

# “Building Blocks of Prayer”

A sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Douglas E. Nagel

Sunday, August 19, 2018

**TEXT: Daniel 9:1-19, Acts 4:24-31, and 1 John 5:14-15**

## **Daniel 9:1-19**

In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede, who became 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 the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying,

‘Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

‘Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and 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. Open shame, O LORD, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

‘All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against you. He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers, by bringing upon us a calamity so great that what has been done against Jerusalem has never before been done under the whole heaven. Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us. We did not entreat the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and reflecting on his fidelity. So the LORD kept watch over this calamity until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the LORD our God is right in all that he has done; for we have disobeyed his voice.

‘And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made your name renowned even to this day—we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!’

## **Acts 4:24-31**

*When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:*

*“Why did the Gentiles rage,*

*and the peoples imagine vain things?*

*The kings of the earth took their stand,*

*and the rulers have gathered together*

*against the Lord and against his Messiah.”*

*For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered*

*together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’ When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.*

## **1 John 5:14-15**

*And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the*

---

Last week we examined prayer as simply conversing with God and being “honest-to-God.” We looked at Hannah’s story in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel as our starting point.

This morning we will look at another Old Testament character and his prayer. It is one of the longest prayers in the Bible. It is the prayer of Daniel, the prophet, in the book of Daniel.

You may already be familiar with two stories from the Book of Daniel. Daniel in the lion’s den is probably the most familiar story. The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace is likely a familiar story as well. However, knowing those stories may still beg the question, “Who was Daniel and why is he important?”

Jerusalem was the site of Solomon’s Temple and the capital city of Judah. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC after fifteen years of war between Babylon and Judah. Jerusalem was the last holdout in the nation of Judah. The Babylonians brought siege engines to break through the walls of the city.

Siege warfare is a form of blockade warfare. No one leaves the city. Food and water become scarce. People die within the walls of the city and become potential sources of disease. Bodies cannot be properly buried, so vermin increase.

The Babylonians breached the walls, the city of Jerusalem fell, the Temple was burned and destroyed, but not before the Babylonians ransacked the Temple treasury.

That was bad enough, but then the Exile began. The Babylonians took the best and the brightest, the young and the healthy, and transported them 900 miles by foot to Babylon. Only the aged and feeble were left behind. Many died along the way.

Young Dan-i-el, whose name means “God is my judge” was one of these exiles. He became a bureaucrat in his new home, trained in the language and customs of Babylon.

You can read Daniel’s story in the Book of Daniel on your own. This morning, I want to focus on Daniel’s prayer life and his prayer. It is obvious that Daniel was a man of regular prayer. It was a daily practice. We see this in the run-up to the lion’s den.

All the powerful people in the kingdom sought to get rid of Daniel. He had interpreted two of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams correctly. He had also explained “the handwriting on the wall” to King Belshazzar. Daniel was a threat to those in power because he was a Jew and not a Babylonian. He would not bow down to customs of Babylon. He remained true to himself and true to his God. As a result, those who were threatened by Daniel sought to take him down a peg or two by laying a trap for him.

They did this by flattering the King. In Daniel 6:6-7 it reads, *“So the presidents and the satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, ‘O King, live forever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors, and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions.”*

Daniel pays no attention to the edict. Verse 10 continues, *“Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.”*

Daniel continued to do what he always did. He prayed three times a day. His enemies knew it. It became the bait in the trap. The king doesn’t want to do it, but he has made a decree. Daniel has disobeyed. So, into the lion’s den he goes.

Daniel prays. God honors Daniel’s prayers. Daniel is preserved from danger and harm. An angel shuts the lions’ mouths and it is those who have laid the trap who end up being destroyed by the lions.

God then gives Daniel a vision of the future and what will come to pass in days to come. It is a troubling vision. It is a vision that is sealed for the future. In verse 27, Daniel writes, *“So I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days; then I arose and went about the king’s business. But I was dismayed by the vision and did not understand it.”*

The vision moves Daniel to prayer. It is the prayer we heard in the Scripture reading this morning. Let’s look at some of the elements of Daniel’s prayer as building blocks for our own prayer life.

## **ADORATION AND PRAISE**

Adoration and praise comprise the first building block of prayer. Daniel begins his prayer with adoration of who God is. He does not begin with himself, his own needs, and his own concerns. He begins with God. Daniel focuses on various attributes of God’s character.

*“Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments.”*

It is not that Daniel needs to remind God of who God is. Daniel reminds himself of who God is before he goes any further. It is the basis for any further prayer. This is not a rote, “Now I lay me down to sleep” kind of prayer. Daniel “turns his face” toward God. This means that he also turns away from everything and everyone else. God alone is his focus.

Daniel sees God as Lord God, “Adonai Elohim.” The name or title “Adonai” means “owner, ruler, or sovereign” of the universe. As Daniel addresses his prayer to Adonai Elohim, he addresses the one who not only hears Daniel’s prayer, but possesses the power and ability to answer Daniel’s prayers.

When you begin your prayer, “Ah, Lord, great and awesome God,” you begin with God’s Person and character. The Lord’s Prayer begins in a similar way. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.”

Daniel continues by recognizing that God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. Daniel addresses a God of steadfast love who delights in those who love God and keep God’s commandments.

Daniel begins with worship. Worship is nothing more than praise and adoration focused on who God is and what God has done. God should form the center of gravity for our prayers, and not our own needs and desires. We need to remember who God is so that we might be reminded why God is the one to whom we pray. It is also that we might be reminded how his character defines and directs the things which we may seek from Him.

Ravi Zacharias writes, “Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God,” begins the quote by Archbishop William Temple, which I have often recited.

“The submission of all our nature to God. Do we understand this, let alone surrender to it? What an incredible statement! The submission of all our nature to God must encompass, as Temple reminds us, the conscience, the mind, the imagination, the heart, and the will. In short, worship is bringing all of ourselves in adoration to God. As the Psalm writer put it: ‘Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name.’

“This type of worship does not come naturally to us as humans, does it? I don’t know if you have ever taken the time to study Michelangelo’s famous painting of God reaching out to Adam. It is such an interesting and telling picture. God’s arm is outstretched. Every muscle on His face is contorted and the hand is reaching

out as far as possible to make contact with man. One might assume that Adam is also struggling earnestly to touch God. Quite the contrary. Adam lackadaisically lets a limpish hand dangle with apathy in an attitude that seems to say, "If it meets, it meets." How well Adam's character reflects the contrasting inclinations of the heart. Certainly, there are times - albeit few - when we realize our need for God and our absolute lostness without Him. But for the most part, we let a limp hand dangle at our side and do not even bother to lift it.

"Jesus makes it clear that God is seeking worshippers. In his famous interaction with the woman at the well he said, "... the true worshippers ... worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." In other words, God is seeking those who love Him with all that they are, with both their hearts and their minds. Author John Piper says it simply: 'Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of biblical worship.'"

This is also reflected in the Lord's Prayer as we pray, *"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven."*

## **CONFESSION**

Daniel moves on to confession. He confesses not only for himself, but for all of Israel. God had kept covenant with Israel. Israel had failed on their end of the covenant. The curses for disobedience and idolatry are laid out in the Book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Nothing had happened to the nation of Israel that God had not promised for those who disobey.

What can you do if you are caught up by your own disobedience? You can deny it. You can claim your own innocence. You can say you didn't mean it. You can claim you didn't know. None of those excuses can stand. The only thing you can legitimately do is to confess your responsibility for your own situation and appeal to the mercy of God.

This is what Daniel does. He knows why Judah's borders have been breached. He knows why Jerusalem has fallen. He knows why the Temple is no more. These are not random events. They are the consequence of Israel's disobedience. There can be no healing and reconciliation until such disobedience is recognized.

So, Daniel prays, *"Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and 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. Open shame, O LORD, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets."*

Daniel confesses because he feels responsible. Daniel confesses because he knows that God hears and forgives. Daniel confesses because reconciliation and restoration are possible with God. Daniel stands as confessor and intercessor for the whole nation of Judah. We see this kind of confession again in the Lord's Prayer as we pray, *'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.'*

We cannot begin to heal until we know that we are ill. We cannot begin the path to forgiveness until we know that we have sinned. Reconciliation and forgiveness can only begin when we are honest before the God who knows us best.

Marilyn Manning relates the following story in *Condensed Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Several years ago, while attending a communications course, I experienced a most unusual process. The instructor asked us to list anything in our past that we felt ashamed of, guilty about, regretted, or incomplete about. The next week he invited participants to read their lists aloud. This seemed like a very private process, but there's always some brave soul in the crowd who will volunteer. As people read their lists, mine grew longer. After three weeks, I had 101 items on my list. The instructor then suggested that we find ways to make amends, apologize to people, or take some action to right any wrongdoing. I was seriously wondering how this could ever improve my communications, having visions of alienating just about everyone from my life.

The next week, the man next to me raised his hand and volunteered this story:

"While making my list, I remembered an incident from high school. I grew up in a small town in Iowa. There was a sheriff in town that none of us kids liked. One night, my two buddies and I decided to play a trick on Sheriff Brown. After drinking a few beers, we found a can of red paint, climbed the tall water tank in the middle of town, and wrote, on the tank, in bright red letters: "Sheriff Brown is an S.O.B." The next day, the town arose to see our glorious sign. Within two hours, Sheriff Brown had my two pals and me in his office. My friends confessed, and I lied, denying the truth. No one ever found out.

"Nearly 20 years later, Sheriff Brown's name appears on my list. I didn't even know if he was still alive. Last weekend, I dialed information in my hometown back in Iowa. Sure enough, there was a Roger Brown still listed. I dialed his number. After a few rings, I heard: 'Hello?' I said: 'Sheriff Brown?' Pause. 'Yup.' 'Well, this is Jimmy Calkins. And I want you to know that I did it.' Pause. 'I knew it!' he yelled back. We had a good laugh and a lively discussion. His closing words were: 'Jimmy, I always felt badly for you because your buddies got it off their chest, and I knew you were carrying it around all these years. I want to thank you for calling me ... for your sake.'

"Jimmy inspired me to clear up all 101 items on my list. It took me almost two years but became the springboard and true inspiration for my career as a conflict mediator. No matter how difficult the conflict, crisis or situation, I always remember that it's never too late to clear up the past and begin resolution."<sup>1</sup>

Confession allows us to begin again. It is the second building block of prayer.

## SUPPLICATION

A prayer of supplication is one in which we pray for God to supply something we cannot supply for ourselves. Daniel prays for restoration. He prays for the people and land of Israel who are desolated by the removal of God's favor and blessing. He cannot restore Judah and Jerusalem on his own. He can confess his complicity. He can own his part in his nation's abandonment of God. He can admit to the covenant he has broken. That is all he can do.

Only God can forgive, heal, and restore. Daniel cannot do it. So, Daniel prays a prayer of supplication. He asks God for mercy. He humbles himself before God. He seeks the face of God. He prays that God will do what no human being can do . . . restore the nation of Israel.

Hear his words, *"Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies."*

Rabbi Emeritus Marc Gellman led Long Island's Temple Beth Torah, a liberal Reformed Jewish synagogue, for many years. He says, "Really, when you come right down to it, there are only four basic prayers. Gimme! Thanks! Oops! and Wow!

"Wow! are prayers of praise and wonder at the creation.

"Oops! is asking for forgiveness.

"Gimme! is a request or a petition.

"Thanks! is expressing gratitude.

"That's the entire Judeo-Christian doxology."

Today, as we have looked at Daniel's prayer, we have covered Wow! Oops! and Gimme! We will cover all three of these types of prayer in more detail later in this series. We will also cover 'Thanks!' in more detail later.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Manning, from *Condensed Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Copyright 1996 by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen & Patty Hansen

In the meantime, though, let us remember the three types of prayers exemplified in Daniel's prayer: Adoration and Praise, Confession, and Supplication. Let them be building blocks for our own prayers as we daily come before the throne of grace.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. AMEN.