

When Mercy meets our Pleas

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- [0:00] Let's prepare our hearts. Let's come expectant, hearing that God will speak to us! Let's ask for him to help us. Gracious and almighty God, as we open your word, we humbly ask today that you might shine your light upon our hearts.
- We confess that we are often blinded by our own desires and distractions. So we ask, Lord, that you would clear our minds and open our eyes to your revelation.
- Speak to us in the quiet depth of our souls that we might encounter Christ in a new and transforming way. For his name's sake, we pray. Amen.
- When you know you failed God, what can you say to him? That question haunted one man in 1505. This young man was bright, ambitious and on track for a promising career as a lawyer.
- But one night, as he was walking back to university, a violent storm broke out. The thunder boomed. A lightning bolt nearly hit him and he fell to his knees in terror.
- [1:19] Out of sheer panic, he cried out, Help me, Sam Anne. I will become a monk. And that's exactly what he did.
- This young man survived and much to his father's dismay, kept his promise. He abandoned law, entered the monastery, and threw himself into religion.
- No monk was as zealous as Martin Luther. He read his Bible until his eyes watered, fasted until his body trembled, and did penance until the priest grew weary.
- If anyone could earn a spot in heaven as a top-rated monk, it was him. But here was Luther's problem. No matter how much he did, he always felt like a failure before God.
- He knew he was never patient enough, gentle enough, kind enough. So when you know you failed God, what can you say to him?
- [2:30] Luther's answer, at least at first, was, You can't. There's nothing you can say. So don't even try.
- Just stay away. Keep your distance from God. Just deal with your own inner turmoil. Try harder. Because if you failed God, how can you even speak to him?
- But Daniel 9 says, You can. Let's rewind the clock.
- The year is 539 BC. Babylon has fallen. And the new king, Darius, rules the empire. And in one quiet corner of this kingdom, an old man, perhaps in his 80s now, is doing what he's been doing for decades.
- Having his daily quiet time. You know his name. Daniel. He's been in exile his whole adult life.
- [3:42] The temple in Jerusalem is gone. There is no altar. No priest. No sacrifice. So the only place you can meet with God is through his word.
- And this morning, he is reading the prophet Jeremiah. And as he reads, these verses stop him cold. Jeremiah 29, verses 10 to 11.

This is what the Lord says. When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and the future.

So that makes Daniel sit up. Wait. Hasn't it been almost 70 years since he first arrived in Babylon? And haven't the Babylonians just fallen?

[4:47] And hasn't God promised clear as day that when that happens, he will bring his people home? He will give them a future?

So Daniel's heart must be racing. This is it. That moment is now. And you would think Daniel would sing and celebrate, wouldn't you?

You would think he would race straight to his room and start packing his bags. But instead, verse 3, Daniel drops to his knees.

He fasts. He puts on sackcloth and ashes. He's acting like someone who's repenting, not rejoicing.

Why? Because he knows why they were in exile to begin with. Their sin. He knows their failure before God is the root cause.

[5:53] And so, he's like a teenager who knows that he's stayed out too late, disobeyed his father, and who is afraid going home now means having to face the music.

To put it another way, he is wondering, what can I say when I get home to my father? When you know you failed God, what can you say to him?

And that's what Daniel 9 will show us today. Today, God will show us we don't have to keep our distance from him. When we failed God, we can still pray.

And when we pray, this is what we can say. We can honestly name and confess our sin. Then, we can boldly seek restoration for the sake of his glory.

And once we've done all that, from our hearts, we can rest in his mercy. That's what we can say. Let's begin with the first.

[7:07] Firstly, we can honestly name and confess our sin. I wonder what your first instinct is whenever you've done something wrong against someone.

What do you do? I know what mine is. I'll try to minimize and downplay it. So I say, oh, you know what? It really wasn't that bad.

It's just an honest mistake. Or perhaps I'll try to excuse and rationalize it. Oh, I wouldn't have said or done that if they haven't provoked me.

I might even try redefining my wrongdoing. I'm not lusting. I'm just appreciating someone's beauty.

I'm not giving in to my rage. I'm just venting to release stress. Why do I do that? Because I don't like being exposed.

[8:06] I don't like having to admit that I've been foolish and sinful. And I certainly don't like having my foolishness and sin made plain to others.

I don't want to be at the mercy of someone else's judgment. I would rather cover my sin and justify myself. But Daniel knows that is a foolish strategy when it comes to God.

After all, he already sees. He already knows. So, hiding from him is like trying to hide your shadow on a sunny day. It's impossible.

It only exhausts you. It's absolutely futile. So, Daniel doesn't even try. He doesn't hide. He doesn't conceal.

Instead, he simply says, God, we've been so sinful. That is the plain truth. We have sinned.

[9:14] Verse 5 and verse 8 and verse 11 and verse 15. We've missed the mark. We've fallen short of what we are called to be.

We've failed to reflect your character. And he stops there. No, actually he doesn't. Did you notice how Daniel keeps naming his people's sin?

Because he wants to say, this is how deep our sin goes. Our problem runs far deeper than just a simple we have sinned.

And so, verse 5 again, he says, we have done wrong. Or as some translations put it, we have committed iniquity. In other words, we have twisted what is straight.

That's what iniquity means. We haven't just made a few bad choices, we have bent our hearts out of shape. And then, verse 5 again, we have been wicked and have rebelled.

[10:18] He says it again in verse 9. sin. And what he means in modern terms is, we've gone fully rogue. We've defied God's authority.

We have known what he wanted and yet deliberately chosen the opposite. So, notice, just about every Hebrew word for sin in the Old Testament pops up here.

And Daniel stacks them on top of one another. As if to say, Lord, this is how deep our sin goes.

We haven't just missed the mark, we've twisted what's right. We haven't just twisted what's right, we've corrupted our hearts. We haven't just corrupted our hearts, we've openly rebelled and said, no God, I don't want to listen to you.

Daniel's confession stretches across the full moral spectrum, from failure to live up to a standard to outright defiance.

[11:28] And did you notice Daniel still doesn't stop there? No, he goes on to tell God not only how deep their sin goes, but how wide it runs.

It ensnares everyone. And so he asks, who hasn't listened to God? Who has sinned against him? Kings and princes, that's verse 6.

Our ancestors, verse 8. And who is covered with shame? Verse 7 says the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far.

So this is everyone from the palace to the village, from the leaders to the exiles, sin runs through every level of society.

And here is the really striking thing. Daniel doesn't exclude himself. All throughout this prayer, he never says they.

[12:36] No, he keeps saying we, we, we. And that's remarkable when you think about it, isn't it? Because up to this point in the book, Daniel's been the model believer.

He's faithful in prayer, courageous under pressure, uncompromising in obedience. In fact, my own son asked me the other day, did Daniel even sin?

And Daniel's own answer is clear. Yes, me too. He doesn't blame the previous generations.

I mean, he could so easily have said, oh, it's your fault, I'm in exile, right? But he's honest. He doesn't blame, he simply confesses.

Because in the end, Daniel knows how high sin reaches. Did you notice how four times Daniel says they did not listen or obey the voice of God?

[13:47] It's a bit hidden in the NIV, but it's actually the same root word in verses 6, 10, 11, and 14. For he has understood his core problem.

You see, what really is sin? It's not merely the breaking of some abstract law. It's really the choice to walk away from a relationship.

It's the decision to be unfaithful to our loving creator, verse 7. And actually, that word translated unfaithfulness in the NIV can be even stronger.

It's treachery. sin is always sin, not merely against a fellow human being, but always ultimately against the great and awe-inspiring God, verse 4.

And that is why, verse 11, they are being punished. God is righteous, verses 7 and 14, and he is simply doing what he is by nature, verse 12.

[15:00] Certainly, not once is there even a hint that Daniel thinks their punishment is unfair. Instead, he fully accepts what they have received.

He confesses with full honesty. But here's the question. How is it that Daniel is so willing to confess?

After all, if you knew God is righteous, wouldn't that terrify you? Wouldn't you want to hide your sin, not name it?

Wouldn't that make you run from him because you know he will condemn you, and be zubbably so? I mean, just look at how messed up Israel is.

Look at verse 13. just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.

[16:11] In other words, Daniel is saying we are so bad that even after all of God's discipline, our hearts still haven't turned towards him.

that's how bad it is. And if you just read verse 7, that God is righteous, you will be like Luther and run far, far, far away from God.

Because if he is covered with righteousness, and we are covered with shame, there is no way we will ever go to him.

but what if you also kneel verse 9? The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving even though we have rebelled against him.

What if this truth about God really grips your heart? What if you realize he doesn't just overflow with righteousness, but also with mercy?

[17:25] What if you saw that God is like that father in the parable Jesus tells, who runs towards his son, who had rejected him and wished him dead? Wouldn't you be more willing to confess?

Wouldn't that make you run to him and not away from him? even when you've messed up like crazy? Wouldn't knowing that God wanted to pour out his heart of compassion on you make you want to draw near to him?

that is what God is like. You know, the Puritans used to say that God's judgments are his strange work, but mercy is his natural work.

Judgment is what he must be, but mercy is what he loves to be. that changes everything.

Because if this is who God is, that means that when you know you have failed God, you can still come before him. You can speak to him without pretending your sin isn't really sin.

[18:52] You can be honest. You really did look at porn again, or snap too quickly at someone in anger again, or walk past a need because it was inconvenient.

You can bring the darkest corners of your soul into the light, because you are sure he isn't waiting for the slightest chance to condemn you.

You come to him in your mess. And when you know God is this merciful and forgiving, prayer becomes a wonderfully safe space.

I love how the theologian Carl Strabo puts it. Prayer, he says, is not a place to be good. It is a place to be honest. Prayer is not a place to perform.

It is a place to be present. Prayer is not a place to be right. It is a place to be known. Prayer is not a place to prove your worth.

[20:03] It is a place to receive worth and offer yourself in truth. And that is something Martin Luther came to discover as well.

In one of his letters, which I paraphrase into modern language, he writes, I wouldn't be able to trust God at all if I didn't believe he genuinely wants to be good and kind to me.

But because I now know he feels that way, it makes me not fear him, but open up to him, to trust him completely and expect good things from him.

So here is what you can say to the Lord. You can honestly name and confess your sin. For the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him.

But here is what else you can say. Secondly, you can boldly seek restoration for the sake of his glory.

[21:19] you see, we don't just need confession, do we? We need restoration. And Daniel knows that.

That's why in verses 15 to 19, he moves from confession to request. And what is at the heart of his request? Verse 16.

Lord, turn away your anger and your wrath from your city, Jerusalem, your holy hill. Or put another way, Lord, forgive our past failures and restore us.

But here is what's so striking. Look at the reason Daniel gives. He doesn't say, Lord, please forgive us because we have suffered enough.

He doesn't say, give us another chance and we will do better next time. No, Daniel appeals to something far greater. He says, verse 16, Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath.

[22:37] Now, don't you think that's a little strange? Surely, if God acts in accordance with his righteous acts, he will judge us, right?

That's what he said earlier in verse 7. But you see, to ask God to act righteously doesn't just mean asking God to act with justice.

more fundamentally is to ask him to act consistently with his character. It's asking God to be true to himself.

Daniel is essentially saying, Lord, be who you are. You've shown your holiness, your righteousness in judging us.

Now, show your mercy in restoring us. In short, he is appealing to God's own consistency. And that is also why Daniel begins verse 15 by reminding God of what he did in the exodus, that great rescue from Egypt.

[23:53] It is basically Daniel's way of saying, Lord, you've done this before. You redeem us. You've restored us. Now, do it again.

Be consistent. And do it, Daniel says, because you have made a name for yourself. You've built a reputation.

So, protect it, Lord. And so, Daniel goes on to appeal to God's own honor. Listen to how he keeps pressing that theme in these verses.

Turn away your anger and wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Hear the prayers and petitions of your servant.

Look with favor on your desolate sanctuary for the Lord's sake. See the desolation of the city that bears your name. Don't delay my God for your own sake, because your city and your people bear your name.

[25 : 04] You hear it? Daniel keeps saying, your, your, your. When confessing sin, he said, we and our.

But now, when pleading for restoration, he says, you and your. Your city, your holy hill, your sanctuary, your people, and especially your name.

You see what's happening? Daniel's prayer has turned outward. He's not trying to convince God to feel sorry for Israel.

He's pleading for God to act for his own glory. You know, Lord, this isn't just about us. It's about you. It's about your reputation, your honor, your name.

And so when Daniel prays boldly for restoration, he's not being presumptuous. He's aligning his heart with God's glory.

[26 : 08] That's what gives this prayer its power. He seeks mercy, not for his sake, but for God's. Doesn't this change how we pray.

You see, when you know you failed God, what can you say to him? You can say this, God, I know I have fallen, but for your name's sake, would you keep changing me?

Would you use my brokenness not to bring shame to your church, but to make your power undeniable? Would you keep shaping me so that over time people won't see how strong I am, but how glorious you are?

Would you, as Jesus taught us to pray, hallow your name through my life. God, God, God, and we don't just pray that personally, we pray it together, as God's people.

Lord, we know that we've not always been the church you have called us to be, but would you help us to be that city on a hill, that light to the world, so that many might see and declare your praises?

[27 : 36] make us a community that bears your name faithfully, so that through us, everyone would see your glory.

That is exactly how Daniel prays. His great longing isn't just for comfort or safety, but for God's glory to shine again.

And by verse 19, that longing reaches its breaking point. It is like his heart can't take it anymore, can't hold it in. Oh Lord, hear.

Oh Lord, forgive. Oh Lord, listen and act. For your own sake, my God, do not delay. For your city and your people bear your name.

That's what Daniel says. And now, we wait. How will God respond?

[28 : 44] Will he answer a prayer like that? After all, when we have failed him so deeply, would he still want to listen?

here's the good news. He does. And that brings us to our final point.

Thirdly, having confessed and asked for restoration, for the sake of his glory, we can rest in his mercy. You see, I wonder, what do you think God's heart for sinners is like?

Do you imagine him looking at us and being repelled by us as we name all our sins one by one?

Well, check out verses 20 and 21. Daniel hasn't even said amen yet when the angel Gabriel appears. And what does Gabriel tell him?

[29 : 49] Verse 23. As soon as you began to pray, a word went out which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.

Or as the ESV puts it, for you are greatly loved. You see how beautiful that is?

It is as if Gabriel is saying, Daniel, God heard you right away, and he sent me to tell you how deeply he loves you. God is telling us we can speak to him.

We can be heard by him. And now God says, I will forgive. I will hear and act.

And I'm going to do it in ways which are far beyond your wildest imagination. You see, Daniel, I know you're asking for forgiveness and restoration so that you can go back to Jerusalem without any issue.

[31 : 01] But what I'm going to do is way bigger than that. I'm going to bring people home, not to the land, as if that's the end goal, but to myself.

That is my big plan. So let me show you, Daniel. Here is another vision, verses 24 to 27.

And this is where some of you take a deep breath, because you know these are famously some of the most difficult verses in the Bible. One commentator says there are at least 20 methods of interpretation up for debate in these four verses.

And it's true. These verses get very complicated very quickly. But today, my hope is that as we briefly look at these verses, you won't be put off by its complexity.

Instead, my big hope is that you will be captured by its beauty. Because here is a really, really, really important thing that I suspect many people miss.

[32 : 22] Verses 24 to 27 is first and foremost God's answer to Daniel's prayer. That's the context.

Verses 24 to 27 is God's way of telling Daniel, you are greatly loved. So, I will indeed forgive and restore you.

And let me show you how I'm going to go about doing exactly that. And I think any interpretation that doesn't show how verses 24 to 27 is God's answer to Daniel's prayer has gotten its meaning badly wrong.

So, let's tackle these verses by trying to answer these two questions. First of all, what does God seek to accomplish? Verse 24 tells us he has six goals in total.

He wants to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place.

[33 : 40] That's what God wants to do. And do you see how that is directly related to Daniel's prayer? Because what does God want to deal with?

He wants to deal with transgression, sin, and wickedness. And in the Hebrew, those are the exact same words Daniel's been using in his prayer.

So can you see, my friends, how personal God is getting? God isn't sending some generic message about some far-off geopolitical future that Daniel has no clue about.

He is answering Daniel's prayer point for point. Daniel names and confesses his sin, transgression, and wickedness.

And God says he will finish transgression, put an end to sin, and atone for wickedness. Except, he says, he's going to do it once and for all.

[34 : 50] He's going to bring in a righteousness that lasts forever. He's going to bring in a righteousness that will cover all your harsh words, your porn habit, your lack of love for your neighbor.

Isn't that a wonderful thing? But now the question is, when is God going to accomplish this wonderful thing?

You notice in verse 24, it says it will happen during 77s. And then in verses 25 to 27, those are divided into three parts.

Seven sevens, 62 sevens, and finally, one last seven. But what exactly are these sevens?

Are they weeks, as many of your translations say? They could be. But it might be helpful to know that the word here simply means a unit of seven things, which is why the NIV literally and helpfully translates it simply as sevens.

[36:03] And of course, a unit of seven things can be a week, but it depends on context. And because the context of Daniel 9 has been 70 years, many people think this is talking about 70 times seven years.

That's 490 years in case, like me, you are bad at maths. So no surprise, some people get very excited and they start doing all kinds of calculations.

But before we rush there, let's remember a few important things. First, remember the genre. we are still in apocalyptic literature.

And in this kind of writing, numbers often have symbolic meaning. That doesn't mean they can't also be literal, but the main point is what they represent.

So let's think about that. In the Bible, the number seven usually stands for completeness, like the seven days of creation. And the number ten often represents fullness or abundance.

[37:22] So if you multiply them, seventy times seven, you get this picture of total overflowing completeness. And that's the perfect way to describe the time when sin will finally be finished and everlasting righteousness will truly come.

right? So rather than just a calendar countdown, these seventy-sevens are pointing to the full, complete time.

What Paul will call later in Galatians 4 verse 4, when the set time had fully come. It is God's way of saying, I've set the perfect timing, and when that time comes, I will make everything right.

So, has that time come? The answer is yes. Because consider this, having thought about it this week, I'm actually inclined to think that we shouldn't take the 490 years literally.

But for the sake of argument, let's do so. Do they add up? I think they still can.

[38:45] But look at verse 25. When does this period of 490 years begin? Verse 25 tells us. It is from the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem.

So, when did that happen? There are a few options. But one of the more viable ones is 458 BC, when the Persian king, Arthas commissioned just such a project.

You can read about that in Ezra chapter 7. And as we count forward from there, we find what the end of verse 25 tells us, times of trouble.

Isn't that what those rebuilding Jerusalem encountered? And isn't that what the people of Jerusalem kept encountering over the next few centuries, as Daniel 8 told us last week?

They'll have to suffer under Alexander the Great and Antiochus IV and eventually the Romans. 19. But finally, we arrive in the final seventh.

[39:57] Notice verse 26 says, after the 62 sevenths, not during the 62 sevenths. And so that takes us right into the lifetime of Jesus.

And my friends, who is Jesus? is he not the Messiah? And isn't that what the anointed one means?

And my friends, what does Jesus make clear his mission is? Does he not say it again and again? I, the son of man, have come to die. And does that not happen to the anointed one?

Verse 26. In fact, the more literal translation is that this anointed one will be cut off. And it's echoing that exact same phrasing that we find in Isaiah 53, where the suffering servant is cut off from the land of the living.

And my friends, this is what I'm trying to show you. When did God accomplish verse 24? The answer is when Jesus died on the cross.

[41 : 14] He is the one who atones for your sin and my sin. He is the one who brings in an everlasting righteousness. He is the one in whom every vision, including this one in Daniel 9, and prophecy find their fulfillment.

He is the spirit anointed temple who has entered the true tabernacle in heaven. He fulfills all of verse 24. And yes, when he did all that, that didn't mean that the whole world was perfected immediately.

In AD 70, you might remember from our sermon earlier this year, in Luke 21, the Roman general Titus came and laid siege to the city and to the temple, bringing it to a time of desolation and destroying it completely.

The time of wars and conflicts have not yet ended. God makes that clear in verses 26 and 27. So don't think that the death of Jesus means our troubles are all over.

As we learned last week, there is still pain ahead. Perhaps that little horn of Daniel 7 might even make an appearance and do all sorts of bad stuff.

[42 : 32] But that is not the big point. Not by a long shot. No, the point is this. When you failed God, what can you say to him?

God himself tells us. You can speak back to him the word of grace he's already spoken to us in Christ.

You can say to him, I am unrighteous,! But Jesus is righteous, and he has given me his everlasting righteousness.

he has already paid for every transgression. You see, the cross is God's great yes to Daniel's prayer.

God has dealt with sin once and for all, and one day he'll make sure that its presence is completely banished from all of creation.

[43 : 34] And today, I don't know if there's anyone here who is struggling with the wake of their sin, of their failures, who have never heard this good news before.

If that is you, then I want to invite you to come to know this Jesus. Join our Christianity Explored course. The details are in the bulletin.

But don't let this chance pass you by. Experience discomfort that Daniel discovered, that Martin Luther later rediscovered that many people have found for themselves today.

And for the rest of us, I hope today has helped you make some sense of a difficult passage. And I hope you see that unlike what many YouTube videos say, Daniel 9 is not there to help us to figure out whether the Pope or Jared Kushner or whoever else it is is the Antichrist or not.

No, it is there to bring us to Christ. It is there to bring us to a saviour who can redeem us from our failures every single day.

[44 : 59] it is there to bring us to rest in his mercy. Let's do exactly that.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word that you have spoken to us.

And I pray indeed that we would receive it as a word of grace. I pray Lord that for many of us who are all too aware of our past failures even our current failures that this would drive us not to run away from you but run to you to honestly confess our sin not to hide it not to downplay it but that as we bring our sin before you and plead for your forgiveness we do so with confidence as we cling on to the cross of Christ so please help us to fix our eyes afresh on the Lord Jesus on his atoning death and on the righteousness that he has clothed us with pray all this in the name of Christ Amen God