

Daniel 9:1-19 – The Seventy Years and the Righteousness of God

Daniel studied the Scripture [read vv1-2]

Daniel 9 starts with the year when he prayed one of the greatest prayers in all of Scripture. It was the 1st year of Darius, son of Ahaseurus, a Mede. Not a Persian. Though I can't prove it, there are a number of reasons to believe this Darius was the grandfather of Cyrus the Great, who had been king of the Medes before Cyrus overthrew him and made his kingdom subject to the Persians. (I gave some of those reasons in my sermon on Daniel 6.) But this matters here for the reason that Daniel was already seeing a fulfillment of the prophecy in his last vision (8:3, 20), that just as predicted 12 years earlier, a new empire had unified the Persians and the Medes, but the Medes were no longer in charge. Cyrus the Great was the Emperor and he "made Darius king over Babylon" (v1). Well if that detail had already come true as predicted, then what about the rest? The destruction, the desolation, the trampling of Jerusalem and the Jews under the feet of more Gentile kingdoms in the future? Daniel turned to the Scriptures for understanding and faith.

When Darius is in his first year, Daniel studied Jeremiah and learned about the "70 years prophecy". Just about 70 years earlier, when King Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian army to conquer Jerusalem, Jeremiah prophesied: [read Jer 25:11-12] and [read Jer 29:10]. In fact, even the order of the books in our Old Testament are arranged to help us see how important this prophecy is to God's plan of salvation in the history of Israel: when you get home, read from 2 Chronicles 36:21 and when you get to the end of that chapter, keep going into the next book, Ezra and see how they flow together, centred on the words of Jeremiah in the "seventy years prophecy"!

Daniel believed the Scripture (vv1-2)

Daniel perceived "in the writings" "according to the word of Yahweh"--affirming the belief even then that the writings of Jeremiah were divinely inspired. "The writer of Daniel believed that the sacred Scriptures, in this case the prophecies of Jeremiah, were the very words of God delivered to the world through a human instrument."ⁱ I don't think we should miss the fact that Daniel had already seen some of God's prophecies coming true in his lifetime. And I don't think we should miss the fact that in our time, almost all of the prophecies God revealed to Daniel have passed from prediction into history. As I said in Daniel 5, even archaeologists who used to laugh at Daniel have had to eat their words. Daniel had good reason to be a man of the Bible. But we have just as much reason, if not a lot more!

Daniel prayed the Scripture

It is amazing to read this chapter looking for references to other Scriptures. This shows us just how much Daniel's mind was soaked in the Bible. It wasn't just the book of Jeremiah that Daniel studied! The Scriptures showed Daniel...

Prayer is personal to God [read v3]

When I read this I'm reminded of when my son Josiah was about 3 and he would talk to me but could tell that I wasn't really listening, so he would put his hands on my face and turn me to look right at him, and then he would speak to me knowing I was listening. Daniel here "gives" his face to the Lord in prayer. This is no shallow, 5 second afterthought. This isn't like I usually pray. But we can learn a lot from this. If our prayers are like little heart emoticons in a quick text-message, this is a love letter that holds nothing back.

This is the kind of repentant prayer we find in passages like Job 16:15, and in Isaiah 58:5; prayerful, personal seeking of God, turning his face to God and away from other hopes for salvation, the God-focused praying you never hear among people who just use God for what they can get from Him:

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' (Isa. 58:9 ESV)... then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isa. 58:14 ESV)

God deserves our praise [read v4]

Daniel prays the words of Exodus and Deuteronomy:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. (Exod. 34:6-8 ESV)

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, (Deut. 7:9 ESV)

You shall not be in dread of them, for the LORD your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God. (Deut. 7:21 ESV)

Notice that Daniel calls on God who “keeps covenant and steadfast love”—very specific words about “the covenant” and “the steadfast love”. Daniel is going all the way back to the covenant God made with Abraham—a covenant with no conditions in which God promised Abraham a great people and the land to call their own (c.f. Gen 12:1-3; Gen 15:18:21). And Daniel is talking about the loyal love of God by which God keeps the promises to the people who are part of that covenant. As the New American Commentary says, “Daniel was appealing to God's heart of love, and by designating Yahweh as the covenant-keeper he also was tactfully reminding Yahweh of his promises to Israel, promises he was about to ask God to keep.”ⁱⁱⁱ We'll come back to that point in a few moments.

God deserves our confession [read v5]

Throughout this prayer, but especially in verse 5, Daniel shows how often he's prayed over the words of King Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8—Solomon's words become Daniel's words: [read 1 Kings 8:46-53]

Israel personally rejected God [read vv6-10]

2 Chronicles tells about how often God warned His people to repent, how often He sent prophets to Israel and Judah, and Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, records the tragedy of a whole nation that would not listen:

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place.

¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy. (2 Chr. 36:15-16 ESV)

From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day.

²⁶ Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. (Jer. 7:25-26 ESV)

God did what He warned He would do [read vv11-14]

"But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments,
¹⁵ if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant,
¹⁶ then I will do this to you... (Lev. 26:14-16 ESV)

Twice—in verse 11 and 13—Daniel refers to the Scriptures written by Moses in which God made an oath that if the nation of Israel personally rejected God, they would bring down the curse Moses predicted. The issue here that nobody likes to talk about today is about what God is like: do we think God will keep his nice promises but not His warnings? Don't we see that if God were to break His Word when it comes to a warning, that then we would have no reason to trust Him to keep His good promises? Can God be trusted in to do what He says or can't He? But if God brings on His own chosen people the punishments His own Word warned about, then isn't that reason to humble ourselves, repent, ask Him for the forgiveness He promised to those who asked, and ask Him for the mercy and grace He promised to give? Can't we see that when sinners ask God for mercy and kindness, we are not deluded about what we deserve: rather we are driven by God's own words to depend on God being dependable! He made gracious promises to sinners! We are throwing ourselves on those promises and relying on who God is to keep His Word, His covenant.

Five times in the warning Moses gave the people God announces that each time the people failed to repent and follow Him, their punishment would get more intense: first their disobedience would earn disease, defeat, and enemies who would eat the food they grew; second it would be seven times worse, including the desecrating of the Temple, famine and drought; third it would be seven times worse, with a serious decline in population so that wild animals roam the lands where people used to live; fourth it would be seven times worse, enemies would lay siege to their cities, where disease would run rampant and God would give them into the hands of their enemies; fifth, it would be seven times worse, and more enemies would come, lay siege to their cities, and famine would drive mothers and fathers to unspeakable cannibalism, the temple would be destroyed, and even enemies of the Jews would be appalled at what God does to His people—the people would be scattered among the nations and the land left desolate.

We need to really notice that although many of these things happened and had come true when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and Jews like Daniel and his friends were taken as captives to a foreign land, the final and most intense punishments described in Moses' warnings had not yet happened to the Jews. As the New American Commentary puts it, "Judgment fell because Yahweh 'is righteous in everything he does.' ... for justice demanded that Israel be penalized for its crimes against God. The exile was deserved."ⁱⁱⁱ But it's not until we read Josephus' eye-witness accounts of the destruction of Jerusalem, forty years after Christ, in 70AD, that we see the full intensity of these final punishments poured out by God upon Jerusalem and the Jewish people.^{iv}

Saving faith relies on who God is (vv15-19)

[read v15] You can boil down verse 15 to two statements: God is a great Saviour and we are great sinners. Both of those facts are proven beyond any shadow of doubt. Daniel's words echo Joshua 24:17. The Scriptures taught Daniel to bank on God to save sinners who call on His name. "God our God, long ago when you rescued your people from slavery in Egypt, you made a reputation for yourself among the nations as a great Saviour. And God we have proven by our rebellion against you, how much we need you to save us."

The prayer in verse 16 banks on God being righteous. [read v16] It calls on God not to skip Jerusalem's punishment, but to consider the "time already served" as enough—maybe Daniel remembered Isaiah 40? "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isa. 40:2-3 ESV) These wonderful words took on new meaning when John the Baptist stood at the Jordan River and preached that he was that voice, and that the God who had come to save was none other than Jesus Christ.

[read v18] Verse 18 is key. The words are, "see our desolations and the city that is called by your name"—our desolations and the city. God, it's not just (v16) "your holy hill"—Mt. Zion on which the old city of Jerusalem and the king's palace was built; it's not just (v17) "your sanctuary", the temple that had been "desolated" because of the sins of the nation; it's not just Jerusalem itself (v18), "the city called by your name"—God, we are lost, desperate, and the sin that promised us so much has left us so ravaged. Our desolations have brought us low; God we need you and only you. So Lord, open your eyes and ears not just to our prayers, but also to what unbelievers are saying about you: that you cannot save, that your Word is not true, that you are not faithful or righteous or wise. So God, rise up and save; vindicate your holy name! [read v18c]

Next week we come to one of the mountain tops of the entire Bible's landscape: the Christ is coming. Because when we study the Bible, believe the Bible because we discover it is the very Word of God through His prophets, and pray as we are taught to know God and worship Him, and trust Him—when we are shaped by the Word of God like Daniel was—the answer God gives us is Jesus. [read v19] We will see that indeed God had mercy; He delivered the Jews from exile in Babylon, just as Jeremiah had promised; He moved the King of Persia to restore and rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem. The judgement on Jerusalem was enough for God to bring them again to their homeland... but no punishment they could bear themselves could ever be enough to atone for their sins and bring them to eternal life. Jesus did that when the righteous Lamb of God, suffered the righteous punishment of God, for every rebel-sinner who prays for mercy. Jesus is the righteousness of God revealed for the salvation of every sinner who believes. That's the Good News announced next by the same angel who appeared to Mary over 500 years later (Lk 1:26).

ⁱ New American Commentary, "Daniel 9:2"

ⁱⁱ New American Commentary, "Daniel 9:4"

ⁱⁱⁱ New American Commentary, "Daniel 9:14".

^{iv} Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Books 5-6.