

WITH DANIEL IN THE SCHOOL OF PRAYER

Pastor Jeff Wood

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I've been doing some reading lately about the start up of churches around the world. They are springing up wonderfully in so many interesting places. Not without work, no. But nonetheless, people who were Muslim or who were witch doctors are becoming Christians and starting churches. Lots of them. One book about this is *The Father Glorified*. It seems like, from that record, prayer is behind these starts. Prayer, lots of it.

Recently we had a Service for Healing and Wholeness. People who come really like it. All we do, really, is pray. We could almost just call it a prayer service and we'd not be far off of what it is.

So I'm hearing and thinking about prayer recently. And next week it is the National Day of Prayer. That's good. We need it. And I am finishing a Bible study on Daniel. We learned in it that Daniel prayed three times a day (it's what landed him, famously, in the lion's den). All this – the start-up of churches, the healing service, the National Day of Prayer -- comes together for a message today on being with Daniel in the school of prayer. Maybe it will help us start churches, heal friends...and the nation. Maybe it will help us be closer to God.

Let's pray about that.

Have I told you about my brother-in-law, Paul? He's been here on several Sundays. Paul likes to read through the Bible in a year plan. He's done it many a time. One of the things he does when he finishes reading is ask, "How can I pray what I read?" It's a really good question. It seems like Daniel did the same thing. He's reading Jeremiah and he turns it into prayer. Jeremiah says, "God will restore Israel after a time." Daniel prays, "Lord, it seems like now is an appropriate time for that."

There was a guy shopping at Dillard's and he picked up a shirt from the sale table. His wife said, "You don't want that one." He set it down and picked up another. She said, "You don't want that one." He set it down and picked up another. She said, "You don't want that one." He turned to her and said, "Why don't you just tell me which one I want?"

You know if God's got everything figured out, I figure, "Why pray?" Why say what I want? Just tell me what's what and I won't offer any notions. But while God can have everything figured out, he doesn't seem simply to go that way.

It's likely that the passage from Jeremiah that Daniel is reading is 29:10-15, which includes that beautiful bit about God wanting us to have a future and a hope, and it solicits prayers for the return of God's people to their home. It's a prophecy. So why the solicitation to pray? It's a prophecy so it should come to pass because God said it, right? Yes and no.

God does this *with* us and that's why prayer matters. He collaborates. We pray and he and you and he and me and he and we collaborate. We share thoughts on projects – he hears ours and we hear his. And we'll have less to work with if we don't pray. We'll have more to work with if we do. Something might not happen if we don't pray. Something can happen if we pray. Otherwise, prayer is meaningless. God doesn't enjoin us to something meaningless.¹

Martin Luther commended that prayers be brief, fervent, and frequent. I like that. Daniel might have as well. But he doesn't seem to practice it here. Shooting off prayers is ok but look at Daniel. He sets his face; he pleads; he gets the prayer into his dress and his body. These things took time and were not just off the cuff. I like the person who, in leading a three-day seminar on prayer, said, "Take something you are concerned about and make it your matter of prayer the next three days." I don't know how long Daniel prayed but it was more than three seconds or three minutes most likely.

Did you hear me say that he got prayer into his dress and his body? Some places, some occasions have dress codes. Did you know that can be true for prayer as well? At Wimbledon, no playing in cut offs. At a funeral, dark and modest dress. Prayer – sack cloth and ashes.

¹ Wrong thinking about this is one of the biggest reasons regular people do not pray regularly.

Let's add fasting, too. It isn't clothing but it is a practice one puts on. I have a friend who's a recovering alcoholic. His name is Tom. He talks about people who he knew would drink wine with dinner but who, when he came over, put it up. It was a prioritization. Tom was their priority. Because he was, they put some things aside so they could focus on him. Themselves and their taste buds they put behind Tom and relating well to him. I think of fasting like that. It shows a willingness at a physical level to make something a priority.

That's a prayer practice we put on. The prayer dress code – here it's sack-cloth and ashes – is about sober humility.² We may not have any burlap in the closet to put on but we can put on humility. I know an author who, in his teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, gets to that part about lust and talks about it as cultivated lust. There are lots of things, good and bad, that can be cultivated. Humility is one. Cultivating it is a way of putting it on. That author's suggestion, by the way, for cultivating humility is to never pretend, never presume, and never push.

² In the movie *The Mission* Mendoza in penance carries a heavy burden and he sees how he has lived his life has been a heavy burden to himself and others. The sackcloth and ashes could be seen as the equivalent of his heavy burden. It helps one realize the discomfort and death-dealing ways of sin. In the movie when Mendoza realizes he's not going to make it, the weight is cut loose. Both the weight and the cutting loose is grace.

President Abraham Lincoln once issued a proclamation in which he said, “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven; ...we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us ... and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.... We have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of God’s redeeming and preserving grace – too proud to pray to the God that made us.... It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power to confess our sins and pray clemency and forgiveness upon us.”

That phrase “too proud to pray” means that prayer itself is the garb of humility. Daniel, for all his accomplishments and status, prayed.

His prayer is known as “Daniel’s Confession.” There was a pilot and mechanic who drove each other crazy. The pilot one day complained of an unfamiliar noise in the engine. The next day the mechanic had the plane back in service. Wanting to know what the diagnosis was the pilot looked in the log book. The note said, “Ran engine continuously for four hours. Noise now familiar.”

Daniel didn’t let himself be just familiar and okay with the deliberate ignoring and violating of God’s help and guidance. It had run continuously for

a long time but in this prayer he gets uncomfortable with it. He confessed it. Real confession isn't just saying, "Sorry." As one little girl in Sunday School put it, it's *real* when you're sorry enough to quit.

Read 3-19.

Well, confession means I am sorry and I am going to change. That's a word we should hold on to. Sorry.

There's a great movie that is animated called "Inside Out." It's about emotions. But that title is a phrase to ponder. Outside looking in is one perspective and it is very different than inside looking out. When I am outside looking in, I confess *their* sin, those people there. But when I am inside looking out, I confess *our* sins. That's what Daniel does. Another word from this confession is "We." Daniel learned it from Jesus. In Isaiah we are told that the Messiah let himself be counted among the transgressors.

He confesses using a lot of words for doing wrong, rebelling, not listening, violating, and on and on. The extensive vocabulary shows our wide experience with the subject. We lie. Then we overlap it with cheat. When that's worn down, we throw in steal. And on and on. That's the nature of sin.

In the confession there's another word to put with all these words. The word is "why." I think the really productive thing is to – and I don't do this nearly enough but it makes confession truly

interesting (imagine that? Confession interesting.) – ask, “Why did I do that?” Why did I lie? Because I didn’t want you to think less of me. So I’m willing to put a false image out there and I must think that if I don’t have your esteem, I will wither up and be miserable. I put you ahead of God and ... etc., etc., etc. I think we probably should do more of this in our confessing.

Now confessing doesn’t make anyone forgiven. Jesus and his sacrifice do that. But agreement with God is important for lining up with this, God’s mercy.

A mother of a soldier who was slated to be executed for something appealed to his general, Napoleon, for mercy. “But,” said the general, “your son doesn’t deserve mercy.” She said, “If he deserved it, it wouldn’t be mercy.” We don’t deserve it but God gives it because of his heart.

Did you ever hear of a book about a big grizzly bear called *Gentle Giant*? I probably read it in the fourth or fifth grade, I imagine. Giants are giants. Powerful. But what made this giant famous? He was gentle. A gentle giant. In his bigness and in his power the bigness and power were made exquisite by gentleness. That was his fame – a gentle giant.

When the book of God is written we all would say that giants are giants and gods are gods. Gods are large and powerful. This God of the Bible is exquisite in his largeness and power because he is merciful.

That is his acclaim. What makes him famous? He is merciful. A merciful God. Gentle Giant. Merciful God.

So when is it time to pray and when isn't it? Meet yourself with this – Our God is a merciful God.

This world, our worlds, need the mercy of God. So let's pray ... and maybe new churches will start, infirmities will be healed, nations will come around, our lives mended, and God will be honored. So let us pray. Amen? Amen.

If you'd like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors, & elders of the church would welcome your call.

revieffwood@gmail.com

welovefirst.org
facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian