

GOD'S ETERNAL KINGDOM

**WISDOM
COURAGE, &
VISION**

Prayer and Fasting Month, January 2016

Introduction: Wisdom, Courage, and Vision under God's Eternal Kingdom

Imagine returning from vacation only to find that someone completely redecorated your house—new color scheme, flooring, furniture, the works. As you stand in the middle of your redesigned living space, your brain would be working overtime to comprehend how you could simultaneously be in your house yet not at home.

As we reflect on 2015 and launch into 2016, we might have a similar experience as Christians in America. Biblical standards for understanding sexuality, gender, and marriage no longer run parallel to the laws of the land. Concerns about the future of religious liberty ripple throughout the evangelical church. We feel a growing sense that, though this is still our house, we are no longer home.

One response to this is to intensify our efforts to enact legislation that more perfectly mirrors Biblical ethics, to “reclaim America.” This approach has merits, and we certainly should have Christians seeking to work in government for the common good. But as we read the biblical narrative, another response emerges. We need to acknowledge that, no matter how influential Jesus’ followers are, until our Savior returns we will not be at home. In other words, the events of the last year may serve to clarify for us our status as exiles.

The book of Daniel offers a timely message for Christians in America. If we are indeed entering an era when we could be persecuted for our biblical convictions, a cursory scan of Daniel confirms that we are on the extremely light end of that spectrum. The Babylonian kings had no restraints in employing “cruel and unusual punishment.” The judgments these dictators doled out were nothing short of savage—being torn limb from limb, thrown into a flaming furnace, or tossed into a pit with hungry lions.

Instead of whining about the unfairness, Daniel and his three friends faithfully submitted themselves to the only One with higher authority than the foreign king: Yahweh, the only Sovereign God who “changes times and seasons” and “removes kings and sets up kings” (Daniel 2:21). Extracted from all that was familiar in Jerusalem and forced to serve their oppressors, these exiles maintained such a vision of God’s absolute control over human affairs that they conducted themselves with exemplary wisdom and courage.

This will be our theme as we study the stories and visions of the book of Daniel: “Wisdom, Courage, and Vision under God’s Eternal Kingdom.” As we observe the powerful lives these worshippers of Yahweh lived in circumstances vastly more extreme than ours, we will pray for God to make us a people of wisdom, courage, and vision in our context.

Let me give you two challenges for how to go about this. First, get help. While the pages ahead are written for personal study, we learn from Daniel and his friends that personal faith is never private. As you work through God’s word and spend time in prayer, identify who can share your insights and resolve for change. It could be your spouse, roommate, accountability partner, or someone from your small group. If you do not have a person like that in your life, make finding a trusted Christian companion a top priority for 2016. You cannot do this alone.

Second, commit to a month of fasting. Follow Daniel’s example of refusing to be defiled by the king’s food (see Week 1, Day 3). Look at the world’s offerings that allure you away from full submission to God, and cut that out of your life for a month. It could be fasting from food once a week, significantly curtailing your time on screens (TV, movies, games, social media), or taking a break from some other activity that consumes much of your time. The aim is to create time and focus for meditation on God’s word and communion with him as you set the pace for 2016.

May God be glorified as we submit ourselves entirely to him!

Pastor Chris

Week 1 - Living Under God's Kingdom in a Foreign Land

Throughout her history, Israel had seasons of living in a foreign land—apart from the temple, apart from the sacrificial system, apart from kosher kitchens. Whether Joseph or Esther or Daniel, the pressing question for believers in Yahweh was, “How do I faithfully live under God's kingdom in a foreign land?”

Daniel's particular story offers challenging insight for our lives these thousands of years later. We too live as exiles, aliens in a foreign land. The Son of Man that Daniel saw in visions—Jesus the Messiah—came to God's people and relocated their definition of a homeland. Jerusalem gives way to the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-4). Jesus promises that the meek shall inherit not only the Promised Land but the whole earth (Matthew 5:5). Followers of Jesus are not home in a world that is rebellious to his authority. “According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

As we will see in the opening chapter of Daniel, this is a challenging life. We will inevitably face conflict and temptations to compromise. Yet with hearts fully submitted to the King of kings, our faithful living can bring his enemies to declare his glory, as did Nebuchadnezzar:

“How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation” (Daniel 4:3).

I. Grappling with God's Sovereignty

The opening verses of Daniel are remarkably matter-of-fact, yet they communicate the beginnings of a homeland attack beyond any national crisis we have known.

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god." (Daniel 1:1-2)

With the distance of millennia separating us from this event, we can intellectually acknowledge the facts of the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile without having our hearts pierced with grief. But if we are to learn from Daniel and allow his experience to inform our prayers, we must parachute into the tragedy and horror of what happened to God's people.

Specifically, we must reckon with the word "gave" in verse 2. The readings below will fill out the history of the "giving over," from the initial exile of Daniel and his peers to the destruction of Jerusalem about 20 years later. Sovereign over it all is the God who made promises to Abraham, rescued the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, and gave them the Promised Land and the Law to guide their lives in it. He is also the God who gave the covenantal curses—that Israel's disobedience would result in their removal from the Promised Land.

The beginning point of our life of faithfulness in a foreign land is grappling with Who is ultimately in charge even when godless kings reign. The losses we grieve are often not as simple as the cause-and-effect of Israel's disobedience and Jerusalem's destruction. Our painful experiences are often only broadly connected to human sin and the decay resulting from it. Even with this distinction, we have much to learn from Daniel as he lived in the aftermath of his homeland's decimation.

Texts to Read:

Deuteronomy 28:45-69 – Warning and curses of God's covenant with Israel, given through Moses in 1445 B.C.

Daniel 1:1-7 – Daniel and other accomplished, royal young people are forcibly exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon in 605 B.C.

2 Kings 25:1-12 – Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. ("Chaldeans" here is synonymous with "Babylonians")

Daniel 9:1-15 – Daniel's confession of Israel's sin leading to this calamity and God's sovereignty over it

Questions for Reflection:

Identify the events—from global news to personal tragedy—that make it most challenging to believe God's sovereign control in the world. Why do these challenge such a belief in your heart?

How did Daniel's embrace of God's sovereignty over Jerusalem's fall inform how he approached the situation?

Guide for Prayer: Acknowledge God's sovereign rule over all things and express to him any difficulties you feel in seeing his hand at work in the events you face.

2. Rejoicing in God's Sovereignty

Acknowledging God's absolute rule over human affairs can be challenging, as we see in Daniel's personal story. The fact that "the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand" meant that Daniel was kidnapped and taken 500 miles away to serve the very king who would soon destroy his home.

Yet, for all the emotional difficulty of embracing God's sovereignty over our situation, the same trust can liberate us to a radical lifestyle even in the most dire circumstances. The "gave" in Daniel 1:2 is the first of three times that word is used in Daniel 1, and the other occurrences reveal the joy of living with a trust in God's supreme reign.

As the story continues, we see that Daniel's belief in God's greatness made him a great man with a great impact on Babylon. Because of the wisdom and courage that flowed from Daniel's vision of God, foreign kings with no regard for Yahweh ended up declaring the glories of Israel's God.

As you read the texts below, ask God to give you an expanding vision of his complete control over all things and, in the process, to impact those in your life with the greatness of God. May many join you in rejoicing in God's sovereignty!

Texts to read and questions for reflections:

Daniel 1:8-21 – God's ongoing sovereignty in the life of his people

What are the other two things that God "gave" to Daniel and his friends?

Daniel 2:17-23 – Daniel casts himself on God's sovereign wisdom to reveal Nebuchadnezzar's dream and praises God when he reveals it.

Look at verse 21 of Daniel's prayer in light of Nebuchadnezzar's intention to kill Daniel and his friends. How might that affirmation of God's sovereignty be a particular comfort? How could a similar trust in God's sovereignty bring joy to you in the midst of difficulties you face?

Daniel 2:47, 3:28-29, 4:3, 34-35; 6:25-27 – Nebuchadnezzar and Darius confess the supremacy of Daniel's God.

List the phrases and affirmations are consistently repeated by these kings.

Guide for prayer: Pray that God would strengthen your trust in his sovereignty. Think of three people in your life who do not believe in or submit to our God and pray that God would use your trust in him to create such belief and submission in their lives.

3. Resolved to be Undefined

Submitting to the sovereignty of God is not merely a theological or intellectual shift. For Daniel, living under God's kingdom first and the Babylonian kingdom second carried a very practical decision, captured in Daniel 1:8. "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself."

This began an exchange that we will explore next week. For now, allow two words to echo in your heart: resolved, undefined. Resolved. Undefined. Because Daniel lived in Babylon, living an undefined life required resolve. It would not come without Daniel taking initiative. He could not live as everyone else did without being defiled.

Such is our state of affairs in 2016 America. A life in which we make decisions and ingest entertainment and spend our money and occupy our time in ways our neighbors deem as "normal" is not a life submitted to the sovereignty of God. We must resolve not to defile ourselves with the common fare of life around us. But how do we do this?

Let's revisit the situation in Babylon. Daniel's decision not to defile himself with the king's food is not as straightforward as you might think. It was not merely an issue of avoiding kosher food, otherwise the wine would have been acceptable. Neither was it that the king's food was sacrificed to idols, because the vegetables Daniel requested could have been tainted in the same way.

So why did Daniel and his friends refuse to eat the king's food? I find the summary in the ESV Study Bible to be most compelling: "Daniel and his friends avoided the luxurious diet of the king's table as a way of protecting themselves from being ensnared by the temptations of the Babylonian culture. They used their distinctive diet as a way of retaining their distinctive identity as Jewish exiles and avoiding complete assimilation into Babylonian culture. With this restricted diet they continually reminded themselves, in this time of testing, that they were the people of God in a foreign land and that they were dependent for their food, indeed for their very lives, upon God, their Creator, not King Nebuchadnezzar."

The following scriptures and questions are meant to direct your prayers as you ask God how you can resolve to be undefined and live fully submitted to his sovereignty in 2016.

Texts to read and questions for reflections:

Genesis 39:1-10 – Joseph, carried off to a foreign land, is tempted by Potiphar's wife.

What did Joseph's answer to Potiphar's wife (vv. 8-9) reveal about his life being submitted to God's sovereignty, even in a foreign land?

Psalms 101 – A song of resolve to walk in integrity within one's home.

Which of these resolves do you most need to make now?

Guide for prayer: Identify areas of your life that are not submitted to God and ways in which you are defiled by the allurements of this world. Spend time in confession and repentance. Resolve to submit the entirety of your life to God and ask him to help you identify at least one or two trusted believers who can help you in your resolve.

4. Undefined, yet Not Withdrawn

Daniel's resolve to be undefiled ran parallel to his decision not to fight against two other forms of Babylonian inculturation. The first was education. Daniel and the other young exiles from Judah were placed in a three-year study program where they would learn the language of Babylon and disciplines typical to modern education such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. However, the teaching would also include study of the many Babylonian gods and their characteristics along with magical arts—reading omens in the sky, practicing sorcery, and interpreting dreams.

The second form of assimilation was in the changing of names. According to Daniel 1:7, Nebuchadnezzar's chief of staff gave the Jewish exiles Babylonian names. "Daniel ("God is my Judge") he called Beltshazzar ("Bel, protect his life!"), Hananiah ("Yahweh is gracious") he called Shadrach ("Command of Aku"), Mishael ("Who is what God is?") he called Meshach ("Who is what Aku is?"), and Azariah ("Yahweh is a helper") he called Abednego ("Servant of Nebo)." In short, their names which honored Israel's God, Yahweh, were replaced by those which honored Babylonian gods.

Daniel's full submission to God's sovereignty did not translate into complete withdrawal from the Babylonian culture. Just as Joseph led government affairs in Egypt without losing his faith in Yahweh, Daniel immersed himself in Babylon's religious indoctrination while maintaining a sturdy trust in Yahweh. Indeed, it was God who gave Daniel "learning and skill in all literature and wisdom" and "understanding in all visions and dreams" (Daniel 1:17).

Thus our call to be undefiled requires much wisdom. The line where conviction ends and compromise begins is not always clear. Next week's study will reveal that Daniel and his friends made both appeals for compromise and absolute refusals. As we submit ourselves wholly to God's reign, we must ask him for wisdom for living a life that is undefiled yet not withdrawn.

Texts to read and questions for reflections:

Matthew 5:13-16 – Jesus' teaching about believers glorifying God by being salt and light.

How do salt and light each exemplify a life that is distinctive yet not withdrawn?

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 – In the context of explaining his decision not to receive financial aid from the Corinthians, Paul discusses his approach to ministry to different groups.

Look at the qualifiers Paul gives to his ministry approach (in parentheses, vv. 20-21). What does that say about ministering in a particular context without fully assimilating to that way of life?

Guide for prayer: Plead with God to grant you a heart that refuses to compromise and the wisdom to know where that line is in every aspect of your life: your family life, work life, time management, finances, the friendships you nurture, what you watch and listen to, etc.

Week 2 - Living Under Godless Kings: Appeals and Refusals

The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, is divided into three categories—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Although the book of Daniel is nestled among prophets in the English Bible, ancient scholars placed it in the Writings, not the Prophets. This was not a denial of Daniel's prophetic ministry but reflects the Jewish mindset that Daniel was first and foremost a wise man.

There is a technical sense in which this was true for Daniel. After his Babylonian education, he was tested by the king “in every matter of wisdom and understanding,” categorically identifying him with “all the magicians and enchanters” in Babylon (Daniel 1:20). When Nebuchadnezzar became infuriated with his magicians and enchanters, “the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them” (Daniel 2:13). So “wise man,” like shepherd or farmer or cupbearer, was Daniel's profession.

Yet apart from his title, Daniel was a man of tremendous wisdom. The way he and his three friends navigated life in Babylon required a level of perception, insight, and prudence that could only have come from God. The first half of the book contains four confrontations between the Jewish exiles and the ruling king. In each, Daniel or his friends show wisdom in ascertaining what the king ultimately wants, what it looks like for them to submit to God's authority in the situation, and how those two may or may not harmonize. In two of the situations, an appeal is made. In two of the situations, no compromise is possible, so refusal is the only option for the servants of Yahweh.

Though our lives in 21st century America look much different than Daniel's, we have much to learn from his example of wisdom and courage. As you consider your relationships with authority figures in your family, workplace, and government, the four confrontations we will study can inform how you conduct yourself in submission to God's sovereignty. May he use your witness to bring those you engage under his authority as well.

I. The Confrontation Over Food

Text to read: Daniel 1:1-21

Questions for reflection:

What did King Nebuchadnezzar ultimately want in giving Daniel and his friends food from the royal table (see vv. 17, 20)?

How did Daniel take the king's desire into account in his request?

There are at least three levels of authority represented here: the king, the chief of the eunuchs, and the steward over the four Judean young men. How do Daniel's appeals both to the chief and to the steward (vv. 8-16) display his wisdom?

How did God bless Daniel's obedience-driven appeal (vv. 9, 17)?

Guide for prayer: Think about situations you currently or could potentially face where an authority figure or colleague makes demands that run contrary to God's ways. As you review the story and your answers above, ask God to show you if you could make an appeal similar to Daniel's in which God is honored and the request is satisfied.

2. The Confrontation Over Dreams

Text to read: Daniel 2:1-30

Questions for reflection:

When the captain of the king's guard found Daniel, what were his orders (vv. 2:12-14)?

In light of this, why is Daniel's response to the captain described as "with prudence and discretion" (vv. 14-16)?

Based on the prayer of thanks Daniel would later pray (vv. 20-23), why could he make an appointment with the king when he did not know the dream or its interpretation?

Contrast the response of the Chaldean wise men (vv. 10-11) and the Judean young men (vv. 17-19).

Remember that Daniel and his friends were part of a defeated people exiled to a foreign land. What does this account say about God's purposes to display his glory through his people in every circumstance?

Guide for prayer: Spend time praying through Daniel's prayer in vv. 20-23, pausing over the sovereign actions of God it chronicles. Pray for the faith to look to God in impossible situations, when all the resources of those around you have been exhausted.

3. The Confrontation Over Worship

Text to read: Daniel 3:1-30

Questions for reflection:

What did King Nebuchadnezzar ultimately want in demanding everyone to bow down to his image of gold?

How did the accusations of the Chaldeans (fellow “wise men”) play into the king’s pride and insecurity (vv. 8-12)?

What did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s answer (vv. 16-18) say about the possibility of compromise in this situation?

What did their answer show about their trust in God’s sovereignty (his supreme authority) over Nebuchadnezzar’s sovereignty?

What details of the fiery furnace story (vv. 19-27) are given to highlight God’s absolute control over all things?

Verses 28-30 record the complete reversal in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s situation because of their refusal to compromise. How can such outcomes motivate our refusal to compromise when we are in the middle of the story?

Guide for prayer: These faithful Judeans had a heads up on what could happen to them if their refusal to bow to the golden image were reported. They were prepared. As you look at compromises in your context that you know you must refuse to make, ask God for the type of submission to his sovereignty that will empower you to make a stand at any cost.

4. The Confrontation Over Prayer

This account introduces us to a new king, Darius the Mede, who conquered the Babylonian kingdom led by Nebuchadnezzar's son (5:30-31). As you read the text, note that even though this is a different king of a different ethnicity ruling a different kingdom, many of the dynamics are the same: a proud (though more sympathetic) king, scheming colleagues, and certain death for refusing to compromise. Most notably, Daniel's wisdom, courage, and vision are the same as he submits himself to God's sovereignty. And the final outcome is the same as it always will be: God is glorified!

Text to read: Daniel 6:1-27

Questions for reflection:

How is Daniel's tenure in government leadership described (v. 4)?

The conspirators made a watertight scheme (vv. 5-9), presumably because they observed Daniel praying toward Jerusalem from his house. Yet Daniel could have simply closed his windows or prayed in a secret room to avoid death. What statement was Daniel making by continuing his daily habit of prayer (vv. 10-11)?

How is Darius' reaction (vv. 14-16) to Daniel's insubordination different from Nebuchadnezzar's reaction to the refusal of the three men to bow to the golden image?

Parallel to chapter 3, this is a story of reversals. The conspirators' scheming is contrasted with Daniel's faithfulness, and the two groups have very different experiences of the lion's den (vv. 22-24). Yet based on the end of the story in verses 25-27, what is the ultimate point of these events?

Guide for prayer: This story again displays the type of wisdom and courage a person can exhibit when he or she submits to God's sovereignty. Spend time meditating on and praying through verses 26-27. Ask God whether there are any daily habits like Daniel's that you need to adopt to more fully embrace and submit to his absolute rule.

Week 3 - Vision of a Kingdom That Will Never be Destroyed

So far we have studied the parts of Daniel that are accessible enough that children can understand the point of the story. But the book of Daniel also contains notoriously challenging sections—visions of animals with unnatural horns, a goat chasing a ram, kings of the south and the north waging war, and a timeline of 70 weeks. Many students of prophecy have claimed to “crack the code” of which animal represents which kingdom and how the angel’s timeline corresponds with human history.

This largely misses the point of the text. These portions are examples of a genre of literature called apocalyptic that speaks of the end of the world through fantastical images. Apocalyptic is meant to embolden and strengthen persecuted people for endurance through their sufferings. The images given should be approached more as impressionistic paintings rather than precise blueprints. If we spend more time figuring out the identity of the statue’s chest than we do marveling at the rock that destroys the statue and fills the earth, we miss the point.

For these studies, we will focus on the visions in Daniel that have the clearest links to our current situation as followers of Jesus. We will give brief attention to what the historical connections might be, then focus most on how the images should impact us spiritually and emotionally.

As in every portion of Daniel, the ultimate aim of these visions is for us to be a people who embrace the supremacy and glory of God,

“for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:34-35)

I. Vision of the Statue and Stone

The first vision of the book is the dream Daniel interpreted for Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2. Scholars debate over which parts of the statue correspond to which nations. A common interpretation is that the head is the Babylonian Empire, the chest and arms are the Empire of the Medes and Persians, the middle is Greece, and the legs are the Roman Empire.

The most significant and undeniable centerpiece of the vision—perhaps the entire book—is that of the stone “cut out by no human hand” (Daniel 2:34) that destroys the image and fills the earth. This is the message that God’s Empire, inaugurated by his Messiah, will endure forever when all other human kingdoms are reduced to dust.

Text to read: Daniel 2:31-45

Questions for reflection:

Imagine being in Daniel’s position. You have been kidnapped and indoctrinated by an oppressive people and now your life is threatened by a mad king. How might this vision of the grand scope of history influence how you view your life in Babylon?

Doubtless each of the kingdoms represented in the statue considered themselves unconquerable. How should this sweeping vision of history affect how we view our nation and the other world powers of our day?

We have seen these events of the stone and statue take place through Jesus the Messiah. What is the impact our hearts should feel as we consider the eternal scope of his ministry and kingdom?

How should our inclusion in God’s eternal kingdom affect how we view nations, corporations, and individuals with power in the present?

Guide for prayer: With this grand vision in mind, meditate on and pray through the Lord’s prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). Allow the inevitability of God’s kingdom to strengthen your faith and motivate your involvement in the spread of this kingdom.

2. Vision of the Great Tree, Chopped and Humbled

Nebuchadnezzar's second dream is less expansive in its historical scope, yet offers equally significant hope to God's people when they feel helpless against earthly powers. As you read this account, think of both contemporary rulers who would share Nebuchadnezzar's pride and the pride in your own heart that would take credit for the good things you enjoy.

Text to read: Daniel 4:1-37

Questions for reflection:

What is the purpose of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling, as stated in verse 17?

It is possible that by this time in the narrative, Nebuchadnezzar has destroyed Jerusalem and leveled the temple. Yet Daniel shows no vindictive delight in the dream's implications for Nebuchadnezzar (v. 19). How might the message of the dream have helped Daniel see these events in a way that kept him from becoming vindictive or embittered?

Daniel gives the king his own counsel in verse 27. What is the appropriate response to recognizing that one's power and wealth are gifts from God?

Guide for prayer:

Identify a person whose misuse of or pride in their power hurts others. Confess God's absolute power over that person's limited power, and pray that God would make them wise and merciful in their use of power or humble them until they are.

What authority and wealth do you have? Do you receive those as gifts from God to be used for the good of those under you? Use verses 17 and 34-35 to shape your prayers for loving stewardship of the authority and wealth God has given you.

3. Vision of the Writing on the Wall

For the third time, a vision is seen that the Babylonian wise men cannot interpret, so Daniel is called. This vision is no dream but a publicly visible hand writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast. Like the vision Nebuchadnezzar had of the tree, this is more specific to the king's own reign, yet it serves as an equally cautionary tale of judgment by the Sovereign of the universe.

Text to read: Daniel 5:1-31

Questions for reflection:

What two acts of blasphemy against Yahweh did Belshazzar commit in verses 1-4?

Verse 6 pauses over the dramatic change that Belshazzar experiences (repeated in verses 9 and 10) when the fingers appear and begin writing on the wall. Why do you think this contrast between the raucous partier and the terrified, frightful king is emphasized?

Daniel indicts Belshazzar in verse 23, recounting his two acts of blasphemy as him lifting "up yourself against the Lord of heaven." How does this, yet again, affirm God's sovereignty over human affairs?

How might this judgment have served as a comfort for exiled Judeans?

Guide for prayer:

We are surrounded by those who have no regard for God, his holiness, or his ways. They blaspheme God not only with profane language but by worshiping what he has created rather than him as Creator. Think of three people in your life who lifted themselves "against the Lord of heaven" and pray for God to bring them to repentance before they face his judgment.

We too can fall into these blasphemous, idolatrous ways. Ask God to identify areas where you have misused God's gifts or treated them with more value than God himself.

4. Vision of the Son of Man

One of the unique features of Daniel is the books' shift from Hebrew into Aramaic, the trade language of the day, from chapters 2-7. The Aramaic chapters form an interesting pattern, where chapter 2 strongly parallels chapter 7, chapter 3 parallels chapter 6 (the fiery furnace and the lions den), and chapter 4 parallels chapter 5 (the judged, humbled kings).

Thus the vision of the four-tiered statue in chapter 2 is restated as a vision of four great beasts in chapter 7. And the stone "cut out by no human hand" in chapter 2:34 is seen as "one like a son of man" in 7:13. This returns the nature of the visions to the same broad-sweeping history of the end times we saw in chapter 2. Yet in this version a new feature is added: the implications of the son of man's eternal reign for the saints of the Most High.

As with chapter 2, we will concern ourselves less with the activity of the four beasts, except to say that they likely parallel the four kingdoms represented in the image in chapter 2. Their histories played out hundreds of years ahead of Daniel and millennia behind us. What remains significant is the kingdom that "shall be an everlasting kingdom" (7:27).

Text to read: Daniel 7:1-27

Questions for reflection:

After the conquests of the four beasts are told, the supreme King, the Ancient of Days, appears in verses 9-10, taking away the dominion of the beasts. In a broad sense, what is communicated by earthly kingdoms being portrayed as beasts while God is portrayed as a powerful judge?

The rise and fall of nation after nation gives the feeling that nothing on earth is ever permanent. How does that change with the appearing of the son of man in verses 13-14?

How might the affirmation of verse 18 have changed the experience of a Jewish exile living in Babylon?

Compare the dominion given the son of man in verse 14 and that given to the saints in verse 27 (echoing verse 18). If we now understand the son of man to be Jesus the Messiah, how is it that his receiving dominion means dominion for the saints?

Guide for prayer: Meditate on the truth that, whatever your degree of authority and dominion in this life, if you are one of the "saints of the Most High," you will receive "the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven" (Daniel 7:27). This is only due to the death and resurrection of Jesus who told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). This does not mean an easy, conflict-free life for us any more than it did for Jesus. But it does mean a life of hope. Spend time thanking God for this undeserved, glorious future and asking him to give you a hope that is proportionate to this destiny.

Week 4 - Repentance

From the time that God threatened exile to his disobedient people, he also promised that there would be a return from the exile. Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah were instrumental in these pronouncements, and it is Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years of exile to which Daniel refers in 9:2. Daniel's prayer of confession flows from the awareness not only of the promised return to Jerusalem but also to his people's disobedience that led to their exile in the first place.

This prayer is a response to God's word. As early as the Law of Moses—nearly 1,000 years earlier—God had threatened expulsion from the Promised Land if his people continued in disobedience. The prophets gave fresh reminders of God's word, yet Daniel's generation and their forebears ignored their warnings (Daniel 9:6). Because Daniel was rooted in God's word, he had clarity regarding both God's character and what he needed to confess on behalf of God's people.

As you spend these days meditating on Daniel's prayer of repentance, may the model of this man who "was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him" (Daniel 6:4) guide the prayers of us who have much more to confess.

I. The Big Picture of Repentance

Text to read: Daniel 9:1-23

Questions for reflection: Broadly speaking, Daniel's prayer has two large sections—confession of Israel's sin and a plea for God's forgiveness and favor. What are the key, repeated phrases that express this confession and plea?

Guide for Prayer: Do you share Daniel's burden for the sins of those around you? If so, express that sorrow and frustration in a prayer of confession to God. If not, pray that God would open your heart to the corporate sins you need to confess—whether of your family, the church, or our nation.

2. Confession of Sin in Light of God's Character

Text to read: Daniel 9:3-15

Questions for reflection: Confession does not occur in a vacuum. Confession responds to the reality of God's moral perfection with an admission of our moral imperfection. Make two lists below: the attributes of God that Daniel highlights and the contrasting sinfulness of God's people.

Guide for Prayer: Pause over the list of God's perfect attributes. In light of who he is, confess ways in which you "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). After you have spent some time doing this, look to Jesus for forgiveness and receive the right standing with God he offers, being "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Romans 3:24–25).

3. Prayer for Forgiveness and Favor

Text for reading: Daniel 9:16-19

Questions for reflection: After focusing at length on God's holiness and the people's sin, Daniel makes a series of petitions. List out the requests he makes. Note the way Daniel closes the prayer; what does that tell us about God's motivation in answering prayer?

Guide for Prayer: As you pray for forgiveness and favor in your life, allow Daniel's boldness to influence your prayers. Basing your prayers on God's character and his pursuit of his own glory (Daniel 9:18-19), boldly ask him to move in your life and in the lives of those around you.

4. God Answers

Texts for meditation: Daniel 9:20-23, 10:1-21

Questions for reflection: God graciously records his unique and powerful answer to Daniel's prayer. What evidences of spiritual warfare are given in the answer to his prayer? What expressions of the love of God are communicated?

Guide for Prayer: Spend some time soaking in the magnitude of what happens when God's people cry out to him in repentance and petition. Thank God for how he responds to prayer, and ask him for patience when you find yourself in the "three weeks" between making your request and hearing an answer.

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