

The Answer to Prayer

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Date: 09 May 2021

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[0 : 00] Stand-up comedian, comic, author, broadcaster, Frank Skinner, released a new book called A Comedian's Prayer Book. And Frank Skinner, if you know him or have seen him on TV, he's very open about his Catholic faith and willing to talk about it on TV and on radio.

And in this book, he shares his prayer life. And he says this in the introduction. I've taken my convictions, my questions, my fears, my doubts, my elations, and presented them in what I think is an eavesdropper-friendly form.

Hell, judgment, atheism, money, faith, and the X-Men all feature. It's a bit like reading the Bible, except you only get one side of the conversation and all the jokes are left in.

Is there a place for comedy in prayer? If there's a place for comedy in life, then there's a place for comedy in prayer. God is a tough audience as far as audible response is concerned.

Okay, that was Frank Skinner, A Comedian's Prayer Book. Well, Daniel, in this chapter, Daniel chapter 9, has really no place for comedy in prayer.

[1 : 10] Because when you read, as we have just had read for us, Daniel chapter 9, it's clear that prayer is no laughing matter. Because we get Daniel's prayer of confession, so serious, he's praying about the sins of the people.

And then we get God's remarkable response, which really is amazing. Because God reveals his rule in establishing his everlasting kingdom, but it involves the suffering of his people.

That's all in this answer to Daniel's prayer. And so what we're taking through here is really history, world history, as we know it from the time of Daniel to the time of Jesus, and then on into the future.

And so Daniel chapter 9 essentially shows us what it means to pray to God in the light of his purposes for this world. And so we're going to look at three things this afternoon.

They're up on the screen. First, prayer prompted by the word of God. Verse 1 to 3. Second, prayer grounded in the character of God. Verse 4 to 19. And third, prayer answered through the rule of God.

[2 : 18] Verse 20 to 27. So the first thing here we see is prayer prompted by the word of God. So Daniel's prayer was prompted by his study of the scriptures. And you can see that in verse 1 to verse 3.

So God's people were exiles in Babylon, and their exile was punishment for breaking covenant with God. But God had promised that they would return to Jerusalem.

He had promised in his word that that would happen. And so we're told here in the narrative that this was the first year of the reign of Darius, and that's 539 BC.

And so Daniel was a very old man at this time. And this was also the year that King Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews to return from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem, their homeland.

And so that's the context for Daniel's prayer. Daniel had been reading the word of God, studying the scriptures, and he'd been reading the book of the prophet Jeremiah, studying passages, I guess, like these.

[3 : 22] This is Jeremiah 25, verse 11 and 12. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for 70 years.

But when the 70 years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt, declares the Lord, and will make it desolate forever.

And then Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 10 and 11. We read this. 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 hope and a future. So Daniel chapter 9, we're told he's reading the prophet

Jeremiah 9, verse 2.

And the word of the Lord that was given to Jeremiah was that God's people would be in exile for 70 years. That was God's promise before God would then take them back to Jerusalem.

[4 : 31] And so when Daniel read these words from Jeremiah, the 70 years were almost up. And that's what prompted him to pray to God, pleading, fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

And so his approach to God was a sign of intense mourning, of deep sorrow and grief for sin. And so this is a confession of sin prayer.

And it's also a prayer of hope. Hope for God's forgiveness and hope for the restoration that is promised. So Daniel is essentially praying that God would be faithful to his word and do what he had promised.

He prayed a bit like a child saying to their mum or to their dad, you promised. And for those of us who are parents, how many times have we promised our children something, that we do something, that we go to this place, that we would eat that food, that we would sort that problem.

And we may forget the promise, but they never forget the promise. And so they come to us and they say, Dad, you promised.

[5 : 39] And it gets us because, yes, we did promise. And so you don't mind your children reminding you to do what you said you would do. And so here is Daniel pleading with God, God, please do what you have promised.

And of course, God hadn't forgotten or he didn't need reminding of his promise to deliver his people. God was going to do it. But for Daniel, Daniel was waiting for God to fulfill his promises.

And he didn't just wait, did he? He was active in that he prayed. And so his knowledge of God's word, his knowledge of what God would do, what he promised he would do, that fuels Daniel's praying.

And so his incentive to pray wasn't because God didn't rule, but because God did rule. And this might raise the question, well, if God already knows, why should we pray?

What was the point of Daniel's prayer if God already had a plan that he was going to fulfill? Well, it's clear here that God works out his purposes in a way that incorporates the prayers of his people.

[6 : 55] And so prayer doesn't ever change God's mind, but prayer does change things. So God not only has a mission that he will accomplish, but he also has a method of accomplishing that mission that includes the prayers of his people.

A friend and colleague of mine, David Gibson, he tweeted this week about his study of the book of Revelation, which also applies to the book of Daniel.

And he said this, he said, if one day all of world history will be seen to be church history, then all of church history will be seen to be propelled by prayer.

And I think this captures the message of Daniel really well. God works out his purposes and they are seen to be propelled by the prayers of his people, as they are here by Daniel.

And so while God does exercise his sovereign rule over all things, he's promised he will do certain things in his word. That should never lead to complacency in our praying, but it should lead to a confidence in our praying that God will accomplish his purposes.

[8 : 05] And our prayers are in some mysterious way, including in what he is doing. And so the better we know from God's word what his purposes are, what his promises are for this world, then the better we'll know how to pray.

What God has already said should fuel what we say to him. So that's the first thing. Daniel's prayer was prompted by the word of God. And if we are to truly pray, then ours will be too.

Okay, the second point is that it's prayer grounded in the character of God. Verse 4 to 19. Daniel prays to God on behalf of the people. And his prayer is grounded in God's character because in his prayer, you see that he articulates what God is like.

And so in his prayer, he speaks of the covenant of God. Verse 4, the righteousness of God. Verse 7, the mercy and forgiveness of God. Verse 9, the faithfulness of God.

Verse 12, the judgment of God. Verse 14, the mighty power of God. Verse 15, and the anger of God. Verse 16. So his prayer reflects his knowledge of God.

[9 : 14] He ransacks the attributes of God as he approaches God and speaks to God in prayer. And we see four elements to what he prays. First of all, we see the covenant relationship.

So Daniel appeals to God in prayer on the basis of God's covenant love and God's covenant relationship with his people. Verse 4, I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed Lord, the great

and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

Now there's something to notice here because the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, is used eight times in this chapter and it's not used anywhere else in the book of Daniel.

And in our translation, you can tell this is the word for God that's used because Lord is in capital letters. So there in verse 2, then verse 4, verse 8, verse 10, verse 13, twice in verse 14, and then in verse 20.

So what Daniel is doing by using this covenant name of God is he is expressing to God that God has a covenant relationship with his people.

[10:29] And that's why what he's saying to God is so important because this covenant relationship involved, it involved blessing for obedience, but it also involved cursing for disobedience.

And Daniel is well aware of that. And this comes up in Leviticus chapter 26 and Deuteronomy 28, the blessings for obedience in the covenant and the cursing for disobedience.

And so the people were in exile, back to the context of the book, because they were enduring the curse for their disobedience. And yet Daniel appeals to God on the basis of his covenant because God is committed to his people.

He loves his people, even if he disciplines them. And so that's the first thing, the covenant relationship. The second thing is the confession of sin. This prayer is a confession of sin because the people have broken covenant with God.

But notice how Daniel includes himself in the confession. It's not, they have sinned, God, let me pray for them, but it is we have sinned. Listen to all the pronouns in the first person plural, the we and the our and the us.

[11:42] Verse five, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled. We have turned away from your commands and laws. Verse six, we have not listened to your servants, the prophets.

Verse seven, we are covered with shame because of our unfaithfulness to you. Verse eight, we and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, Lord, because we have sinned against you.

Verse nine, we have rebelled. Verse 10, we have not obeyed the Lord our God. Verse 11, we have sinned against you. Verse 14, we have not obeyed.

Verse 15, we have sinned, we have done wrong. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors. So prayer is no laughing matter for Daniel.

He is conscious that as the people of God, they have sinned against God. And that is a big problem. And so Daniel stands with his people using the richest of vocabulary to confess their sin.

[12:45] Well, what is their sin? At heart, their sin is their failure to listen to God and to obey his laws. So verse five tells us they turned away from God's commandments and laws.

Verse six, they did not listen to God's covenant. Sorry, they didn't listen to God's servants, the prophets. Verse seven, they were unfaithful. Verse 10, they did not obey God or keep the laws he gave.

Verse 11, they transgressed the law and turned away, refusing to obey God. Verse 13, they did not give their attention to God's truth. And so the heart of their sin was their refusal to listen to God and do what he said.

And that is always the heart of sin, your sin and mine. It is our refusal to listen to the God who made us and then go and do what he tells us to do.

And that's why Daniel admits that the people deserved the judgment of the exile. They were guilty and God was right to punish them for their sin.

[13:54] And so his confession of sin is integral to what he says to God. It is part of his prayer and essentially a confession of sin should always be part of our prayers to God.

Because if it isn't, it shows that we don't really know what God is like and we haven't really understood what we're like as human beings. If you haven't grasped that our sin is an offense to God, then we don't really know God or ourselves.

But because Daniel knew the character of God, he had to confess the sins of the people and plead for mercy. So there's the covenant relationship, there's the confession of sin, and then there's the cry for mercy.

Daniel pleads for God's mercy and forgiveness. Verse 15 to 19. And he's pleading on the basis of God's character because he knows that they deserve God's judgment.

And their only hope is in God's mercy and forgiveness. And so he prays, verse 18, we do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.

[15:10] It's not about anything that they could ever do, but it's about the mercy of God. So there's the covenant relationship, there's the confession of sin, there's the cry for mercy, and then fourthly, there's the concern for God's honour.

Daniel prays for God to act, not only for his sake or even for the sake of the people, but for God's own sake, for God's reputation, for God's honour, for God's glory.

Notice that Daniel is not concerned for himself, but he's concerned for the honour of God's name. Look at verse 16 to 19. Verse 16, he says, Jerusalem is your city, your holy hill.

Your people, he says, have become an object of scorn. See verse 17. Hear my prayers, Lord, for your sake. Look with favour on your desolate sanctuary.

Verse 18, see the desolation of the city that bears your name. And then verse 19, he says, Lord, listen, Lord, forgive, Lord, hear and act for your sake, my God.

[16:27] Do not delay because your city and your people bear your name. Can you see his concern for God's reputation? He wants God to be honoured.

And the cry of his heart in his prayer is, Lord, do all that you have promised for your sake.

Essentially, he's praying the way that Jesus taught us to pray.

Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And so, can you see how Daniel's prayer teaches us what it means to come to God in prayer ourselves?

Because if we really want to pray, then the priorities of Daniel's prayer ought to be reflected in our own prayers. Daniel's prayer is God-centred and it's kingdom-focused.

It's grounded in the character of God and it flows from God's covenant relationship with his people. And so, it's full of confession of sin and conscious of the need for mercy.

[17:32] And its chief concern is the honour and glory of God. And if you're like me, I guess you're thinking, well, my prayers are just so poor in comparison.

How often is the focus more on me and my glory or my little world or my kingdom come and my will being done?

So, Daniel's prayer is a challenge to know God far better than we do. Because the more we see God for who he is, the better we see ourselves for who we are and then the better we're able to pray to the God who made us.

So, first of all, we see prayer prompted by the word of God. Secondly, prayer grounded in the character of God. And then thirdly, prayer answered through the rule of God. Verse 20 to 27.

So, we've seen Daniel's prayer and next, at the end of the chapter, we get God's answer. So, let me read verse 21 to 23. In fact, verse 20.

[18:38] While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request 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 about the time of the evening sacrifice.

He instructed me and said to me, Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. 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. So, God sends Gabriel, angel Gabriel, to give Daniel the answer. And Daniel is assured that his prayer has been heard by God and as soon as it was articulated, there was an answer for Daniel to receive.

And Gabriel came to give it to him. And the answer came in the form of a vision. And so, while the answer that Gabriel gives uses different language from the other visions in Daniel, he's actually communicating the same message.

In other words, this is not all random. All of these visions are connected with one another. And so, while Daniel was praying for the restoration of God's people after this 70-year block, the 70 years in exile, the vision that Daniel receives goes away past these 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecy and although God would fulfill that, it points to what God would do in the future.

[20:13] And so, the answer that God gives through this vision points to something far greater and better than just the return from exile. because what God is revealing here essentially points to the coming of Jesus Christ and God's plan for the world.

And it comes in this 77s, which is there in verse 24 to 27. Now, this is probably one of the most difficult passages to understand in the book of Daniel as well as being one of the most mysterious passages to understand in the Bible.

And so, there are various views and theories and ways of understanding it. And I don't think anyone actually claims to have a full understanding of every detail.

But what is said here makes sense in the light of the rest of the Bible the same way that Line of Duty Season 6 only makes sense when you've watched Seasons 1 to 5.

In other words, it's complex but you can get the message even if you don't quite fully understand everything that is going on and you're still left confused.

[21 : 21] I think that's what happens here. And so, what we've got really is in verse 24 we get the big picture preview or the summary or the overview that is then unpacked in verse 25 to 27.

So, verse 24 helps us get bearings. It encompasses the whole time of this 77s. 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 vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place. So, during this period of 77s we're told a number of things will take place. Six things. Transgression will be finished sin will be put to an end wickedness will be atoned for everlasting righteousness will be established, the vision and prophecy will be sealed, and the most holy place will be anointed. So, at the end of this period 77s all of these things will have happened. And so, if that's the case then this is clearly a prophecy about the work that Jesus Christ came to do.

And so, that is the ultimate answer of Daniel's prayer. And so, we are to interpret what is said here in the light of Jesus and pointing to the coming of Jesus and all about the work of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 51] And so, if we are unclear on every detail we can be clear that that is the main message. The vision takes us to the life and work of Jesus. And so, the main difficulty in interpreting these verses comes in how we understand the 77s.

Are we to understand them as literal periods of time? So, 77s would be 70 times 7 a period of 490 years.

Or should we understand them as symbolic periods of time because it's apocalyptic literature and that's how it's written. Or perhaps we should understand them as a bit of both.

And so, the 77s are then divided up into three different periods. of time in verse 25 to 27. And so, the difference in interpretations comes over whether these three different periods are referring to a continuous period of time or whether there are sections with gaps of indefinite periods of time in the middle.

So, if you're still following, then take verse 24 as the big picture and then the following verses give a progressive unfolding of the future from Daniel's day onwards.

[24 : 10] And last week we looked at Daniel chapter 8 and like the vision there, what we find here is, what we see is that it is remarkably accurate to history.

So, verse 25, first there are the seven sevens. No one understand this, from the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the anointed one, the ruler, comes, there will be seven sevens and 62 sevens.

It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. So, the shorter period, seven sevens, looks forward to the return of God's people to Jerusalem, the end of the exile, when Jerusalem was restored and rebuilt.

And then secondly, verse 26, we've got these 62 sevens. So, it says, after the 62 sevens, the anointed one will be put to death and will have nothing.

The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood. War will continue until the end and desolations have been decreed.

[25 : 21] Okay, so this is a longer period of time moving forward it says, to the coming of the anointed one. Now, who is the anointed one? The anointed one is Jesus Christ. He's the one who would be cut off or put to death.

But then there's another ruler mentioned in verse 26, one who would come to destroy the city and the sanctuary. And this happens to fit with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which happened in AD 70 after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so, it's saying here that there's going to be an intensifying persecution of God's people right up to the end. And so, I take it this refers to the period between the coming of Jesus, his death, and then his return.

In that period, there will be persecution for God's people. And then verse 27, thirdly, we've got this one seven, the final seven, which is divided. So, verse 27, he will confirm a covenant with many for one seven.

In the middle of the seven, he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And at the temple, he will set up an abomination that causes desolation until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

[26 : 35] So, this seems to unfold the same future as verse 26, but in a bit more detail. So, verse 26 and verse 27 seem to be parallel. They're saying the same things, but in different ways.

And again, we see here that this is a reference to Jesus, the one who put an end to sacrifice through his death and made a covenant with many. But again here, there's another he in the second part of verse 27.

And the he there can't be Jesus. Because this person, figure, sets up an abomination that causes desolation and then meets his judgment in the end.

Now, Jesus in the New Testament speaks of the abomination that causes desolation by quoting from Daniel. And so, for Jesus, this is something that's still to come in the future.

And it did in the destruction of the temple, but it seems fair to see this as also an anticipation of the Antichrist at the end of time before Jesus returns, saying that things will get worse for God's people and will culminate in the ultimate Antichrist power in the future.

[27 : 51] So, while all of these details are complex, the point that we shouldn't miss is that the rule of God in world history through Jesus Christ will put an end to all sin and all evil and will bring in everlasting righteousness, a perfect kingdom, kingdom, where everything is sorted out, where all evil and wickedness and sin is no more, all because of Jesus.

And so I think we can take this vision of the 77s as referring to the period from the time of Daniel in his own day up to the coming and the work of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, and then on into this destruction of the temple, AD 70 in Jerusalem and then further forward into the future from us when God is establishing his everlasting kingdom when Jesus returns.

And so essentially Daniel's prayer results in him giving, God giving Daniel the answer of Jesus. And that's what we are meant to grasp.

Daniel prayed for God to keep his promise to end the exile, but God responded with a far greater answer than Daniel could have imagined. So God wasn't just going to show his people mercy by delivering them from exile and then returning them to Jerusalem.

God was doing something far greater. He was promising to show mercy to the world by sending Jesus Christ to deliver us from our exile from God.

[29 : 37] Because of our sin and our rebellion. And so Daniel can see further down the road than the end of the exile. That is one mountain peak in the distance for him to see.

But when you climb mountains you realise that one peak looks so far away and then when you get to it you discover there are many more peaks further in the distance.

But they all looked from the car park as if they were at the same level, same point. And so for Daniel there's a higher and there's a greater mountain peak to come.

And that is when Jesus would come to bring God's salvation. And so fulfil all of God's great covenant promises to his people and they'd be fulfilled through the death of Jesus on the cross.

So Jesus, this anointed one that's spoken of, would come to die in order to restore people to God and bring in this everlasting righteousness to the world.

[30 : 34] God's God's God's God's promises, all of them in the Old Testament, all of them in the book of Daniel. God will do everything he has promised.

So Jesus is our only hope and Jesus is the ultimate answer to all of our prayers. So God's people will always go through difficult times, we will always face suffering, Daniel makes that clear, and yet Jesus Christ has gone through the ultimate suffering on the cross where he was exiled from God so that we need never be.

And so whatever the future holds for our world or for God's people, we can be sure that we are safe if we belong to him because God keeps his promises and because God keeps his promises, we have to keep on praying.