

THRIVING in BABYLON

A STUDY OF DANIEL

SERMON TITLE: Prayer and Prophecy
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 8-9

DATE: July 28, 2019
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Sometimes life feels like it's all about survival. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is keep our head above water. This is true for everyone, but especially for followers of Jesus. As Christians, we are exiles, and that means that survival is doubly difficult. But God has not merely called us to survive; he has called us to thrive. And the place that God called us to thrive is in Babylon - the place of our exile. With this in view, the book of Daniel is a perfect picture for us of what it looks like to be faithful in a foreign land that isn't our home. Daniel doesn't merely survive in Babylon. Rather, with God's help, he thrives there. What would it look like for us to do the same here in Greenville?

Every week we've been looking at how the book of Daniel speaks to God's people in any place and at any time. It speaks to people when they find themselves in the minority, and when they are trying to live faithful and hopeful lives in a culture that does not embrace their beliefs and values. One of the things we haven't talked about so far in this book is how Daniel and his three friends ended up in exile in the first place.

The bottom line is this: When God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, he met with them on Mt Sinai. There God and Israel entered into a binding covenant.

If Israel obeyed God's laws, God would bless them. If the nation turned away from God, he would discipline them. And for most of their history, they failed miserably. After nearly 500 years of God calling his people back to himself through prophet after prophet, God sent his people into exile in Babylon, where many would live for the rest of their lives. As we've seen, Daniel is a really good guy. Not that he is without sin, but no sin is recorded against him.

Think about this—*Daniel is in exile by no fault of his own*. He's been faithful, but the majority of his ancestors, kings, priests, and countrymen had rebelled against God, and so he's stuck in Babylon. When God's people are a faithful minority, if you're not careful, you can begin to see yourself as "God's faithful few." When you do this, you can begin to see yourself as morally superior to everybody else. It's easy to throw yourself pity-parties, taking on a victim/martyr mentality. It's easy to become self-righteous, mean-spirited, angry, condemning of the people who make life hard for you. But Daniel isn't like that. And his prayer here in chapter 9 shows us the heart of what it means to be faithful in "Babylon" without distancing ourselves from the culture around us.

THE PRAYER —READ 9:1-19— Daniel doesn't throw himself a pity-party. He does something really strange. He confesses his sin and the sins of his people. There's a lot we could talk about here in this prayer of confession, but I'm just going to focus on one thing.

Big Idea: The heartbeat of Daniel's prayer is focused on God's character, and God's character shapes his prayer and his character.

There's one main thing that he emphasizes about God's character, and that is *God's righteousness* (see v7, v14, vv16-19). What Daniel understands about God's character is what shapes his prayer and his character. His understanding of God's righteousness makes him humble, not proud. It prevents him from taking on a victim/martyr mentality. Instead, it causes him to humble himself before God. *So what does it mean to be "righteous?"* It's not a word we use every day. It's a religious word, *but not really*. It's a relationship word. You can be a good person by yourself, but you can't be a righteous person by yourself.

Tim Mackie and the Bible Project guys define "righteous" like this: Righteous is a word that describes someone's character, not in and of themselves, but the character you see demonstrated in how they treat the people in the relationships. O.T./Hebrew scholar Bruce Waltke says a righteous person is someone who lives in a right relationship with God and other people. One way to put it is that a righteous person "does right by people." *So how does Daniel say God "does right" by Israel?*

In 9:7, he says, "Lord, you have displayed your righteousness to us, and that's caused us to feel ashamed." You were faithful to us, but we've been unfaithful to you. You kept covenant with us, but we haven't kept covenant with you. You are righteous, but we've not been righteous. Then he goes on to say in 9:14, "Lord, you have brought disaster upon us because you are righteous." *What does that mean?* It means that God was and is right in judging the sins of his people and bringing serious consequences upon evil and destructive behavior. God would not be righteous if he did not bring justice to wrongdoing.

But there's another part to God's righteousness. In 9:16-19, Daniel prays: "Lord, in keeping with your righteous actions, turn away your anger and your wrath...not because we're righteous, but because of your mercy on us, Lord, listen! Lord, forgive!" He says: "Lord, just like you were righteous to bring justice—I'm asking you now, because you're righteous, to have mercy on us and forgive us. Not because we deserve it—not because we're righteous. But because Lord, you're righteous in your justice and righteous in your mercy. God does right in bringing his justice to bear on sin, and he does right in forgiving our sin."

Daniel sees God as righteous by letting us sit in the mess that we've made for ourselves. But God isn't fully righteous until he does something to deal with, restore, and heal the mess. And it's this rich view of God's righteous that shapes Daniel's character and makes him humble and not proud. As Daniel kneels before the perfect righteousness of God, he sees himself as every bit as guilty as those who were more unfaithful than him. He sees himself as a participant in this huge mess. He may have contributed to it in a way that's different than the corrupt kings of Israel or the people who sacrificed their children to foreign gods, but when he kneels before God's perfect righteousness, he sees, owns, and confesses his guilt. A true grasp of God's righteousness humbles God's people. So, that's his prayer, and what's even more strange is that the answer to his prayer comes in the form of a prophecy.

THE PROPHECY—READ 9:20-27—Daniel has been reading Jeremiah 25, and he sees that God said that Israel would be in exile for 70 years. No doubt he would have read about God establishing a New Covenant with Israel in chapter 31. So, Daniel thinks that the exile will bring an end to Israel's sin and rebellion. And when they return to Jerusalem, they will also return to the glory days of David's kingdom. But Gabriel comes and tells Daniel, "No," the 70-year captivity is not enough to deal with Israel's sin. Israel will atone for her iniquities to usher in a new age of peace of righteousness (v24). It's going to be 70 weeks, literally, 70, sevens = 490 years. Those years are divided into 7 sevens, 62 sevens, and 1 seven. This is a very complex passage of biblical prophecy. Nearly every line and phrase are debated, but there are three main views of this passage. Within each of those views, there are permutations about the numbers, literal/symbolic, and many other things.

Here's a quick overview: First, some think everything written here was fulfilled around 160BC, 150 years before Jesus, under the rule of a Syrian king named Antiochus Epiphanes (there's a lot about him in Dan11). However, A.E. came to Jerusalem, conquered it, assassinated the High Priest, and desecrated the Temple. He set up an abomination of desolation in the Temple, but he came to an end; the Temple was cleansed, and worship was restored. That all took place in the years between Malachi and Matthew. Second, others think that this prophecy runs through the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and extends up to Jesus. Everything therein v24 was completely fulfilled in Jesus' first coming when Jesus died

on the Cross for our sins. Third, others think that this prophecy runs through Antiochus Epiphanes, up through the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and then on the Cross Jesus fulfilled what's written there in v24, but not entirely. People in group 3 believe that in his first coming Jesus inaugurated a the New Kingdom and a New Covenant. But, the complete and final fulfillment will come at his Second Coming after a period of Great Tribulation. This is how I understand the passage, as someone who ascribes to a premillennial understanding of prophecy.

[To see how I understand the 70 weeks of Daniel see my chart—Daniel's Seventy Weeks]

Here's what everybody agrees on: Did the 70 years deal fully with Israel's sin and transgression? NO.

There's a longer period of time that's going to come, and near the end of that time, the 490 years, an "anointed" one will come. The Greek word for "anointed" is Christ = Messiah the Prince (NASB), but he will be cut off (die). Shortly after, this really bad ruler, patterned after the 4th beast (the really scary Super beast from chp7 and chp8), will completely destroy Jerusalem and with it, the Temple, so that not one stone is left upon another, as Jesus said (and that did happen in 70AD). All of this is part of the long story of how God is going to v24 "finish transgression, put an end to sin, atone for iniquity, seal up the prophecy, and usher in a time of eternal righteousness." Everybody agrees with that.

As I understand it, the first coming of Jesus and his death on the Cross for our sins did bring an end to the reign of sin and death. It did this by making righteousness, right standing with God, possible for everyone who puts their trust in Messiah Jesus for salvation. *But we are still waiting* for complete fulfillment when Christ returns and sets up his Kingdom in a world made new. When He returns, there will be no more sin, sorrow, and death. It will be a kingdom characterized by eternal righteousness, that is, by people living in a right relationship with God and each other forever.

And I could be wrong about my view, but I don't think I am. Lots of very committed, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving people hold different views. Again, what everybody agrees on is Daniel 9 points to the brokenness and sin of Israel. The brokenness runs so deep that the 70-year exile in Babylon didn't deal with the heart of the problem. There's still something left that God's righteousness needs to accomplish to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin once and for all, and to atone for Israel's evil fully. You following me? Gabriel tells Daniel that there's something yet to be done where God's righteous justice and God's righteous mercy converge to punish sin and forgive sin.

Now, tell me, what greater something could you be looking for than the moment of the Cross? The Cross is precisely the moment when the evil nature of our sin was exposed. The Cross is when God's righteous justice was satisfied, and God's righteous mercy was poured out. If you really grasp what happened on the Cross at that moment in history, you realize that it's not some distant thing that happened some 2000 years ago, it's an event that exposes all of us today, because the truth is, we were all participants in putting Jesus on that Cross. I wasn't there, I didn't physically hold the hammer that nailed him there, but we are all responsible. My sin and your sin put him there every bit as much as those who nailed him there. Just like you and I are participants and contributors in nailing Jesus to that Cross, we are also participants and contributors to the ongoing sin in our world today.

If you understand the perfect righteousness of God, it will humble you because you realize that we all are participants in the sins that dominate the landscape of our nation today. You'll confess that we all are contributors to what's gone wrong with this country.

Think, since the last time we were together, we all have ways that we've failed. We all have ways that we've sinned. We all have ways we've compromised. We've all been inconsistent as followers of Jesus, and in all those ways, we've all contributed to the problems in our world. The right response is to confess our sins and then rejoice in the Good News that our righteous God has judged our sin at the Cross, and we live daily in his mercy and grace. Amen?

Discussion Starters:

1. When you look at what's going in our country and in our world, do you sometimes battle a victim/martyr mentality? Talk about that. Do you battle a self-righteous, angry, mean-spirited tone in how you talk about what's going on? How can falling into a mindset that "I am one of 'God's faithful few' keep you from putting Jesus on display?
2. READ 9:1-19. What was it about Daniel's prayer that was strange? What was the focus of Daniel's prayer?
3. What does "righteous" mean? How is a person "righteous?" Give examples.
4. How did Daniel's view of God's righteousness shape his praying and his character?
5. How and why is God righteous in justice? How and why is God righteous in his mercy?
6. How does a true grasp of God's righteousness humble us?
7. READ 9:20-27. What did Daniel expect to happen at the end of the 70 year exile? Read v24 again.
8. How long did Gabriel say it would take for God to accomplish v24?
9. Look at Charlie's chart and discuss how this way of viewing Daniel's 70 weeks might explain how God will bring history to what he has planned from the beginning?
10. What is it that everybody agrees on? How does the Cross demonstrate both God's righteous justice and God's righteous mercy?