

DARE TO HAVE A PRAYERFUL SPIRIT

DANIEL 9:1-19

Back in June, Cheryl and I had the privilege of visiting the downtown Chicago church named after Dwight L. Moody – a great evangelist and man of God in the 1800s. On one occasion, Moody spoke to the children of Edinburgh, Scotland. To get their attention, he asked a question, “What is prayer?” He intended it to be just a rhetorical question, but the kids didn’t know that. Many of them raised their hands to provide an answer. Moody called on a boy who then stood up and said in a loud, clear voice, “Prayer is an offering up of our desire unto God for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies.” Wow! Moody said in response, “Thank God, my boy, that you were born in Scotland!”

That’s an impressive answer, isn’t it? It’s part of the Westminster Shorter Catechism that many Scottish children in that day and time learned from memory. I wonder, though, if that boy’s actual practice of prayer matched his glowing definition of prayer. That’s where I struggle. I’ve read books on prayer, preached messages on prayer, led workshops on prayer. Given enough time, I could write a pretty impressive theology of prayer. But do I pray? Not as much as I should. I’m growing. I’m making slow progress. Am I satisfied with the quality or the quantity of my prayers? No. There’s lots of room for improvement.

Today we continue on in a series of messages about one of the Bible’s greatest characters: Daniel. I know you’ve missed singing our little song together the last two weeks, so here’s your chance! “Dare to be a Daniel. Dare to stand alone. Dare to have a purpose firm and dare to make it known!” Previously, we’ve seen that Daniel had a purposed will and a courageous heart. Next week, we’ll look at his surrendered mind. But today I want you to see with me that Daniel also had a prayerful spirit. Prayer was very important to this man and I’m impressed with his prayer life. He never wrote a book on prayer. He never preached a sermon on prayer. Instead, we just see him pray and thereby know that prayer was valuable and important to him. Let’s read one of Daniel’s prayers in Daniel 9:1-19. One reason Daniel was such a man of God is simply because he was a man of prayer. What does it mean to have a prayerful spirit? As I study Daniel’s life, I’m challenged by three images or metaphors having to do with prayer. First...

PRAYER IS LIKE OXYGEN.

Three weeks ago, we looked at the greatest challenge in Daniels’ life. It was the famous story of Daniel being thrown into the lions’ den and how God spared his life miraculously. Do you recall what initially caused that crisis? Prayer! Daniel was being considered for the number two role in the whole Babylonian Empire. Other governmental officials got very jealous of Daniel’s influence. So they cooked up a scheme to get him into trouble. They got the Babylonian emperor, Darius, to enact a foolish law that forbade anyone from praying to anyone or anything other than the king for thirty days. Daniel just ignored the law. It was his

habit to pray to the Lord three times a day in the privacy of his own home and he apparently never stopped praying for even one day.

What does that suggest about Daniel? Prayer was to Daniel like oxygen is to you and me. Daniel couldn't live without prayer. There's no evidence Daniel had a confrontational personality or that he itched for a fight. You don't get to a high position like Daniel's without knowing how to finesse powerful people and dicey situations. So, prayer was incredibly important to his man. It was like air that he had to breathe every day in order to stay spiritually alive. Daniel thought giving up prayer for a month to be far more dangerous than being thrown into a pit of hungry lions. Imagine that for a moment! What a stunning choice! If you were presented with a choice of not praying to God for thirty days or being thrown to a pack of hungry lions, what would you choose? Nobody forced him to pray to King Darius. No one insisted he pray to some idol. Nobody said he had to abandon his faith in the one, true God. Just don't pray for a month, Daniel! What would you do? Why, some of us don't need the threat of being fed to hungry lions to just not pray for a month! We can pull that one off with no threat whatsoever! Is prayer that important to you? Is prayer like oxygen – like air – to you? Is prayer so central to your life every day, that you'd find it hard to function normally without it? Prayer was that important to this man, Daniel.

Some Christians get all worked up about the refusal to allow voluntary prayer in public schools. OK. But I'll tell you what I think is a far greater issue in my humble opinion. It's my prayerlessness. It's your prayerlessness. It's the lack of prayer in our church. It's the weak, namby-pamby prayers of much of the Body of Christ in this country. Here's a question: would it make any substantial difference in your life, my life, or this church's life and ministry, if prayer was banned for thirty days? Would anything be that much different? The answer might well be an embarrassing one.

Prayer was spiritual oxygen to Daniel. It was how he expressed his constant dependence on God for every aspect of his life. It kept Daniel in touch with spiritual reality every day of his life. God is there. God is sovereign. God holds you accountable. God wants to empower your life with His presence. God wants to have a daily, hourly, moment by moment relationship with you. Did you notice how prayer is described in Daniel's prayer? Daniel says, "So I turned to the LORD God..." (Dan. 9:3 NLT) Literally, it means, "I set my face towards the Lord God." Do you do that regularly and consistently – set your face towards God?

You get a wonderful example of how to pray by just analyzing Daniel's prayer. It's all there – all the components of effective prayer. Daniel recognizes his own sin and confesses it. You hear him praising and thanking God for who He is. You observe Daniel struggling with God, begging God and asking God to be merciful to the Jewish people and bring them back to Jerusalem. That's what you call intercession – the kind of prayer that intercedes for someone else. Look again at what v. 18 says, "... We make this plea, not because we deserve help,

but because of your mercy.” (Dan. 9:18 NLT) Even way back then, Daniel knew full well that God doesn't answer prayer because you deserve it or because you've earned it. God answers prayer only because of who He is. That's grace and Daniel was aware of it. Notice, too, how he asks God to bring glory to Himself. Real prayer is all about God being lifted up and honored above anything else. The Hebrew word for glory is *kabod* and it means to have heaviness or weight. God's worth or weight is expressed in His character and His attributes. The main reason Daniel prayed was to give glory – or to add weight – to God. That was the purpose of his life. Daniel was God-centered if he was anything and so were his prayers. Because Daniel lived in and breathed God Himself like a holy atmosphere, prayer was like oxygen to him.

Before refrigerators, people used icehouses to preserve their food. Icehouses had thick walls, no windows and a tightly fitting door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the icehouses and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer months. There's a story of one man who lost a valuable watch while working in an icehouse. He looked everywhere for it, even carefully raking through the sawdust, but he couldn't find it. His fellow workers helped him search, but they came up empty, too. A boy heard about this lost watch and he slipped into the icehouse during the noon hour when the men weren't in there working. He emerged with the watch after a few minutes. Amazed, the men asked the boy how he's found this watch. The boy said, "I closed the door, lay down in the sawdust and kept very still. Soon I just heard the watch ticking." Are you quiet enough – are you still enough – to hear God speak into your life? Don't get all hung up on how to pray and get all distracted by this technique or that method. It's far more important just to pray. Here's a second image:

PRAYER IS LIKE EXERCISE.

Like exercise, prayer needs a certain amount of routine, discipline and regular consistency to be effective. From the story about the lions' den, we learned that Daniel got down on his knees and prayed three times a day. It was probably 9 in the morning, 12 noon and 3 in the afternoon which were the hours that animal sacrifices had been offered at the Temple back in Jerusalem. Daniel knelt and prayed in the direction of Jerusalem. Why? Perhaps it was a way to remind Daniel every time he prayed that he was a citizen of another country and that he was accountable ultimately to the God of Israel not the current king of Babylon. Daniel lived in Babylon but his heart was in Jerusalem. Remember, if you're a follower of Jesus, you're a resident alien like Daniel. Yes, you live in this world, but your heart belongs in Heaven, your true home. And just like Daniel, you're accountable ultimately to the God of Heaven and Earth - not to yourself, not to your spouse, not to your boss, not to anyone or anything else. A disciplined, regular prayer life will remind you where you belong and to whom you belong.

When you start to bring a discipline, a routine, to your prayers, it will make those prayers more effective. It's very easy for you and me to forget that we belong to the Kingdom of God. It's easy to forget you've been bought by the blood of Jesus and that the Holy Spirit lives within you. It's easy to forget that God is in control of all things past, present and future. But regular, consistent prayer will remind you of those all important truths. Here's what I know. The more I pray, the less I sin. The less I pray, the more I sin. The more I pray, the less I worry. The less I pray, the more I worry. The more I pray, the more energy I have for the things of God. The less I pray, the less I want to do anything for God. The more I pray, the more answers to pray I receive. The less I pray, the less answers I receive. The more I pray, the more God-centered I become. The less I pray, the more self-centered I remain. Daniel faced many challenges and crises in his life. So will you. They're just inevitable. Will you be ready for those challenges, those crises, those tests? Let the record show that Daniel prevailed because he had already developed a consistent, regular and disciplined life of prayer.

"But, Pastor, I just don't have time to pray." You always make time for what you believe is important to your life. When your prayers are regular and consistent, you give evidence that you truly believe in prayer's importance. If your prayers are here and there, kind of haphazard, you reveal that you don't think prayer matters all that much. Imagine if you ate like that. If you eat sporadically with little or no thought about the nutritional value of what you're eating, you're not a healthy person. If you pray that way, you can't be spiritually healthy either. Daniel was the number two man in the Babylonian Empire which probably means he was just as busy as Vice President Joe Biden is today. Nevertheless, Daniel built into his busy schedule the practice of prayer three times a day.

Robert LeTourneau was a gifted industrialist and engineer in the mid 20th century. He was also a devoted follower of Jesus. His company received an order from the government to build a very complicated machine to be used to lift airplanes. No machine like that had ever been designed before. LeTourneau and his engineers couldn't come up with a design. Tension and nerves began to rise. Finally, on a Wednesday night, LeTourneau told his staff he wasn't going to stay at the office. Instead, he was going to a prayer meeting at his church. Frankly, some of his engineers were upset with him. They had a deadline to meet and it felt like the boss was deserting them. They expressed their displeasure. He said, "But, I've got a deadline with God." So, off LeTourneau went to the prayer meeting where he sang hymns and prayed. Afterward, as he was walking home, the design of the machine in complete detail came into his mind. He just needed time with God and some creative silence to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal it to him. How often we try so hard to solve the problems of our business, our health, our marriage, our kids or our future until we get thoroughly agitated and depressed! What if we learned to take the time to be still and to be with God?

I love watching big sports spectacles like the Olympics. Great athletes have a way of making their sports look so easy, so effortless and so spontaneous. But

you know as well as I do that there's never excellence without discipline. Those athletes can compete at that amazing level because day in and day out they have the discipline to train, to practice and to work at their events. Discipline is one of the keys to success in any arena of life and that applies to the spiritual life. It's a big mistake to pray only when you feel like praying. Make prayer a habit. If you get in a rut, try something new and fresh. But whatever you, don't give up praying. A patient, steady resolve to meet with the Lord regularly and often will bear a lot of wonderful spiritual results in your life. Here's a third and final image:

PRAYER IS LIKE A WEAPON.

Daniel's life and story give us many insights into something called spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is the biblical teaching that God and the devil are at war with each other. The Bible makes it clear that the devil was decisively defeated by God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But the devil can still cause many problems and much heartache. He can still win some battles even though he's lost the war. Because the devil cannot destroy God, he settles for second best - destroying God's people. He tried to destroy Daniel numerous times. He is today trying to destroy you and me. He tempts you. He tricks you. He accuses you. He can't stop you from going to Heaven, but he can get you to compromise, to sin, to fail, to embarrass yourself and to discredit the name of Jesus and the cause of Christ in some way. Every day you're in a battle.

Some 600 years after Daniel died, the great Christian leader, Paul, wrote a letter to some fellow Christians. Here's what he wrote: " Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm.... Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere." (Eph 6:11-13, 18 NLT) Prayer is an essential weapon in this battle.

Daniel learned early in his life that prayer is a weapon. When Daniel was a teenager, one Babylonian king wanted Daniel not only to interpret the meaning of one of the king's dream but also to tell the king what the dream itself was about. How did Daniel respond? "Then Daniel went home and told his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah what had happened. He urged them to ask the God of heaven to show them his mercy by telling them the secret, so they would not be executed along with the other wise men of Babylon." (Dan 2:17-18 NLT) Daniel invites his friends to pray with him and for him. There will come those times in your life and my life when you will face challenges that are too big for your own prayers alone. Call out the troops! You're in a war! Call for reinforcements right away! Prayer is your primary weapon to protect yourself from all the devil's schemes, tricks and temptations. Use it!

One final thought fascinates me. Apparently the devil was well aware of the power of Daniel's prayers. That was the reason he concocted that scheme using Daniel's enemies as pawns to get Daniel to stop praying. We tend to think of prayer as a holy waste of time. Sure, prayer is good and holy, but it's still a waster of time, right? Of course, it's the devil who gets you to believe that lie! Why? Because he doesn't want you to pray! He knows only too well the power of prayer. The devil will go to any length to get you to stop praying. The most memorable words I've ever read about the power of prayer come from the pen of a man by the name of Samuel Chadwick. "Satan dreads nothing but prayer. The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." Ironic, isn't it? It's not the devil you must convince of the power of prayer. It's you and me!

Christie Borthwick's dad seldom expressed any interest in spiritual things whatsoever. In fact, for years he aggressively resisted invitations to receive Jesus as his Savior, citing the hypocrisies of the church and the hard-to-believe content of the Bible. On one occasion, he and Christie talked through the "bad news" aspect of the good news that people without Christ go to hell. He resisted this message so strongly that he retorted, "If there is a God who allows people to go to hell, then I don't want to go to heaven to live with him. I choose hell." A few years later, after the sudden death of Christie's 47-year-old brother, her dad was again belligerent. When we asked if he would like to receive God's gift of eternal life, he snapped, "Eternal life is a myth; there's no heaven or hell. Just put me in the grave. The grave is all there is."

But Christie kept praying tenaciously. She and her husband called friends and asked them to join them in prayer, and they marshaled the prayers of more than 500 friends and associates using e-mail. Two weeks later, Christie's dad's heart softened. He indicated an interest in a relationship with God. Christie invited him to pray a simple prayer - "Jesus, have mercy" - and he responded. For the first time in her life she heard her dad pray, "Jesus, have mercy on my soul." His countenance changed. His striving was over. God had finally answered Christie's prayers of 29 years! Her dad died two weeks later. That's the power of prayer. That's the importance of having a prayerful spirit. Daniel knew it. More importantly, Daniel lived it. Do you have a prayerful spirit?