

Daniel Series Part 20

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[0 : 01] It's not an uncommon thing for a believer to pose the question, how long, Lord? The prophets in the Old Testament would often ask, how long will your hand be heavy upon your people?

The psalmist would inquire, how long will the wicked prosper? The oppressed people of God could cry, how long till you act in justice?

The faithful remnant in the days of prophetic silence between the Testaments could ponder, how long till Messiah comes? And today God's people can also ask, how long, Lord?

How long till we will know again days of gospel, refreshing, and revival? How long will your people in many lands suffer violent persecution?

And maybe supremely, how long, Lord, till you return in power and glory to gather your own? On a more personal level, we can pose the same question.

[1 : 14] How long will I be single? How long till we have a child? How long till my son, who has drifted far from the things of God, return to his ways?

How long this illness or affliction that I experience or that one I love experiences? How long, Lord? As we meet Daniel at the beginning of chapter 9, we can imagine that this is the question on his heart and perhaps on his lips as well.

How long, Lord? Now, this evening we will limit ourselves to the verses that introduce Daniel's prayer there in chapter 9, verses 1 to 4, the first part of verse 4.

And what we'll do is, as we consider these verses, pose the following questions that revolve around the suggestion that I've made that Daniel is a man with a question, how long, Lord, on his lips?

The questions that we're going to pose are as follows. Why would Daniel ask this question? In a sense, we've already indicated that that is very likely to be the question that is on his mind and heart.

[2 : 31] But we want to just think about why that would be the case. But then also, turn to ask, where does Daniel turn to for answers? One thing, to pose the question, how long, Lord?

But where are we to find the answer to that question? Well, where does Daniel turn to for answers? And then, thirdly, who does Daniel turn to for help?

That's obviously very related to the second question, but I hope you'll see the distinction that we'll make in due course. But what we can do now, before we pose and seek to answer the first question, let's just read these verses that introduce Daniel's prayer in Daniel chapter 9, from the beginning of the chapter.

And what we'll do is, we'll read through to verse 6. We won't read the whole of Daniel's prayer. That isn't going to be what we're going to be thinking about this evening. We will do so in due course. But just to give us a flavor of the prayer.

And it's helpful to have that flavor of the prayer that he prays, even as we consider the words of introduction to it. So, Daniel chapter 9, from the beginning.

[3 : 40] In the first year of Darius, son of Xerxes, a Mede by descent, who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom, in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.

So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands.

We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled. We have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants, the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

First of all, then, why would Daniel ask the question, How long, Lord? In order to answer that question, we need to appreciate, if only briefly, the historical context of this chapter and this prayer.

And we're given it very explicitly. At the beginning, in verse 1, we read, In the first year of Darius, son of Xerxes, a Mede by descent, who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel.

[5 : 11] And then we go on to discover what it was that Daniel did, he understood, and he turned to God in prayer. Now, there is a consensus, certainly among those who, as we do, consider this to be the inspired Word of God, conservative biblical scholars.

There is a consensus that this reference is a reference to the beginning of the reign of Cyrus, of Persia. Now, the Persian Empire conquered Babylon, and on conquering Babylon, ruled supreme in the ancient world.

And this would date, chapter 9 and this prayer, to the year 538 B.C. Now, an immediate difficulty or problem is that Daniel doesn't mention Cyrus, rather he mentions this character, Darius.

And immediately it begs the question, well, who is Darius? In extra-biblical sources, there's no reference, or very little reference, certainly to this character, and certainly not as one who was over the Persian Empire.

So, who is he? Well, I just want to mention briefly in passing, so as not to simply ignore the matter, two possible explanations that do not involve questioning the integrity of the book and its historical reliability that we are persuaded of.

[6 : 42] One possibility is that Darius could refer to the man appointed by Cyrus as a kind of viceroy over the Babylonian portion of his empire.

The Persian Empire extended beyond Babylon. They conquered Babylon. And as would be normal when the empire extended, the one who was over all the empire would need to engage the help of others to rule over portions of his empire.

And it's possible that perhaps Darius performed that function. Another possibility is that Darius is simply another name for Cyrus.

And that's certainly a suggestion that is made by many and carries some weight. We know that kings could have different names, and maybe even according to the geographic location where they were being talked about, they could have or be given or adopt different names.

Now, one immediate difficulty with that suggestion is what we find in chapter 6 of Daniel. In the chapter that speaks of Daniel in the lion's den, the chapter ends in the following way, So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

[8 : 02] That would seem to dismiss the suggestion that they're one and the same person because there they seem to be spoken of very clearly as distinct individuals. However, those who know more about these things than I do explain that another way in which the original language could be understood or translated in this verse is as follows.

So Daniel, this is Daniel 6.28, So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius. That is the reign of Cyrus the Persian. So the word that we have there in our Bibles is and could be understood as being a reference to something along the lines of that is.

So actually, what this chapter would be doing would be identifying these two individuals. Well, there are two suggestions that are made. We don't know for sure.

But regardless of not knowing for sure, and I don't think it's possible to know for sure, what we can reasonably maintain and will maintain is that the year 538 B.C. remains, the likely year that is being referred to there in the first verse of Daniel chapter 9.

That being so, what would be the significance of this year and be a cause for Daniel crying out, How long, Lord? Remember that that's what we're trying to establish at this point.

[9 : 22] Why would Daniel ask the question, How long, Lord? And why would this year be significant? I think we can say three things. One thing that we can say is that this reference to the beginning of the reign of Darius, or the beginning certainly of the Persian Empire, reminds us of just how long Daniel has been in exile.

Daniel was part of those who were exiled in 605 B.C. And now we're in 538. Well, you can do the maths. We're talking about 67 years, if my arithmetic is correct, that he's been in Babylon.

Now, we know he was a young man when he was exiled to Babylon, but we could reasonably conclude that he was now an old man, say, in his 80s. Now, this alone would be good reason to cry out, How long, Lord?

How long? How long this exile? How long will we remain far, far away from Jerusalem? How long will Jerusalem remain desolate?

The years have passed. The decades have passed. How long, Lord? But a further impetus to that cry would be precisely the shift in political power that had just been experienced, from Babylon to Persia, and the opportunities that such a shift could afford to the exiles.

[10 : 56] We know that this is generally true, that when there is a change in the geopolitical horizon, when there is something of the nature described here, things change, and there are opportunities for some, and some gain and some lose.

And so, for the exiles, this would have been a reason at least for expectation. Well, what will this have as an effect on us? Might this provide us with an opportunity to return home?

Now, that kind of thinking would be especially so for Daniel, who, as we've been able to discover very clearly, was fully persuaded that kings were but instruments in the hands of God.

It's interesting in the reading that we had in Jeremiah, where Nebuchadnezzar is spoken of as God's servant. Now, Daniel believed that. Daniel believed that the kings, however pagan they were, however hostile to God they were, were instruments in God's hands.

And so, as there was this change in empires, as one empire was brought to its knees, and another took its place, that would have been good reason for a man like Daniel to, with particular impetus and fervor, cry out, How long, Lord?

[12 : 23] But there's a third element. This is maybe the most important one, and that is Daniel's own knowledge of God's promises of restoration. Now, of course, that wasn't true only at this moment in history, but it was certainly true at this point, as it had been previously.

Daniel knew that God had made and given promises concerning the restoration of His people. He had promised to bring His people home, and the time for fulfillment of that promise must surely be approaching.

It would have been a reasonable conclusion for Daniel to come to. And so, again, we say it seems reasonable to conclude that Daniel, at the beginning of this chapter, has this question on his heart and perhaps on his lips, How long, Lord?

But that takes us to the second question that we introduced, and that is, where does Daniel turn to for answers? And if we turn to our passage, these few brief verses at the beginning of chapter 9, we're given the answer.

I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.

[13 : 43] See, this is Daniel's concern. How long will this exile last for? And he says, well, how will I find an answer to that question? This is the burning question. How long, Lord?

How will I know? Well, what will I do? Where can I find the answer to that question? Well, he turns to the Scriptures. The phrase used is literally the books.

And evidently, even at this time, there were books, including the writings of recent prophets like Jeremiah, that were recognized as, to use the language we use, as canonical or authoritative.

And it is to these books that Daniel turns for an answer to his question, how long, Lord? And the point that we would stress here about Daniel in particular, turning to the Scriptures, is that Daniel was himself a prophet.

He was peculiarly gifted in the matter of revelation, in receiving revelation, and in interpreting revelation, be it in interpreting the dreams and visions of others, or his own dreams and visions, or receiving the interpretations that God gave throughout the book.

[15 : 01] We've come across this gift that Daniel had, this office that was his, time and time again. And yet, even so, when Daniel needs an answer to his question, he turns to the Scriptures.

He doesn't wait for some vision that God would give him. He doesn't seek to establish the answer for himself as some gifted prophet. No, he turns to the Scriptures for the answers that he is looking for.

And it doesn't require for us to labor the point of how that clearly has an application for us. How much more should we, as we seek an answer to the questions that we can pose, and perhaps this question, in our own circumstances, is how long, Lord?

Let us turn to the Scriptures for answers. So, he turns to the Scriptures, but we can say further that he is enabled to understand the Scriptures. This is what Daniel says, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures.

As he reads, he is granted understanding. And what does he read? Well, he tells us he reads from the prophet Jeremiah. And he concludes that the desolation of Jerusalem would last 70 years.

[16 : 19] Now, where would Daniel have found this prophetic promise? Well, two passages stand out, and we have read both of them. And remember that as Daniel, in the reading of these passages, in Jeremiah 25 and 29, and as he comes upon the promise that it would be 70 years that the exile would last for, remember that, as we have just noted just a few moments ago, he has been 67 years in Babylon, certainly if the assumptions we are making are correct.

So, even at that point, you can just imagine his excitement. You know, Jeremiah is speaking of 70 years, and he tries to work out, well, how long have I been here? Well, I've been here 67 years.

And so, as I say, you don't need to have great imagination to just consider the level of expectation and excitement that there could have been for Daniel. However, we're going to complicate things a little bit now by moving on and asking a couple of questions about the conclusion Daniel comes to from the Scriptures concerning the desolation of Jerusalem that would last 70 years.

Because there is a couple of questions there. First of all, what is being referred to when the reference is to the desolation of Jerusalem? What exactly is that about?

And also, what are we to make of the 70 years? It's not that simple to establish the 70 years in terms of when they begin, and then, obviously, depending on when they begin, that will have a consequence on when they end.

[17 : 55] When do these 70 years? It's clear that the duration is stated explicitly, 70 years. But when do they begin, and as a result, when would they then end?

That is not so clear. It's also worth making the point, though I do think that this time reference is a literal time reference. Nonetheless, it is worth recognizing that the figure 70 could well have a symbolic element to it.

I'm not saying that it's only symbolic, but have a symbolic element. We know in the Bible that 70 years is used as a reference to a lifetime. The psalmist speaks of a lifetime as being 70 years, and so perhaps that's something just to bear in mind as being certainly on the panorama as we consider this matter of, well, what about these 70 years?

When do they begin, and when do they end? Well, the first place that we would go if we were trying to find answers to that question would be the very passages that Daniel went to in Jeremiah.

Now, in Jeremiah chapter 25 and verses 11 and 12, we've already read the passage, but if we just quickly turn to those two verses in particular to see what clues they would give us concerning these 70 years in terms of when they begin and consequently when they end.

[19 : 18] Well, what do we read there in verses 11 and 12 in particular? We read, 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, and then he goes on.

Now, what Jeremiah says here doesn't really provide us with a conclusive view of when they begin or when they end. He speaks about a desolate wilderness, and that would seem to be talking about the time when Jerusalem was destroyed.

Now, that wasn't at the beginning of Babylon's rule over Jerusalem, but rather in 587 when there was the violent and brutal destruction of Jerusalem.

And here in Jeremiah, the talk of a desolate wilderness would seem to suggest that that is what Jeremiah is referring to, which would mean that that is the start point of the 70 years.

However, in this passage, Jeremiah also speaks of the beginning of this exile, of the 70 years as being measured from the point when these nations serve the king of Babylon.

[20 : 33] And that takes us not to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587, but to the beginning of Babylon's rule over Jerusalem, the time when Daniel was exiled to Babylon in the year 605 or thereabouts.

So, Jeremiah 25 could be understood in a couple of ways. What about Jeremiah 29? Well, in chapter 10, let's just notice what Jeremiah says there.

Jeremiah 29 and in verse 10. This is what the Lord says, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my promise to bring you back to this place.

Well, there it would seem that there's not too much of a help in terms of, well, okay, 70 years, but when do they begin and when do they end? However, Jeremiah is writing this letter, it is probable, in about 599 B.C., long before the destruction of Jerusalem.

And the implication seems to be in the letter that the 70 years have begun. You know, he's speaking to the exiles, they're suffering in exile, and he's saying, you know, take heart, because at the end of 70 years, there will be a return.

[21 : 46] Now, it would seem strange that he is talking about the 70 years that haven't actually begun yet and will only begin over a decade later. Just to further complicate matters or, depending on your perspective, make things all the more fascinating, there are a couple of other references in the Old Testament to this time of 70 years, and we'll just look at them briefly.

in Zechariah 1, and verse 12. So, if you turn to Zechariah, right at the end of the Old Testament, this penultimate book in the Old Testament, in Zechariah 1, and verse 12.

Now, I hope you're taking careful mental note of all that's been said thus far, because you have to compare and contrast all these passages. And I'll hand out little bits of paper for a wee test in a moment. So, Zechariah 1, and verse 12.

What do we read there? Then the angel of the Lord said, Lord Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these 70 years?

But then notice what Zechariah says in verse 16. Therefore, this is what the Lord says, I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. So, Zechariah would seem to be identifying the end of the 70 years with the rebuilding of the temple.

[23 : 10] Now, the rebuilding of the temple was not achieved when the exiles returned with the edict of Cyrus in 538, but rather in about 520.

So, Zechariah is focusing very much on the temple, and so the suggestion would seem to be that Zechariah has in mind the destruction of the temple in 587 as the beginning of this desolation, and the conclusion of it, the construction or the reconstruction of it in 520 or so.

That would also give roughly 70 years. And then finally, in terms of references that help confuse us, as the case may be, in 2 Chronicles chapter 36.

This is the last one that we're going to look at at this point. You'll be glad to hear. 2 Chronicles chapter 36 and verse 20. 2 Chronicles chapter 36 and verse 20.

So, the end of the chronicler's account of this time in the history of Israel, and he concludes with these words, he carried, that is, God carried into exile to Babylon the remnant who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power.

[24 : 29] the land enjoyed its Sabbath rest, and all the time of its desolation it rested until the 70 years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah.

And then, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing.

And what follows is the edict of Cyrus, which we know was in 538 granting permission to the Jews to return to Jerusalem. So, the chronicler would seem to be suggesting that the beginning of this exile, of this desolation, of these 70 years, was when the temple was destroyed and there were those who escaped from the sword, that time of violent and brutal destruction, and it concludes with Cyrus' edict.

Now, that would be a time considerably less than 70 years, but that would seem to be what the chronicler is suggesting. Well, what do we conclude? Well, I don't know what we conclude, but what I would suggest is that on balance, it would be reasonable to consider that the 70 years, certainly if they are to be taken as, to be understood as 70 years or approximately 70 years, then, to consider the beginning at the time of Daniel's exile when Babylon first took control of Jerusalem and then ending with the edict of Cyrus allowing the return from exile would seem a reasonable conclusion, though strong arguments can be made for tweaking that in different directions.

I don't think it's something we would want to be dogmatic about. The important point is that Daniel turns to the Scriptures for answers and he finds the answers that he needs.

[26 : 24] Even if we're not altogether sure what he understood by the conclusion he comes to and especially the 70 years, he's got a question, he needs answers, he turns to the Scriptures and he gets an answer for his question and we must do the same.

He turns to the Scriptures, he's enabled to understand the Scriptures, but he is also convicted by the Scriptures. Now, this is something we'll explore and develop more as we consider his prayer, but we're not going to do that this evening, but it is worth making the point here, if only in passing, that his understanding of the Scriptures and being reminded of the original cause of the exile, which was the rebellion of God's people, bring profound conviction upon Daniel and so he prays.

Where does he turn to for answers? He turns to the Scriptures. But then finally, who does Daniel turn to for help? Having understood that the end of exile is imminent and yet also conscious of the sin of the people and the need for help, to whom does he turn?

Well, not surprisingly, to the God of the Scriptures. And how does he do this? Well, he prays. This chapter is largely concerned with Daniel's prayer.

We're not going to consider the prayer, but we can consider truths concerning the prayer that are introduced to us, even in the words of introduction in these first three verses.

[28 : 00] And I want to just notice three or four things about Daniel's prayer. Not the prayer itself, but what is said concerning it in the words that Daniel himself gives us in introducing the prayer.

The first thing I want you to notice about Daniel turning to help to God in prayer is the intimacy of his prayer. There's a beautiful description of prayer in verse 3.

In the NIV, the force of it is somewhat lost when we read at the beginning of verse 3, so I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him. The actual words that Daniel uses there are, I turned my face to the Lord.

Daniel speaks with God. He prays face to face. He turns away from all others and fixes his eyes on his God.

He turns his face to the Lord God. The intimacy of his prayer. And let us do likewise. Let us pray in this manner that we would turn our face to the Lord God.

[29 : 07] The question could be asked, is such intimacy appropriate? On what grounds can Daniel presume such access to God? Well, verse 4, in the beginning of verse 4, which also serves to introduce the prayer, gives us an answer.

because there we read, I prayed to the Lord my God and confess. The way in which Daniel is able to speak of this God to whom he prays, the living and true God, the only God, as my God.

Daniel can pray in this intimate manner because God is his God. He belongs, Daniel belongs to God's chosen people. He is part of a people in a covenant relationship with God.

In fact, this aspect of the covenant relationship that Daniel and the people of God enjoy with God is particularly highlighted in this chapter by the way in which, for the first time in the book of Daniel, God's covenant name, Yahweh, makes an appearance in these verses.

In verses 1 to 4, we have it on two occasions, in verse 2 and in verse 4. And so, further stressing this covenant God who is in relationship with his people that allows one such as Daniel to turn his face to God in prayer and address him in this way, in this intimate way, in this personal way, my God.

[30 : 30] The intimacy of his prayer, but also notice the grounds upon which he prays. Why is it that Daniel on this occasion prays to God? Well, his prayer is essentially of confession and of supplication for the end of the desolation of Jerusalem.

We're not going to look at the prayer, but just to confirm that, notice how in verse 18, Give ear, O God, and hear, and open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your name.

But on what grounds does he call on God to act? Well, Daniel, here especially, clearly is driven by what he has been enabled to understand from Scripture.

Namely, as we've been thinking about, that the exile will end and Jerusalem will be restored, which does rather beg the question, why pray for that which God has already decreed?

You see, what Daniel has established from Jeremiah is that the exile will end, period, that Jerusalem will be restored. It's a done deal in God's economy, in God's purposes, it's a done deal.

[31 : 42] So why pray? What purpose can be served in Daniel praying for that which has already been established and will occur? That's a question that perhaps is often posed in different contexts and perhaps in different ways.

If God is a sovereign God, why should we pray? Well, Daniel would have responded to that question, and we also should respond in this way. It is because God is sovereign that I pray.

The sovereignty of God far from being something that would stop us from praying or leading us to think that there's no purpose in praying, it is precisely the sovereignty of God that is an encouragement to pray because we pray to a God who is able to do all things and all things well, indeed a God who has determined that the fulfilling of His purposes is achieved in a measure by means of the prayers of His people.

So the intimacy of his prayer as he turns to God for help, the grounds upon which he prays. Notice also in these words of introduction the intensity of his prayer. In verse 3, So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with Him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes.

This is no perfunctory fulfilling of a religious duty. Daniel prays with a passion for God's people, for God's city, for God's name. Fasting, sackcloth, ashes point to mourning before God.

[33 : 12] I wonder how alien is such prayer to many of us to praying with this degree of intensity. And yet, this is how Daniel prays.

And yet, as we think of the circumstances that drove him to pray in this way, the desolation of Jerusalem, is it not true that as we look around our own land, our own nation, do we not also see much desolation that would lead us to pray in like manner.

And the final thing I want to say about who Daniel turns to for help to God in prayer and the manner that he does so, I just wanted you to notice this final thing, and that is the solitariness of his prayer.

In verses 1 to 4, where Daniel introduces his prayer, what he repeats on three occasions is the word I. I, Daniel, understood. I turn to God.

I pray to the Lord my God. He, and certainly it would appear he alone, on this occasion, is praying. He's praying alone. That stands in contrast to the prayer where he unfailingly speaks in the first person, plural.

[34 : 26] we have sinned. We have fallen short. We come to you. So, he's actually praying alone, but he prays in solidarity with those who perhaps choose not to pray.

Now, why this distinction between the way Daniel introduces the prayer, I, I, I, and the prayer itself, where we figures prominently? Why does Daniel pray alone?

Might it be, we don't know for certain the answer to that question, but might it be that there were so few with that spiritual discernment, burden, passion, who would join him in such prayer?

Now, there may have been a faithful remnant scattered across the empire who were praying as Daniel prayed. We're not precluding that possibility, but it seems reasonable also to imagine that there were perhaps very few, who would pray as Daniel prayed.

But despite that, despite, if you wish, the loneliness of his circumstances, Daniel prays. I think today of those who maybe lament what they would consider to be the lack of prayer in the life of the church, maybe in the life of a congregation, the little interest that there would seem to be in gathering to pray, the seeming formality or coldness of what prayer there is, and though these may be legitimate concerns, though that may be a reasonable diagnostic, what these things are not is a reason not to pray.

[36 : 10] You know, Daniel doesn't say, well, you know, who else is there who will pray with me? I'm all alone, and so how can I pray? No, Daniel prays. If there are others that will join him good and well, but if he has to pray alone, he'll pray alone.

Daniel prayed. He prayed alone, and God heard and answered his prayer. Well, as we draw things to a close, we've considered why Daniel would ask the question, how long, O Lord, but as we think of ourselves, is this a question that we might ask?

We might ask it with different thoughts in mind as to what it is that we're asking for, but is that a question that you might ask? Where do you turn for answers to that question, and to whom do you turn for help?

Let us learn from Daniel in this matter.