

THE PRAYER PROJECT, PART II

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We are looking at prayer again this morning. Last week we looked at the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray. We said that the Lord's Prayer is really a template for us, giving us some handles we can use in forming our own prayers. Let's look briefly again at the elements we saw in that prayer:

Abbacize it
Applaud my God
Adjust my alignment
Accept my dependence
Act my status
Ask for bumper guards

Those are key components of prayer. When we're not sure what to pray or how to pray it, we can grab on to those concepts as our starting point.

So last week was a bit more clinical in our approach as we dissected a prayer and looked at what made it work. I tend to be more of a "show me" person than a "tell me" person though. I like to learn by looking at examples.

At work, we call them case studies. If I have a client who wants to reach architects and get them to use their product, they will provide them with all the facts and data. They have long lists of benefits and advantages. But architects are visual people. What they really want is to see a great picture of a building that has incorporated the products we're talking about. That connects with them on a different level.

That's how I felt this week as I looked at the life of Daniel. There's a little verse in Genesis 6 that says "There were giants on the earth in those days," and I think that is a fitting way to talk about Daniel. He was a prayer giant. I never really looked at him in those terms before, but when you examine his story, you realize how central prayer was to his life.

We're going to pick up his story in Daniel 10, but we'll be reaching back into his history to fill in some blanks as we go.

Daniel 10:1-19

In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision.

At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.

A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said, "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you." And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling.

Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come."

While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless. Then one who looked like a man touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak. I said to the one standing before me, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I am helpless. How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe."

Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. "Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed," he said. "Peace! Be strong now; be strong."

When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength."

Now I don't know if you noticed, but that passage doesn't even mention prayer. Not once does it use the word. So why would that be our text for this morning?

It gets back to coming at prayer from a different angle. Here's a picture of a pentium chip. You'll notice it doesn't look much like a computer. There's no monitor or keyboard. It doesn't say the word computer on it. So to someone who doesn't know much about computers, it doesn't look like the two are related. But the more we learn

about processors and how they operate, we find they are really the hub of a computer. Everything depends on that processor working properly. It is very much about computing even though you can't see it by looking at it.

We don't immediately recognize Daniel as having much to do with prayer. But the more we learn about the way his life operated, the more we realize that he was all about prayer.

Daniel was an Israelite, one of God's chosen people, who happened to be living in Jerusalem about 600 years B.C. That wasn't a great time to be living in Jerusalem, because that's when the King of Babylon came and ransacked the place and took the people as captives back to Babylon. Daniel was in that group that got captured.

This morning we have Myles, Aaron, Dillon and Makoa here. Take a good look at them, because Daniel was somewhere around their age when this happened in his life. He was a young guy. And he knew who he was. When he got to Babylon, he wouldn't eat the food the king gave him, because it would go against his faith, so he stood up and said he wouldn't do it. Right away, he made it clear that he was going to follow God, and God totally blessed him for it and got the king's attention through it. It goes to show you can have an impact for God no matter what your age.

The next big event in Daniel's life came when the king had a dream that really disturbed him, to the point where he told all his counselors, "I want you to tell me what my dream meant. But I want to make sure you know what it really meant, so I'm not even going to tell you what the dream was. You have to tell me. If you can't, I'm going to have you killed."

That was unheard of, and all the wise men protested. But Daniel went back and prayed, and he got his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to pray with him. And God told Daniel the dream and what it meant. King Nebuchadnezzar was blown away.

This gift for visions and dreams became a major portion of Daniel's existence. People would come to him and ask him for advice and wisdom, and he was able to solve all kinds of puzzles and riddles. He had a number of his own visions, seeing all kinds of future events and what they meant.

Well Daniel outlived another king or two, when we come to the story of Daniel in the lion's den. You may not have realized it when you heard the story as a kid, but Daniel would have been pushing 80 at this point in his life.

The way the story goes, Daniel was so popular and powerful even at that age that the other leaders of the country were jealous and conspired against him. But they knew that they couldn't find any grounds to get him, unless it had something to do with God. So they had the king issue a decree saying anybody who worshipped any god other than the king would be thrown to the lions.

Of course, Daniel, who was the same guy he always had been, refused to comply.

Daniel 6:10

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

In other words, it was his prayer life that got Daniel thrown into the lion's den. It says he kept praying just like he always had. Years and years of praying daily weren't about to change just because of a piece of paper.

So if Daniel were here today, what would he have to say about prayer? What lessons did he learn over those 70 years in Babylon? He would probably have many things to say, but as I reflected on Daniel and his experiences, four themes emerged.

Life is one big reason to pray.

There's no question that Daniel lived a big life. His highs were extremely high. You couldn't get any lower than his lows. His life was on the line time after time, then he would be given top honors by some king. And on every peak and in every valley, we find Daniel running to God in prayer. When he needed answers from God, he prayed, and when he got answers he prayed. At every crisis point in his big life, good or bad, Daniel got on his knees and prayed.

But besides living a big life, Daniel lived a long life – well over 80 years. We have a handful of incredible stories about him, but they don't add up to more than one per decade. He had many more average days than spectacular ones. And in those times, he continued to pray. That's what we saw in the story about the lion's den: Daniel had set aside three regular times a day to pray. It was planned prayer, not emergency prayer.

All of life was a reason to pray for Daniel, and it can be for us as well. While not on the same scale as Daniel, we can all relate to having high points and low points. That's a question we ask around the dinner table all the time. "What was your high point today? What was your low point?" And almost every day, the kids can identify specific mini events that were exciting or hard for them.

Those are the times when we're most inclined to pray, if we're going to pray at all. When it's a crisis, we turn to God. When we're feeling thankful, we'll direct some energy toward prayer.

But what about the everyday? How consistently do we set aside time in the middle of busy schedules when we don't feel like we have time for it and we don't have a particularly urgent need to bring to God?

A couple weeks ago, I was supposed to get together with a friend for coffee. We both got so busy that the week went by without either of us calling the other. Finally the

following Tuesday, I called him and said, "So I guess we're not getting together last week..."

Our tendency when we're busy is to shuffle around our prayer schedule. I'm certainly that way. I'm much more likely to have short conversations with God throughout the day than I am to actually carve out a set time to pray by myself. The feeling is that the busier I am, the less time I have to pray.

Martin Luther was just the opposite. He once said, "I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer". Wow. That's an entirely different view of prayer that sees it as something much more vital and connected to life, rather than an interruption or even a good habit.

There is nothing wrong with praying as good or bad things in life happen. Spontaneous prayer is great. **We need to cultivate consistency.** A consistent prayer life will prepare us and sustain us through those good and bad times. And it is the ongoing practice of praying that will make us naturally turn to prayer when the big highs and lows come along.

You can see this in Daniel. When he was young and his life was threatened by the king who wanted someone to tell him his dream, Daniel urgently set about praying with his friends. Toward the end of his life, when the decree went out about being fed to the lions if he kept worshipping God, there's no sense of panic. Daniel just went home and prayed like normal. In fact – it said he thanked God. There's no mention of a desperate cry for help. It's as if at this point in his walk with God, Daniel knew him well enough to know that God would take care of him. A lifetime of prayer had taught him that.

That's why soldiers run exercises and drills over and over again in training, so that when they get in a combat setting they can instinctively know what to do. When I get in a crisis, what is my instinct? Is it to try to do something? To panic? To run? Or to pray? If it's something positive, am I taking all the credit for it, or thanking God? What is my first response?

Daniel knew life was one big reason to pray. I think if he were here today, he would probably also warn us that

Persistence will meet resistance.

As we persist in prayer, we're going to bump up against all kinds of obstacles to reaching an answer. We saw that in the story we read at the beginning. The visitor in the vision told him:

Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days.

Daniel prayed and nothing happened for 3 weeks. When the messenger arrived, he said that Daniel's prayer had been answered immediately, but that it had been detained by a resistant enemy.

There is opposition to our prayer. We talked before about the spiritual struggles that are going on around us that we can't see. I have heard missionaries who have gone from one continent to another and who say there are some countries where you get this sense that your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling and coming back to you there's such a sense of spiritual resistance.

I don't say that to be discouraging – I think that can actually serve as an incentive to keep praying. If there's resistance, it tells me that prayer is important. Someone doesn't want it happening. It also tells me that God isn't being unresponsive. Sometimes when you've prayed and prayed and haven't seen any answer, it's easy to think that God isn't going to answer. Daniel's experience shows us that maybe he already has, and we just need to keep persisting in our prayer until we discover what that answer is.

Resistance can take on other forms as well. Obviously Daniel found that out when the people around him looked for ways to stop him from praying. He had two circles – supporters and detractors. He had his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who partnered with him in praying, and then he had his fellow government officials who wanted to see him fry for praying.

We need people in our lives like that first group – people who will encourage us to take things to God and who will do that with us when we need help. Even if it is just another friend or two, that's enough. If there's nobody around us who is geared that way, we're going to only find resistance with no support. **Look for reinforcements.**

We can also find a whole lot of resistance within ourselves. We already mentioned busy schedules. Fatigue, distractions, not taking care of some stuff in our hearts that goes against God – All that can add up to resistance in prayer. Daniel was big on confession – telling God what he and the whole nation had been doing wrong. That helps clear out the junk that's blocking the path.

When we meet resistance in all its forms, our job is to keep persisting and not give up.

Not to scare us off, but Daniel would probably have a second warning about prayer for us as well.

Prayer pulls our plug.

Look at the string of things our story tells us. First Daniel mourned. Then when he saw the vision, he lost his strength, turned pale and was helpless. He was trembling on his hands and knees, he couldn't talk, he was overcome with anguish and he could hardly breathe.

In other places, poor Daniel experienced similar situations. He was always being devastated by his prayer times. Read through the book and you'll find story after story where he was perplexed, or disturbed or couldn't get out of bed for days.

Now maybe Daniel just had a weak constitution. Maybe he was a sensitive guy. And it could have something to do with the fact that what happened in his prayer life was so much bigger than most of us have ever seen. His reaction isn't necessarily a good yardstick for measuring our experience in prayer.

But I do believe that when we get serious about prayer and we realize we're alone in the presence of God, when we get by ourselves in a quiet space and let it sink in what we're doing, something happens. **In prayer, the Holy Spirit will start to work on us.** He will bring things to mind that need to change in us. He will bring burdens and cares to mind that we need to pray for that our too big for us. And he'll reveal more of God's character that is too much for us to handle.

That's the hard work of prayer – allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to sit in that spot. To be open to God speaking to us, it requires a draining out of all that is in us that would put itself in charge.

There's good news on the far side, though. Daniel shows us that

Christ fills us back up.

I firmly believe that the messenger in Daniel's vision was none other than Christ himself. Christ, the Son of God, existed before he was born in Bethlehem as a baby boy.

How do I arrive at the conclusion that this was Christ? Let's compare Daniel's description of his visitor with the description of Christ that we read from the book of Revelation a week or two ago:

Daniel's vision

Man dressed in linen
Belt of finest gold
Face like lightning
Eyes like flaming torches
Arms and legs like burnished bronze
Voice like sound of multitude

John's vision in Revelation

Like a son of man dressed in a robe
Golden sash
Face like sun shining in all its brilliance
Eyes like blazing fire
Feet like bronze in a furnace
Voice like sound of rushing waters

No angel is described in that way. It has to be Christ. If you're not convinced by the description, his effect on Daniel should seal the deal. Daniel knows he's standing in the presence of God.

"I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I am helpless. How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe."

Even more interesting are the words Christ speaks to Daniel when he first arrives. He says,

“Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.”

God didn't just explain a mystery to Daniel. He didn't just interpret the dream – He sent Christ. You've heard the old cliché, “Jesus is the answer.” In prayer that is really true.

We go into prayer looking for something specific. We have a problem on our minds that we want solved, a dilemma that needs an answer. But usually there is something deeper in us that needs a response only God can be. Only Christ satisfies our true prayer.

A.B. Simpson wrote a hymn about that. It goes:

*Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord.
Once it was the feeling, now it is his word.
Once his gift I wanted, now the giver own.
Once I sought for healing, now himself alone.*

Daniel found that everything got rearranged in prayer. Getting the answer to his questions paled in comparison with seeing Christ.

Daniel was helpless and overwhelmed. Then Christ spoke those beautiful words:

“Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed. Peace! Be strong now; be strong.”

It's that second “be strong” that gets to me. This is my encouraging Lord who speaks to me what I need to hear. When we come to him in prayer feeling completely overwhelmed, he Himself meets with us and whispers to us again and again “be strong.”

And it isn't just words. It is strength itself that comes from him. He renews us, just like Isaiah said.

Isaiah 40:31

But those who wait upon GOD get fresh strength.

We go into prayer weighed down and unable to stand before God, and we come out strengthened and ready to hear what he has to say.

As I look at Daniel's life in exile, I think of it as a metaphor for our own. Like Daniel, we've got seventy years give or take a few – seventy years in this place that isn't our real

home. Like Daniel, we'll experience lots of highs and lows here, and we'll have a lot of everyday ordinariness in the spots between.

In those experiences, will we turn to prayer, like Daniel did?

We can ask ourselves a few questions in light of Daniel's life:

1. Am I cultivating consistency? Am I looking for ways to build prayer into my daily life? Sometimes you can do that by attaching it to an activity in your day. Karin has taped her prayer list inside the cupboard door by the coffee cups, and when she opens it for her first cup of tea in the morning before the kids come downstairs, it reminds her to take that quiet time to pray. How can we cultivate that consistency?
2. Am I well reinforced? Do I have people in my life to pray with or who encourage me to pray? If not, can I find some? I know I need all the help I can get in prayer. There is too much resistance to tackle it all alone.
3. Am I being vulnerable? Am I allowing myself opportunities to be still before God and listen to what he's telling me about myself? Will I let him in to the center of my being?
4. Am I worn out? Am I coming into prayer with nothing left, feeling helpless and overwhelmed by life? Do I need an encounter with Christ to lift me back up?

Only he can see past our initial reasons for praying and get to the core of what we need. Only he can inspire us with a greater vision of God. And it is only Christ who can come alongside us, put his hand on our shoulder and say, "Be strong now; be strong."