Lord to do so “for your own sake, and because your city and your people are called by your name” (v.19).

Sinclair Ferguson’s observation here is so helpful: “How little Daniel would have understood our pseudo-spiritual notions of prayer. Our age has come to believe that real familiarity with God is best expressed in a casual approach or in language that expresses how easily and informally we have entered His presence. Even the most cursory reading of this chapter should awaken us from such deception. The sad truth is that we do not pray like Daniel because we cannot pray like him. If we could, we would know God as he did and live as he lived—to the glory of God...Daniel’s ultimate motive for prayer was the glory of God because it was his great motive for living. Daniel clearly saw the need of the people. His praying was clearly people-oriented, but it was God-centered. The bottom line of his heart cry was: “Save your people, Lord, for your own sake” (v.19). Only when the phrase is present in our hearts and not merely in our words, have we been mastered by a true motive.”

When we pray, is our ultimate aim the praise of God or the praise of man? The truth is that on this side of heaven, although we can have true motives, none of us will ever have perfect motives when we pray (v.16). For this reason when Daniel prayed, he didn’t appeal to his own righteousness but to the righteousness and mercy of God (v.18).

And for the same reason when we pray we do so in the name of Jesus. We invoke His name not as a magical incantation that ensures we will get what we ask for. We pray in the name of Jesus because we are standing in His authority and are seeking His acclaim in answer to our prayers. We pray in His name because it is through His blood that we have access to the courtroom of heaven where God is seated on His throne and presides over the armies of heaven which are at His command.

Next week we will see that Daniel's prayer was powerfully answered. God sent an angel to assist Daniel with the burden of his heart. In fact, we will see in verse 20 that the spiritual realm was activated in answer to Daniel's prayer while he was still praying. We will see that Daniel's prayer had implications in the present and in the distant future.

God's immediate answer to Daniel's prayer was to raise up Cyrus, the Persian king, who issued the decree that allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem within the same year that Daniel prayed. His prayers not only moved the angels of heaven to work on his behalf, but they moved the heart of the Persian king to allow the people of God to return home.

## **Conclusion**

The pattern of effective prayer that we find in Daniel's prayer is a motif seen all throughout the great prayers of the bible including the Lord's Prayer. This pattern is powerfully summed up in Paul's doxology in Romans 11:36: "*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen*" (Romans 11:36). That's what effective prayer looks like.

Prayer is *from God* in that He is the initiator and we are the responders. Therefore pray with an open bible. Prayer is *through Him* in that it is sustained by seeing Him rightly and dependent on His power. Prayer is *to Him* in that its ultimate aim is to bring glory to His great name.

In view of these vital principles of effective prayer, Corrie Ten Bloom's counsel will serve us well: "Don't pray when you feel like it. Have an appointment with the Lord and keep it." May the Lord teach us to pray as we seek in His word a high view of God that moves us to pray and live to the praise of His glory and the greater fame of Jesus.