

DANIEL'S PRAYER

DANIEL 9:1-27

Daniel and Revelation Series

OPENING PRAYER

God, we give you thanks that you are always attentive to our prayers and are not slow to answer us. You are sovereign over all of history and yet you care for us individually and respond to our cries. We put our trust in you afresh this day.

EXEGESIS

We have already met Daniel, the man of prayer, in chapter 6, refusing to abandon his daily practice of seeking God. Now we learn what he was praying for and why he was unwilling to stop. The second half of the book of Daniel is stocked with extraordinary visions and detailed timetabling, which have been the source of great speculation through the centuries and not a few confident (but incorrect) predictions of the end of the age. But at the heart of this section of the book is a prayer of desperation, pleading and determination.

Daniel has been reading the prophecies of Jeremiah and becomes convinced that the exile of the Israelites should soon be ending, if God is true to his promise of restoration. Rather than simply waiting for this to happen, Daniel turns to prayer.

His prayer is both personal and representative. He confesses his own sins and the failures of his people. He looks back over Israel's chequered history and grieves the disobedience, neglect of covenant responsibilities, and failure to respond to the warnings of the prophets. He does not suggest Israel deserves to be rescued from Israel.

However, he expresses hope and confidence that God will act. God rescued the nation from Egypt, so why not from Babylon? God's name and reputation are at stake, Daniel argues, for Israel has become a disgrace – bringing Israel back to Jerusalem will change this. Above all, he believes God is merciful and ready to forgive.

After three weeks of fasting and prayer (chapter 10:2), Daniel receives a remarkable answer through the arrival of the angel Gabriel, who assures him that his prayers were heard from the moment he began to plead with God. The rest of the book of Daniel spells out that answer in great detail, giving him far more information than he needed – how empires will rise and fall, how earthly events interact with heavenly conflicts, and how God will bring, not just Israel's exile, but all of history to an end.

The timing of Daniel's prayer is significant – the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede. The Babylonian empire has fallen, as all empires do eventually. This gives Daniel hope and impels

him to passionate prayer, urging God to be true to the promises made to Jeremiah and to act for the sake of God's people and God's own reputation.

REFLECTION

Prayer is often regarded as primarily a way of aligning those who pray with the purposes of God. But Daniel's prayer is presented in a more robust and challenging way. His prayers are intended to move history forward, to prevail upon God to act, to hold God accountable to God's promises. His prayers summon an angel and in some way affect the outcome of the conflict raging in the heavens. He prays with humility and contrition, but also with great boldness and passion. Daniel appears to believe that praying is effective! How does our experience of prayer, our understanding of God, relate to this perspective on prayer?

This chapter and the following chapters are set against a backcloth of spiritual warfare, in which angelic beings fight with each other and there is some kind of interplay between this conflict and the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms and empires. Is this apparently mythological worldview impossible for secularised western Christians to embrace or do we need to critique the 'disenchanted' of the world in modern culture and recover a more holistic understanding of reality and the outworking of history?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How uncomfortable do you feel with this perspective on prayer and spiritual warfare? Why do you feel uncomfortable (if you do)?
2. How do you respond to Daniel confessing not only his own sins but those of his nation? Is there a role for such representational praying today?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, as the disciples asked you when you walked with them, please teach us to pray. Impart to us passion for your name and your purposes, not just our own desires. Forgive us our sins and lead us forward in the ways of your coming kingdom.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Ernest Lucas: Daniel (IVP, 2002)
- Walter Wink: Engaging the Powers (Fortress Press, 1992)