

UPSIDE DOWN: THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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SCRIPTURE: Daniel 9

A father was very busy one day and wanted to give his Very bored daughter something to do so he could finish his work. So, he found a picture of the world on a sheet of newspaper. He tore it into smaller pieces and told her to see if she could put the pieces back together correctly, kind of like she would work a puzzle. The little girl agreed. Five minutes later, she showed her father the pieces – put back together perfectly. He was shocked. When he asked her how she had done the task so quickly, she said, “Oh, on the back was the picture of Jesus and I figured if I got Him right, the world would fall into place.”¹

Today, our world seems upside down and in chaos – all torn up in pieces. We are being confronted by crisis on so many fronts – from the Covid surges around our country – to the great unemployment figures and concerns about the economy – to racial tensions and civil unrest – and then there’s the wildfires in California and Colorado – and the amazing amount of hurricanes. And put on top of all of that – the division of our country across political lines and the upcoming election. Our world seems upside down and we all are a little bit on edge; in fact, psychiatrists are now telling us we are facing disaster fatigue – worn out from it all – exhausted and stressed out. We are in a crisis – with our world turned upside down. We’re crying out, “How long? How long is this going to go on? Is life ever going to get back to normal?” Everything just seems to be in a mess. If there was ever a time in our lives that we need to “get Jesus right – to look to Him and get our focus on Him – it is now!” In fact, I believe that God is calling to us in the midst of these difficult times – to turn back to Him and get the world “back into place”. As the little girl said, “If I get Him right – then the world will fall into place.”

The prophet Daniel was living in an upside-down world – ever since the Babylonians came in and conquered his homeland of Judah and exiled him to Babylon when he was 15 years old. Talk about changes and chaos. He had so many changes and losses – and threats to his life... including having to face the lion’s den for refusing to worship a pagan statue. In our passage for today in Daniel, chapter 9, we discover that it is the beginning of yet another king’s reign. Daniel and the other Israelites have been there about 67 years. Can’t you just imagine that they are saying, “How long, O Lord? How long is this exile going to be? How long will our world be turned upside down? When will we be able to go home?”

When the story opens, we see Daniel, as was his custom, having his quiet time, reading the Bible, and praying. On this day, he was reading from the prophet Jeremiah – reading once again about how his ancestors had not listened to God and had continued to worship idols and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord. God had sent prophets with the message to turn from the evil road you are traveling – but they would not listen to them. Finally, God had enough – God sent the Babylonians who conquered the land and captured the people who would be held captive for 70 years.

And then he read in Jeremiah 29, beginning in verse 10 - these words from the Lord:

“You will be in Babylon for 70 years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for Me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you,” says the Lord.’

You will be in Babylon for 70 years! The end of the exile was coming soon! There was hope and a promise! But the people had to change their ways – they needed to seek God’s face – looking for Him with their *whole* heart.

So, Daniel did just that. Daniel 9:3 says that Daniel turned to the Lord and pleaded with Him in prayer and fasting. This was not a casual, prayer – just talking without really thinking about what you are saying. No, it was a deliberate turning of Daniel’s face towards God – pouring his heart out to God. Daniel goes to God, in a desperate, heart-felt prayer to repent of personal and national sins and plead with God for forgiveness.

Daniel begins by praying: *“O Lord, You are great and awesome God! You always fulfill Your covenant and keep Your promises of unfailing love to those who love You and obey Your commands. But we have sinned and done wrong. We have rebelled against You and scorned Your commands and regulations. We have refused to listen to Your servants the prophets, who spoke on Your authority to our kings and princes and ancestors and to all the people of the land. Lord, You are right; but as You see, our faces are covered with shame...But the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against Him.”*

What is interesting in this prayer of confession is how Daniel prays. Do you notice how many times Daniel says “we” and “our”? We have sinned...we have rebelled...we refused to listen ... our faces are covered with shame. You know we see Daniel as an exemplary man – as Greg said last week, someone like David – a man after God’s own heart. So why does he say “we”? Well, Daniel was identifying with the sins of the people, taking on those sins as if they were his own. He was interceding for the people – standing in the gap for them.

The idea of “standing in the gap” comes from Ezekiel 22:30: *“I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one.”* Ezekiel 22:40 When Jerusalem was in a horrible state in the midst of their sin and rebellion, God said He was searching for someone who would intercede or stand in the gap in prayer for the nation and the city – but he found no one. But now, after years in captivity – Daniel was the one who prayed and stood in the gap. He confessed their sins and prayed that they might know the forgiveness and mercy of God.

Daniel continues his prayer by saying: *“O our God, hear your servant’s prayer! Listen as I plead. For Your own sake, Lord, smile again on Your desolate sanctuary. O my God, lean down and listen to me. Open Your eyes and see our despair. See how your city – the city that bears your name – lies in ruins. We make this plea, not because we deserve help, but because of*

Your mercy. O Lord, hear. O Lord - forgive!! O Lord - listen and act! For Your own sake, do not delay, O my God, for Your people and Your city that bears Your name."

Daniel continued praying, confessing his own sins and the sins of the people – and then look what happened. Look at verse 21 – *"As I was praying, Gabriel, whom I had seen in the earlier vision, came swiftly to me at the time of the evening sacrifice. He explained to me, "Daniel, I have come here to give you insight and understanding. The moment you began praying a command was given. And now I am here to tell you what it was, for you are very precious to God."*

Now isn't that amazing! The very moment Daniel began praying a command was given to answer Daniel's prayer. An angel was sent to give him insight and understanding about the vision for the future.

Think about that for our own lives. When we turn our face to God in prayer – God hears us, and the answer may be on its way even before we finish praying. In fact, in Isaiah 65:24, God gives us this wonderful promise that says: *"I will answer them before they even call to me. While they are still talking about their needs, I will go ahead and answer their prayers!"*

God answered the prayer of Daniel – his heartfelt and desperate prayer for the nation. His prayer made a difference and helped to bring about the deliverance of the people in exile. Warren Wiersbe said something interesting about that. He said, *"God doesn't have to wait for the entire nation to repent and cry out for mercy – He will start to work when He hears the believing prayers of one faithful intercessor."* And then he asked that probing question: *"Are you that one man or one woman who will begin to intercede for the glory of God's name in America?"*²

If there ever was a time that we needed people to stand in the gap and intercede for our nation, it is now! The current distrust and hatred and turmoil in our nation, racial tensions and civil unrest, and the devastating effects of the pandemic, threatens us all. More and more we have turned away from following the ways of God and are following our own sinful ways... living as if we don't even need God. And on top of all of that – we are sitting on the edge of a national election that seems explosive and divisive and has such implications for our future. Our nation is in a "mess" as some have said – at the point of "unraveling and exploding." Now, more than ever, we all need to be that person, interceding for our nation – because it is only by turning to God that we will find healing and hope for our land. As Ann Graham Lotz says, *"When faced with God's righteous judgment, there is nothing . . . nothing . . . no politics or president, no government or agreement, no institution or organization, no media or ministry, no economy or military, no alliance or treaty . . . nothing will turn our nation around except prayer. Heartfelt, desperate prayer. Prayer where the pray-ers rend their hearts, return to the Cross, and repent of personal and national sin. Only prayer that moves Heaven can change a nation. And that's the Daniel Prayer. Daniel's story emphasizes that heaven can be moved, and a nation changed, even when just one person prays. We watch the news and think, Oh, my goodness, what can I do? We can pray,"* she says. *"We'll never know the difference the prayer of one person makes until we pray."*³

God is looking for people who stand in the gap and intercede for His lost world. God is calling you and me to stand in the gap for Galesburg, for Illinois, for the United States. God is calling us to intercede for our neighborhoods, our churches, our families. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. It can change a life, a home, a marriage, a church, a community, a city, and an entire nation.

God says in II Chronicles, *“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 I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”*

What is it going to take to change our country? How can we get our upside-down world back into the right place? Only praying and seeking God’s face – repenting and turning to the Lord. Standing in the gap for our hurting and broken nation.

For you see - once we get Jesus back in focus – our world will fall in place!

Let us pray: *O Lord, we lift our hearts in prayer to You. See how our nation is hurting – and is turning away from You. Turn us back to You, Lord. We make this plea, not because we deserve help, but because of Your mercy. O Lord, hear. O Lord - forgive!! O Lord - listen and act! And move in us, your disciples, that we can be Your light and bring Your love and peace to our world. Through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN*

BENEDICTION:

As you go into this week – seek and love the Lord with all your heart and soul. And stand in the gap in prayer for your family - our community and our nation! And may God bless and keep you in all your ways. AMEN

RESOURCES

¹Tony Evans, *Tony Evans Book of Illustrations*.

²Warren Wiersbe quote in Precept Austin. https://www.preceptaustin.org/daniel_9_commentary1

³Mark Kelley, “Stand Up – Session One – Pray Like Daniel Prayed”, Bible Studies for Life. <https://biblestudiesforlife.com/stand-up-session-1-pray-like-daniel-prayed/>