

How to Improve Your Prayer Life

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Daniel: Thriving in a Hostile World

Daniel 9

There is almost no Christian in the world who doesn't believe that prayer is important. From the earliest moment that a person tends to be aware of God, they feel this internal tug to pray. Any immature Christian in the world will tell you it is really, really important to pray. They might not be able to give you a whole theology of prayer or a lecture on the various kinds of prayer or prayer in the history of the church. But the most immature Christian will tell you that it is important to pray. And most mature Christians will tell you they don't pray enough. If you want to provoke guilt in an audience of Christians, all you have to do is ask, "So tell me, how is your prayer life going really? I am not asking you if you think prayer is important or if you can give me a teaching on prayer or if you wouldn't recommend prayer to other people in times of crisis. Just tell me how it is that you are doing right now – this past week, this past month, and this past year. How would you say you do in terms of your private prayer?"

And you will see the look of guilt on many people's faces when you start talking about your own individual prayer lives. They say, "Well, it hasn't been what it should be. Sometimes I am not as disciplined as I ought to be."

Sometimes the problem is a lack of discipline. We know everything we need to know. And yet, we just don't set the alarm to get up in the morning to pray. We don't get to sleep on time. Sometimes it really is a simple matter of just a lack of planning in our lives. Life is so chaotic and time is never allotted. Other things, the tyranny of the urgent, crowd out what is really vital.

Sometimes we don't pray because we have gotten into a habit of believing that nothing is going to happen if we pray. The truth is if you expected to get an answer to your prayers within 30 seconds of you praying you would pray all the time. But if you have been disappointed or if there have been some delays – you prayed about some things and they don't seem to occur, then even though you might say you believe God answers prayer, in your heart you doubt whether prayer really makes a difference at all. Again, if you were seeing answers to prayer within just a few seconds, as one writer said, every Christian pair of pants would have holes in the knees because we would virtually never get off of our knees. But doubt begins to creep in and we wonder if it is really relevant. Is it meaningful, does it make a difference when we pray?

Certainly, one reason we have problems with prayer is that we don't feel God's nearness. We have those great moments when the Lord seems so near to us and so intimate. Often at the beginning of our Christian experience it is like we have entered a whole new world and we feel his arms of love around us. We feel totally close to him and we feel his willingness to answer us and to be near to us. But there are other times

in life when we don't feel God's presence at all, when it feels like the whole room is just really empty. And you are aware of the great distance between you and God. Your prayers just seem to bounce off the ceiling. It feels emotionally like you are just talking to yourself and there is no one else there.

Let me offer you one last reason we don't pray. Sometimes we aren't exactly sure how to pray. After all the years you might have been in church, you still might be a relative novice, a baby when it comes to actually knowing how to come before God in prayer. And you still pray a few blessings over your food and "forgive me God" and "help me God" kinds of prayers, but that is about all you know how to do. It seems like you should be further along in the vocabulary of prayer and your experience and depth of prayer, but you really aren't very far along.

This morning I want to accomplish two goals. Number one, I would like to give you some inspiration, some vision, regarding why prayer is something you will really want to do even when it is cold and dark in the room in the morning and in Watchman Nee's language, "You are having wonderful fellowship with Brother Pillow and Sister Sheet." When with your down comforter and your pillow, you feel like you are sleeping on a cloud. I would like to give you some vision regarding why it is you should climb out of that warm, comfortable bed and throw your feet onto an icy cold floor and trudge off to pray, even when you don't immediately feel great intimacy with God, a great breakthrough. One of the reasons I want to talk about prayer today is to give you some vision, some inspiration, to get you moving. To recognize what you could have if only you would pray.

And the second thing I would like to accomplish today is to give you some practical help, just a method to improve and mature your prayer life. I am calling this talk, "How to Improve Your Prayer Life." Let's pray.

Daniel 9:1-2

"In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."

We are talking about a date of probably 539BC. Daniel, at this point, is an old man. He has served under three successive Babylonian kings and now the Persians have established their hegemony over the entire Near East. They have defeated Babylon and we find Daniel studying the scriptures.

I would like to make just a few points here before we relate this text to our understanding of prayer. Just a few observations:

Daniel was a prophet. A person who was often getting communication from God via dreams and visions. And Daniel was someone whom the Lord was speaking to

regularly by his Spirit. And Daniel was given the capacity to interpret dreams. And just by way of simple observation, I would point out that even though Daniel was a prophet and had a prophetic gift, we find him here studying scripture. He is studying the prophet Jeremiah and what Jeremiah said about the judgment that was going to come on Jerusalem and how long the Jews would be in exile in Babylon.

Now it is really unfortunate, but I have observed in a lot of folks that when they begin to have experiences with the Holy Spirit, when people begin to have prophetic experiences, when they start opening up to the whole charismatic dimension of life, very often in people's lives they begin to move away from scripture study. And the truth is, you can never become more charismatic than the Bible. The Bible is God's inspired Word from his Holy Spirit. And even the most charismatically gifted people – people like Daniel or, in the New Testament, Paul – even the most charismatically gifted, prophetic people spend long hours in scripture meditation.

What was it that Daniel was meditating on? What passage was he studying?

Well, perhaps it was Jeremiah 29. Of course, back in Daniel's day, there were no chapters and verses marked off. The Bible wasn't divided up into chapters until the 13th Century, during the Middle Ages. It wasn't divided up into verses until the mid-1500's. But that text that we now call Jeremiah 29, perhaps, formed the basis for Daniel's scripture meditation.

And it says in Jeremiah 29, if you wish to read with me, verse 4: "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in numbers there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Jeremiah is counseling those Jews who have been drawn into exile by the Babylonians, who are far away from their homeland. He says to the Jews who are going to live out their lives in exile, Jews like Daniel, "Don't put your life on hold while you wait for your return to your homeland. Build houses. Marry. Have kids. Prosper. Make the best of your situation. Don't just climb into bed and pull the covers over your head, if you find yourself where you never intended to be."

Now this is really important counsel for us today. Because I meet so many people who are in situations that they never intended to be in, who are putting their lives on hold. They aren't moving forward in life. They are not making the best of a disappointing situation. Instead, it is as if they have pushed the pause button on the video recorder of their lives and they are saying, "I am not going to make any decisions, any moves. I am not going to take any new job. I am not going to search out any new relationships because life hasn't worked out the way I was intending it to work out. It is not unfolding according to my plans."

Perhaps it is that when you got married you really meant it was for better or for worse, until death separated you from your mate. But your mate had a very different idea and you now find yourself divorced. Your husband or wife left you for someone else. Or your husband was a terrible abuser. But you never intended to be a divorced person. What do you do now?

Perhaps you have had your heart set on getting into a graduate school or a professional school. That is what you have been aiming for all through college. But you have gotten out of school and you find that you can't get into the professional school or the program or the graduate school you were aiming at. What do you do now?

Perhaps you have had your heart set on ministry and you have been preparing for pastoral ministry or for missions or for some ministry in the area of worship or children. But doors haven't opened, and those that were open closed on you.

What do you do when life is not working out according to your plan? Jeremiah is giving us some very good counsel. And it is counsel that we can share with others. Don't put your life on hold. Don't fold. Don't give up. Don't say, "Well, because the plane didn't land where I was expecting it to land in my marriage - my life has landed me in Oetz and I was planning to land in Upper Arlington or New Albany - I am just going to take my ball and go home."

Jeremiah says that that is not the way to live a successful life in God. You make the best of it. You take responsibility for where you are and you grow where you are planted. And friend, wherever you are this moment - you may be in the pit; you have fallen into a hole that you never intended to fall into - **but you do not have to stay there.**

But notice, my real point here is that I want you to notice that scripture reading inspired Daniel's prayer. Daniel is reading the Bible. And it says, "According to the Word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years." And Daniel begins to pray. And that is, by the way, from Jeremiah 29 where God says, "This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are complete for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with your whole heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back from captivity.'"

So, Daniel reads this prophecy from Jeremiah that they are going to be in exile for seventy years and the encouragement of God to pray. And this becomes the fuel for his prayer. Here is my point. You get up in the morning and you are committed. It is Monday morning and I am going to pray. But what is it that you should pray? What should you say to God? And sometimes you find yourself running through the same

gerbil-wheel, like a little gerbil in the wheel you pray the same prayers of repentance, and ask for the same forgiveness for the same sins, and then you have your little list of loved ones that you pray for and your little list of needs. And you thank God for a couple of things and then you say, "Amen." And you walk away feeling terribly unfulfilled. You might as well have put in tape 101, punch a button and go back to bed because you prayed the same thing last Friday and last Wednesday and six weeks ago.

Well, we can do better than that. And the way you do better than that is that you use the Bible as the fuel, as the inspiration for your prayers. Start off, instead of beginning with prayer, begin with Bible reading. We have been encouraging you to read the Bible daily. We have given you Bible reading guides. But whatever kind of plan you have, begin your devotions with Bible reading. Then as you discover in the Bible the way you are supposed to be living, what life could be like, as you discover in the Bible what you could have in your marriage, what you should have, what you should be like, what God is like, as you discover things in the Bible, and then you see the reality of your own marriage, or your own life, or your own prayer, that gap is what you pray about.

Let me illustrate from my own prayer journal. And one of the things I have been doing, and I would encourage you to do – here is some helpful counsel for you in your prayers - I have been writing out my prayers in a notebook. Now, that might seem to you to be a little tedious or difficult. I actually find that I am much more focused and it is much easier for me to connect with God when I am writing out my prayer than when I am just speaking it into the air. There is a reality to it and I am finding that I am seeing far greater breakthroughs and a greater sense of intimacy with God. I just got myself a spiral notebook, real cheap. It doesn't have to be a \$24.00 journal with flowers on it with hand-made paper inside, but if you like that, that's great. And just from my journal a couple of weeks ago:

I was reading that portion in Matthew 7 where Jesus says, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask."

And I began to meditate on that little phrase, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children..." I said in my journal as I was praying over this, this became the fuel for my prayer for that verse. I wrote, "The truth is I don't know how to give good gifts to my children. I agree with you on the 'You who are evil' part, Lord, but I am not so sure about the assumption that I know how to give good gifts to my kids. O God, I want to give good gifts to my children. I want to give to my kids the gift of acceptance. I want to give to my kids the gift of availability. I want to give to them the gift of looking at things positively. I want to give to them the gift of humility and admitting when I am wrong. I want to give them the gift of affection. Help me to give my children good gifts, even as you want me to receive your good gifts."

You are a husband and you are reading Ephesians 5 which says to you, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by washing with water through the word." And you can begin to

write in your prayer journal or pray over those statements and say, "O God, I don't love my wife in a self-sacrificial way. I am often selfish and lazy. Help me to be the one who does the dishes in the evening or initiates communication and affection. And Lord, help me to initiate scripture study since I am the one who is supposed to wash my wife with your word. How rare it is, O God, that I bring your word to bear in our conversations."

You are a worker and you read that text, "Do all things without grumbling or complaining." And you say, "God, I am such a grumbler. I have turned into a grumbler."

You read a story of healing in the Bible and you make that the fuel for your prayer. "Lord, God, use me, allow me to see the kind of physical healing that I am reading about here in Mark 5. I want to see people instantly healed. I want to see your miraculous power."

You are reading 1 Corinthians 14, about spiritual gifts, and you use that as the fuel for your prayer. Prayer is the gap between what you are reading life should be like in the Bible and what your life is really like. And it is the cry of the honest heart, the open heart before God, and you are saying to God, as you are reading this stuff about spiritual gifts and the Holy Spirit and miracles, "God, I really want to go deeper with you. I want more experiences with your Spirit. I am tired, God, of a head only, doctrine only, dry as dust kind of Christianity. I feel, God, like my whole Christian experience is like eating saltine crackers without any water. Lord, I want to experience you. I want to feel your presence. I want what Paul writes about here in Romans. I want to know the love of God poured out in my heart by the Holy Spirit. I really want to know your love in my heart. I want to see someone healed through my hands and through my prayers. God, I want to hear your voice the way Daniel heard your voice."

Do you get it? You get off the little gerbil wheel where you just pray over the same 5, 6 or 7 items over and over again and never get anywhere. Instead, the scripture becomes the tinder, the kindling for igniting you to prayer. And I don't mean you just use the words of the scriptures and turn them into prayer. I mean as you are meditating on the scripture, and you see the distance between what it says there and what you are living like, that is what you pray over, that gap.

But in verse 3, we see prayer's earnestness, prayer's passion. After Daniel reads this promise that God was going to bring the people back to Jerusalem after seventy years, it says, "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sack cloth and ashes."

In the New Testament we get rid of the sack cloth and ashes. Jesus tells his followers in Matthew 6, when you pray, don't go around like the Pharisees, but rather anoint your head with oil, get rid of the sack cloth and ashes, don't allow people to know that you are fasting...

But Daniel here, having discovered that gap between what God desires and the way the people are living, begins to plead with God. We don't earn any points with God by

yelling. But so often evangelicals fall off the tightrope with God in the other direction and I have heard over and over again this kind of passivity that says, "Well, if God wants to do this thing, I am here, I am open. If God wants to give me spiritual gifts, if God wants to heal, if God wants to bring the Jews back from Babylon to the land of Judea, he could do it." That could have been Daniel's position.

But you see none of that passivity here. I read it in God's Word and I just need to rest. There is a fervency, a passion, as we discover that gap between what God's Word says, what God promises, and what we are experiencing, there is a fervency in going after that particular thing.

And I often believe that God is asking each one of us in our prayers, "How much do you really want this thing?" I mean you are upset with the way your life is going. It didn't turn out the way you intended. You have fallen into a pit. You haven't gotten to where you want to be. Well, how much do you want to change? How much? How much do you say you are disappointed in God for not giving to you? How much do you want something? You say you want to meet God. You say you want a relationship that goes beyond just words and religion and church going. How much do you desire change? How much do you want God?

Enough to put down the remote control on your TV? Enough to shut off your computer and get down on your knees? Enough to crawl out from under your comforter and stop fellowshiping with Brother Pillow and Sister Sheet? Enough to get up when it is still dark in your room and go to another room to pray?

How much do you want what you are asking for? It says Daniel is pleading with the Lord. I honestly believe that real prayer has a pleading note. Not because we doubt that God will give it to us. Not because we are trying to wedge out of the unwilling hands of God some gift from him, but because we really mean it. Because we are really sincere.

And so Daniel is fasting. Again, how much do you really want a breakthrough with respect to your marriage? Or an illness? Or one of your kids? Or the church? Or getting free from a lot of things by discovering God's will for your future? Or your walk with God? Do you want a breakthrough enough to skip a meal or two or even several days of meals? Enough to deny yourself the newspaper or relaxation or the opportunity to do just a little more work?

See, real prayer arises from the scripture, but it also arises from the depth of your heart. Real prayer. Not the kind of superficial thing that most of us engage in that just comes from our mouths and our brains. Real prayer comes from the heart. As you more and more get in touch with what your life could be like, but isn't, there is a groan that comes up from the heart. Or as you more and more get in touch with what the church could be like, but isn't.

Again, I want to clearly say to you, it is not for our many words, or an emotional display that God answers. We are not putting something on with God. I am talking about a sincere, open-hearted desire that really does come from you. It is something that you really are concerned about, not something that you are pretending to be concerned about. But something that you really want God to do.

What is the basis of confidence that when we cry out to God for something that God will hear and answer?

Well, Daniel's basis of confidence is God's covenant. He prays, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. 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." Prayer sounds so different than the individual prayers of most Christians. Forgive me; give me the covenant Daniel is in - the covenant God made through Moses. A covenant is essentially a treaty between a conquering king and his conquered people - like Mount Sinai's conquering king, the Lord, and his conquered people Israel. In the Ancient World, the conquering kingdom made a treaty promising protection, security, provision, and prosperity. In return, people owed complete loyalty and obedience to the king's commands. Now in the case of breaking the king's commands, there were penalties - what we might call covenant curses.

Now, it has become very popular, especially across the church spectrum these days, in charismatic churches, in more and more conservative evangelical churches, certainly it has been long practiced in main line churches, to hold prayer services in which the church or its representatives - the pastors, a group of bishops some lay leaders - read a prayer of repentance or hold a service of repentance in which people repent not only for the sins that they have individually committed, but it has become more common for churches and their representatives to repent for the sins of the community and the sins of our nation. And people will cite Daniel 9 as the authority, or Nehemiah 9, as the authority for this kind of identificational repentance. There are numerous national prayer services and gatherings held in Washington DC where thousands of people are urged to repent for the sins of the nation.

Here's my question to you: What sins are proper for you to confess as you are praying and being fueled by scripture? You are trying to pray from your heart and maybe you are trying to write some of your prayers out. What sins are proper for you to confess? Just your own sins? The sins of your family? The sins of Columbus? The sins of America?

Often when these national prayer gatherings are being held, various organizations will send around prayer cards with a verse from 2 Chronicles 7:14 written on it. 2 Chronicles 7:14 has become familiar to some of you. It says this: **"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and**

turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

And so the appeal is made. America is in horrible shape. There is moral decline and immorality at the highest levels of government. We have so-called “family values” politicians committing adultery and leaving their wives after espousing some conservative line. And we hear about the family in America showing more and more signs of disintegration. And every other person is divorced. Divorce keeps happening at record levels. More and more children grow up without both of their natural parents at this time than at any other in history. Drugs have taken over large parts of our cities and have spread rapidly to rural communities.

But here is the promise, it said, “If my people will humble themselves and pray and turn from their wicked ways, then I will heal their land...” And so we hear America can be saved. America can be healed. America can be restored to the days of our forefathers.

Now, I want to ask you something. Is there any real spiritual transaction taking place when an Episcopal Bishop or a Pentecostal Assembly pastor or a group of 5-10,000 or 1-10 million Christians gather together and confess the sins of America before God? Is there a real spiritual transaction taking place? Can we repent for the sins of America or the sins of Columbus, Ohio?

Now, there is nothing wrong with desiring the place you live in to prosper. And we are told to pray for our national leaders and to pray for peace and to pray for justice. There is nothing wrong with desiring the country you live in to have a moral government. But, friends, I believe that much of the identificational repentance that is going on and is urged by prayer meetings, prayer groups and prayer cards, that there is a basic biblical and theological error that precedes from the quoting of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and the using of passages like Daniel 9 as a basis for repenting for the sins of America. And the basic error is this: America, despite all of our national myths to the contrary, is not in a covenant relationship with God. America is not, nor has it ever been, God’s people. The promise of God for the healing of the land was made to God’s people Israel in their unique role as the recipient of God’s covenant.

And when we read Daniel’s prayer, his prayer of identification was with the sins of Babylon or the sins of Persia. He wasn’t confessing the sins of Nebuchadnezzar or the sins of King Xerxes or King Darius. He was confessing the sins of his people, Israel. See, nowhere in the Bible do we ever read of any of God’s people confessing the sins of the nation where they happen to be. You never read about one of the prophets confessing the sins of Assyria. Or Nehemiah confessing the sins of Persia. Or Paul the apostle urging people to repent for the sins of Rome or the sins of Greece, or the sins of Herod.

Here is my point. We need to have a corporateness in our prayers and a corporateness in our repentance. Forgive us and our debts as we forgive others. It is right and good that you ask for forgiveness not only for your own sins, but also the sins of others. But

the others whose sins you are supposed to confess are not the sins of the entire world, but rather the sins of those you are spiritually related to by virtue of God's covenant. Christians are called to repent for and confess not the sins of America, but the sins of the Christian church – the sins of the Vineyard.

So when you come before God and you are repenting, it doesn't sound like: "Lord, on behalf of the city of Columbus, I confess compromise on the City Council and under the table deals between local businesses and big business and city officials. I confess the practice of abortion on Cleveland Avenue." It is, rather, "God, we your church, your people, the Vineyard, we confess with our mouths that you are Lord, but privately in our practice, O God, we, and I in private, in our workplace, in our choices, in the secret recesses of our hearts, we say you are Lord, but in the secret recesses of our hearts, we have a million other Lords. We in the church follow the culture's pattern in our choice of leisure, in our sexual practices, in our spending habits, in our marriages. O God, on behalf of the Vineyard, I confess our prayerlessness. On behalf of this church, I confess our lack of faith in healing. On behalf of the church, I confess we have lots of small group meetings, but not a lot of community and not enough genuine love. On behalf of this church, I confess that we don't have the kind of racial diversity that we should have. On behalf of this church, I confess that we have lots and lots of money, but not lots and lots of financial sacrifice or extravagant giving. Lord, you tell us that we are supposed to forgive everyone who has injured us, but I say to you, Lord, on behalf of this church, I know that many, many people are still holding grudges and they have laundry lists of offenses that have been committed against them. And yet, O God, we come to you asking you for blessing when we won't forgive those who have injured us."

You see, the prayer of confession/repentance is not just an individual prayer. It is not just confession/repentance for our sins alone, but it is confession/repentance for the sins of the church of Jesus Christ, the sins of the body of Christ. So we pray for America and its leaders. But we identify and repent for the sins of God's people.

Daniel prays to God not only on the basis of God's covenant, but on the basis of God's mercy. Verse 16:

"O Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us." Verse 18, "...We do not make these requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy."

As you come before God and you pour out your prayers, the basis upon which you are relying on God to answer is not because of your great righteousness, because you deserve it, because you have been serving God, because you have been faithful, you have been holding up your end of the bargain. Daniel says, "No. I am always in your debt, O God. I never hold up my side of the bargain the way I should. I appeal to you, Lord, not for justice and what I deserve..." Because what each one of us deserves is to be judged by God. What you deserve, if you pray for what you deserve, what you

deserve from God is to go to hell. We pray, instead, for God's great mercy, to have pity on us, O Lord. Give us not what we deserve, but what we don't deserve – mercy, grace, unmerited favor.

Daniel prays to God on the basis of God's covenant, his treaty with his people – the old covenant and for us the new covenant. We pray based on God's mercy. And Daniel prays based on God's desire to promote his name. Look at verse 17:

"Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary."

For your sake. And verse 18: "Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name."

Verse 19: "O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name."

I care about how you are viewed and how your word is viewed in my classroom, in the State House, in my law office, at the lunchroom table. He is saying, "Dear God, the people in my sociology class, the Professor in my philosophy class, the teacher in my English class or bio class – they openly mock you. Dear God, what is happening at my job is totally contrary to your character. The people around me act as if there is no God, as if you are dead, deaf, blind, dumb or too lazy to act. For the sake of your reputation, show us who you are. Dear God, people talk down to us as Christians. They marginalize us. They act as if we are dupes, too stupid to know any better. For your name's sake, for your reputation's sake, act.

Your people in the Sudan, your people in China, your people in Iran and Iraq, the people who bear your name, who are called Christians because of your son, Jesus Christ – your people are being murdered, put in prison, and raped, and their children are being enslaved. Intervene on their behalf for your name's sake.

Daniel knows that God cares about one thing supremely above anything else. He cares about his name. He has invested his whole being in his name. In his reputation, in his glory. Throughout the scripture when people want to receive something from God and they are reaching for a basis on which to receive it, they plead that God will act for his name's sake. When Moses wants to hold back the hand of God from judging his people in the wilderness, Moses prays in Numbers 14, "If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 'The Lord was not able to bring the people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert.' O God, don't just do it for us, or for my family, or the church...when we pray for God's name sake, we are saying, "Lord, do it for the sake of how you are viewed. Do it for your reputation." This is God-centered praying. It is okay to pray for your needs, to pray for health and for desires. God can lift our prayers to a whole other level where we start really being concerned about God. God I want you to be loved. I

want you to be adored. I want you to be worshipped; get glory for yourself in this situation.”

And when we pray on the basis of God’s covenant, on the basis of his mercy, on the basis of his desire to support his name, God answers.

We read in verses 20-21 God’s swiftness to answer. “While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my requests to the Lord my God for his holy hill—while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight [and you can underline that word “swift”].”

And then in verse 23 Gabriel says to Daniel, “As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.” God hears prayer the moment the prayer is offered. Sometimes there is delay in communicating to us an answer. Sometimes God wants to purify us through delay. To get us to center our hope on him rather than the desire we have. We have this idol in our life that we say we won’t be able to live successfully or fully unless we find a mate; unless we have a spouse. We won’t be able to live successfully or fully unless we are able to bear a child. We won’t be able to live successfully or fully unless we have a certain kind of a job. Or unless we have a financial breakthrough or healing.

God sometimes delays answering even though we are praying on the basis of his name. Or on the basis of his mercy. Or on the basis of his covenant. Sometimes God will delay to purge us of the idols that we are secretly pinning our hope on for success and fulfillment and prosperity and meaning – so that our entire hope will be on God alone.

And then Gabriel gives Daniel an answer. In this case, he got a quick answer. Would that all of us have a swift angel quickly bringing an answer to our prayers from God. Sometimes we have delays. Sometimes we get a quick answer. But Gabriel is communicating to Daniel. He says, “Therefore consider the message and understand the vision.”

Listen, Daniel is meditating on Jeremiah’s prophecy that Israel will be liberated from Babylon after seventy years of captivity. He is meditating on what it means that we will be liberated from Babylon after seventy years? When will the captivity be over? And he is praying passionately over that. And Gabriel comes along and says, “Daniel, I want to communicate to you a deeper liberation than even the one that Jeremiah promised about liberation from Babylon’s captivity. The seventy years are actually seventy times seven.” “Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.”

There is a deeper kind of liberation, not just liberation from national bondage, but liberation from sin that, Daniel, I am going to talk to you about. Because you have earnestly sought me, I am going to give you some insight and prophetic understanding,

and there is a freedom that I am going to bring about that goes beyond freedom from Babylon. I am going to put an end to sin. I am going to atone for wickedness. I am going to bring in everlasting righteousness and I am going to do it in seventy sevens, in other words, 490 years.

And then he goes on and says, "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes..." The anointed one, as you probably know, is a translation of the word "Meschiach" which means Messiah or Christ. "From the issuing of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, [the Messiah,] the ruler comes, there will be seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens.' [in other words, 69 'sevens' and Jerusalem will be rebuilt in the first seven times seven or 49 years] It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens' the Anointed One will be cut off and have nothing."

He is talking about the sacrificial death of Christ for our sins. I would be very careful, friends, about trying to work out the exact dating. I know there is a small segment of Christianity that has multiplied out the years and then find some decree, and they work with the lunar calendar and come up with a certain date for the death of Christ, the hour and the day. I am not sure; I am not convinced that that is what Daniel is getting at. I do think that this prophecy of the seventy weeks of years is designed to point Daniel to a greater and deeper liberation. Daniel is being pointed to Christ.

Let me finish with this thought. I believe that all true prayer, wherever it starts from, if you stay at it long enough, all true prayer will ultimately lead you to Christ and to his cross. You are praying for peace in your life. God is eventually going to bring you to the cross where you will find the source of your peace. The healing of your damaged conscience, you are praying over a bad habit, God is going to lead you to the source of power for self denial. He is going to bring you to the cross where you will find the ability to put to death the thing that you have been struggling with.

You are dealing with a broken relationship, eventually, God is going to bring you to the cross where he will show you that the death of his Son is the means by which you are going to be reconciled with somebody you are alienated from. Over and over again, as you grow in prayer, God is going to bring you to this insight that he gave to Daniel. He is going to bring you to the death of Messiah and the cross.

So let me review. You say, "Where do I begin with my praying?" Daniel 9 says to begin with the Bible. Begin with your Bible reading and off of what you see in the pages of the scripture, let that be the fuel for your prayers that day. Write your prayers out.

How should I pray? Pray with earnestness and fervency. Pray as if it makes a difference to you that you get an answer to your prayer.

On what basis can I appeal to God? On the basis of God's new covenant with us, his mercy, God's desire to have his name upheld.

And where is God going to lead me in prayer? He is going to lead me to the cross, and so it is there we turn.