

How Long, O Lord?

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[0 : 0 0] that we might see great things from your word and soften our hearts that we might receive it. Please loose our tongues that we might proclaim your word and we ask this for the glory of your son in whose name we pray. Amen. Well it is the question of the godly. It can be raised by terror or blasphemy even or just the plainly inexplicable and the prayer is this one or the question is this one. How long oh lord? That is how long will these things go on? How long before you restore your honour? How long before you assert your sovereign rule over the earth? How long before you do what you've led us to expect you ought to be doing? That is the question that is raised in chapter 8 of Daniel and the answer given by the messenger of God was somewhat enigmatic. The terror that was portrayed is still overwhelming but life must go on and so in the closing verses of Daniel chapter 8

Daniel gets up and goes about the king's business and the question of how long though continues to play on his mind and that is the context of chapter 9 which we are going to look at. Daniel is in Babylon. He's still serving a human king, a king not a believer in the god he believes in. He's still serving a greater king that is the god he does believe in. He's still concerned for the king of heaven's glory and honour, still concerned for the king of heaven's people, still wanting to know what could it be that God has in mind for them? And I want to give you just a little clue as to the rest. You'll see in chapter 9 verse 1 that he talks of Darius and there are lots of reasons why I am going to do this which we're not going to explain but I think Darius mentioned there is actually Cyrus. I think the two are synonymous and that will be explained in a moment. So with massive questions like that in mind where do you think Daniel would go? Well verse 2 tells us

Daniel goes to where all the godly go when they want to know God and they want to know God's purposes. That is he goes to the scriptures and he goes to where the godly go for answers. Why? Because Daniel knows that the godly know that the books of scripture have authority and if you want to find out what the purposes of God are that's where you go to. Scriptures where he outlines them. But I want you to notice what he does when he opens the scriptures. Can you see it there? He takes those words that he does not understand and he prays over them. He thinks on them. He throws them over and over again in his mind.

He asks God for enlightenment. Friends I wonder if you are like Daniel when you read the Bible. First do you even read the Bible any longer? But when you do do you read it like Daniel? That is do you read them prayerfully, dependently, seriously? These are the habits of godly people. Such habits feed the soul of the godly and such disciplines inform their knowledge about God and God's purposes in his world. Now in all likelihood the verses that Daniel was reflecting on come from Jeremiah 25 and 29. I put them in the outline so you don't have to look them up. They're there in the outline I've given you.

Jeremiah 25 verses 8 to 11 reads like this. Therefore the Lord Almighty says this. Because you have not listened to my words I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon declares the Lord and I will bring him against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn and an everlasting ruin and I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness the voices of the bride and the bridegroom the sound of the millstone and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland and these nations will serve the king of Babylon 70 years. Then we read Jeremiah 28. This is what the Lord says when 70 years are completed for Babylon I will come to you and fulfill my good 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 a hope and a future then you will call on me and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart and I will be found by you declares the Lord and I'll bring you back from captivity and I will gather you from all the nations and the places where I have banished you declares the Lord and I will bring you back from the place from which I carried you into exile. Now friends the first year of Darius if I'm right is the same as the first year of Cyrus is the time when Isaiah had prophesied that God would bring his people back from exile. 70 years. There is Daniel. He's sitting in exile. He's reading about the 70 years from the prophet.

[5 : 16] What does he hear? He hears God say that when he prays God will listen God will be found by him. So what does he do? I don't think he's thinking so much about the 70 years. He does what God says at this point. He starts to pray and that is because he knows that the secret of this thing is found in prayer.

What does he pray for? Well he prays confessing for sin. Why is that? Why do you confess sins at this point? You do so because you know it's because of sin that the people of God have been in exile these 70 years.

And the prayer that Daniel prays is magnificent. Look at what he says. O Lord the great and awesome God who keeps covenant. You who have steadfast love with those who love and obey your commandments.

We have sinned. We have done wrong. We have acted wickedly. We have rebelled. We have not listened to your servants the prophets. Now what is the one thing that strikes you as you read those those prayers? What shouts out to you?

Can you see it? The glaring word is we isn't it? We have sinned. We have done wrong. We have acted wickedly.

[6 : 26] We have rebelled. We have not listened to your servants the prophets. Notice what it is not. It is not they did wrong and now I'm reaping the consequences.

It is we. We have. Daniel's identifying himself with the sins of his ancestors and interceding for others. He prays as the representative of the nation and then he confesses God's righteousness.

Look at verse 7. Lord you are righteous. In other words Lord you are right. We belong here in exile because of sin. This is where we deserve to be because of sin.

And then the second half of verse 7. Lord you are righteous but this day we are covered with shame. And verse 8 gives the reason for that shame.

It is because of our unfaithfulness to you. And the rest of Daniel's prayer continues in the same vein. Daniel acknowledges the sin of his own generation. He acknowledges the sin of the generations before his.

[7 : 28] He casts himself on the mercy of God and the pinnacle is reached in verse 15 and following. Can you see it there? Now Lord our God who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day we have sinned, we have done wrong.

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 ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all around us.

Daniel's grasped a great truth at this point. He's reflected it in his prayer. You see he doesn't say this and now Lord turn away your anger and your wrath because well we've now picked up our act and we've stopped sinning.

And nor does he say this now Lord God turn away your anger and your wrath because well now I Daniel have now arrived on the scene I'm a holy man unlike all my ancestors.

And no he doesn't say that either does he? Instead he says God we still deserve punishment for sin but please please turn away your anger and your wrath from it.

[8 : 44] And then he goes on in verse 17 Now Lord our God hear the prayers and petitions of your servant for your sake Lord look with favour on your desolate sanctuary. I wonder if you can hear the basis of his pleading.

He's asking God to act for his own sake. He's saying God it is your city that has been devastated. It is your people that are an object of scorn.

It is against you that the nations are setting themselves. For your sake turn things around. For your sake restore Jerusalem. Give ear O God and hear.

Open your eyes. See the desolation of the city that bears your name. We don't make this request of you on the basis of our own righteousness but on the basis of your great mercy.

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. Here we have an insight into Daniel of the whole book.

[9 : 49] This is the Daniel you see who stood against Nebuchadnezzar and the great kings of the ancient Near East utterly dependent upon God. the Daniel who knew that all he had and all that he has came from God.

All that he was came from God. The Daniel who knew that any mercy he received any rescue he experienced any righteousness he had came from God.

It was the gift of God and so as he reads Jeremiah he sees the sin of himself and his people he goes to the only place where there can be hope he casts himself at the feet of God and the mercy and grace of God.

There is nothing in him or his people that can make God respond but there is something in God and so he goes to God. There is God's compassion and kindness and steadfast love and he knows it.

He knows that God is a God who is loyal to his covenant and he knows that God is a God who is faithful to his word and so Daniel knows he can rely on God when he can rely on no one and nothing else.

[11 : 00] Friends before we go on to it it would be good for us to stop and soak this in. I have emphasized it deliberately. You see God's own glory and his nature to have mercy are the prerequisites that are the bedrock of our relationship with God.

They undergird our salvation and our redemption. God's nature is to be loving giving just generous and gracious and to be saved and to continue in his presence.

We must rely on these things in God not on what is in us. We must start being we start being Christians by believing this don't we?

We cannot become a Christian without saying I have nothing to bring but what you have to give. We go on being Christians by believing this.

We know we are sinful. We know that God must act according to his nature. We know we deserve judgment and punishment but we know that God's nature is to be merciful and so in the face of our own sinfulness all we can do is cling to that.

[12 : 11] It is that mercy that is fully and finally demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ and all who grasp this so call upon God to save and will be saved.

They can be assured of salvation because that's what God's nature is to be merciful. Now before we go on and look at God's response I want to reflect on our own prayers in the light of what we see here.

I want to ask you to ask yourself three simple questions. The first one is this what is uppermost in your mind when you pray? Is it yourself your desires your wants your ambitions your glory or is it God himself his desires his wants his purpose his glory?

Daniel tells us which way to go in this doesn't he? He says the latter is right our focus is to be on God and when our focus is on God we'll get ourselves in proper perspective.

So let me urge you to think about this whenever you pray whenever you pray on your own or when you pray in a corporate setting or when you pray as a congregation ask yourself are these the sorts of prayers that are focused on God?

[13 : 25] Are these sorts of prayers the prayers of a congregation focused on God? Are they about God's purpose God's character and God's glory? That's the first question. Second question what is it that structures your prayers?

Is it your own concerns or is it the concerns of God? Is it your own will or is it the will of God? Let me say that the prayers that God delights in are the second sort.

They're the sorts of prayers that Daniel prays. They're based on God's will in scripture and structured around them. They reflect God's promises. Only these prayers can be absolutely assured of God's answer.

So whenever you pray personally or corporately keep that in mind and one way to make sure you pray that way is to keep your Bible open while you pray. Read it, absorb it, wrestle with it and pray it like Daniel did.

And the final question, who has the ultimate say? When you pray, what is your attitude? Is it, God, you'd better do my will or else?

[14 : 24] Or is it, God, not my will but yours be done? Because that is the prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ when facing crisis, isn't it? Not my will but thy will be done.

It is the prayer which gives God his proper place. It is the prayer of the person who knows God is loving and righteous. The prayer of the person who desires God to be God and not God to be me or you.

So whenever you pray personally or corporately, keep that in mind. By all means plead and urge and argue and ask God for the things you need. But remember that God is in heaven and you are on earth and remember that he alone is God and entrust yourself to him.

He always has your best interests in mind. So those reflections on prayer, let's look at the response of God. While Daniel is still praying God is active, look at verses 20 and 21.

Daniel tells us, while I was speaking and praying, while I was still in prayer, Gabriel the man came to me in swift flight. That is such a beautiful picture, isn't it? Can you see what's happening?

[15 : 26] Here is Daniel praying and while the words are on his lips, the answer flies out to Daniel from God.

Gabriel comes in swift flight. Like a lightning bolt from God, he arrives with an explanation from God and notice the words of Gabriel in verse 22. He instructed me and said to me, Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding and as soon as you began to pray, a word went out which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.

Therefore consider the word and understand the vision. Do you notice what's strange about the words of Gabriel? Daniel, there has been no vision in this chapter. It's the previous chapter.

That was the vision that Daniel had then. In this chapter he's been more worried about the exile and its end. What Gabriel is doing is telling Daniel that the answer is about to come from God.

So friends, I want you to now, in your Bibles, pick up this particular piece and have a look at it. because you'll find here a great secret from Daniel. So have a look at Daniel chapter 9.

[16 : 36] So he's speaking and he says, from verse 24, 77s 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 the vision and the prophecy and to anoint the most holy place.

Now friends, I don't have time to go into all the details of this, but I want to tell you there's only one place in history where all those things have happened at one particular point. Have a look at them all again.

Look at them there in this. 77s are decreed for you, for your people and your holy city, to finish transgression, finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring an everlasting righteousness, righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and that means I think to fulfil them, and to anoint the most holy place or the most holy one.

Where has all of this happened? It has happened in the Lord Jesus Christ, hasn't it? And do you know what that means? Do you know what God's answer therefore to Daniel is?

He's saying the question's not the 70 years, but the question is when will all my purposes be fulfilled for my people? And it is coming down the track, not today, not in the first year of Cyrus, not in the first year of Darius, no, it is coming down the track, 77s.

[18 : 14] And friends, it did happen. It happened through the Lord Jesus Christ. All of those things were fulfilled. He was the anointed one spoken of here.

And now I want to tell you what the implications of that are. What was Daniel yearning for? He was yearning for an end to the exile.

And what did God answer him with? He said, Daniel, it's not the end of the exile you need to be looking for. It's the end of sin.

And it's coming a long way down the track. There's a while to wait for it yet. And friends, we don't get any news from the Old Testament that Daniel ever returned to the land when the rest did after the 70 years.

So he probably never saw the return. and he never saw the days of the Lord Jesus when these verses were fulfilled. Friends, sometimes prayer is like that, isn't it?

[19 : 30] Think of the great ones of the Bible. Did Abraham get all his prayers answered and all the promises of God to him fulfilled in his life? No. Did Isaac?

Did Jacob? Did Joseph? Joseph didn't. Joseph said, bury my bones when you finally get to the land. Take them with you. He knew he wasn't going to get it in his day.

It was coming. Friends, our prayers will often be like the prayers of Daniel. Modelled around, formed by scripture, never seeing their result in our own day.

Let me tell you a little story. Heather's grandmother, great-grandmother, prayed for her children to be converted, for her grandchildren to be converted, and for her great-grandchildren to be people of faith.

She never saw many of those children and great-grandchildren, but she knew where to put her hope. It was in the mercy and grace and kindness of God.

[20 : 44] And she knew she could pray knowing by faith that God would answer her prayers. And there are hordes of them, let me tell you, that are Christians. And God has answered her prayers.

friends, the Christian faith is a faith that is there for the long haul. It is there for the long haul.

It is not always about getting what we need now, immediately, spontaneously. And many of us, I know, are in Christian faith for the long haul.

And that's what it's about. I know many godly folk amongst you who know that's what it's about. But I want to urge all of us that this is what Christian faith is about.

It's about praying dependent upon the mercy and kindness of God and maybe being willing never to see our prayers actualised in our own life.

[21 : 50] Are you in it for the long haul? people? Can you take the promises of God on the basis of God's mercy and kindness and grace and know he's going to fulfil them even if you never see them in this life?

Then you stand with the great ones. Read Hebrews 11 perhaps tonight just to see how they were just like you. Let's pray. Gracious God we know that you are the God of all grace and kindness that your actions in your world are determined by this grace and kindness.

Father we pray that you would help us to trust that this is who you are and what you are like. and to stake our all on it. And Father should you call us to help us to be ready to wait.

Confident in that's who you are and what you are like and that you know what you're doing in your world. And we pray these things in Jesus name. Amen.