

Confession and Forgiveness

Daniel 9:1-27

Israel is in exile, under judgment for their prolonged national sin of disobedience toward God and worship of other gods. In chapter 9, Daniel offers a prayer of confession and repentance. This week, we will look, first, at the content of the confession, then, at its effects, and, on day six, at its application to us.

Day 1 Daniel 9:4 Why confession is possible: Who God is

Why is confession possible? Because of who God is.

Daniel's confession begins with an acknowledgement of the distinctive two-fold character of God: (a) he is great and awesome, and, (b) he loves and commits himself to people. The juxtaposition of these themes is startling, though easy for us to overlook. Anthropologists tell us that gods typically come in two sorts: (a) 'high gods', those who are powerful and important, and, (b) those who care about their worshippers.

Consider Chinese folk religion (sometimes called 'Buddhism' or 'Taoism', but really an amalgam of either of those faiths with animism): practitioners typically worship both gods (who are powerful, but not all that involved with people) and ancestors (who are relatively weak, but care about their descendants). Similarly, Muslims are meant to worship only the powerful, distant Allah (the Muslim call to prayer, 'Allahu akbar', means Allah is great), but Muslim cultures typically also engage *jinn*, lesser, but more accessible, spirit beings. Similarly, medieval Christians often invoked saints for assistance, in addition to God and Jesus.

All this is unnecessary (not to mention, theologically problematic). The God to whom Daniel prays – and to whom we pray – is both 'high god' (great enough to help in crisis) and 'low god' (he cares about his people).

Day 2 Daniel 9:4b-6 Why confession is necessary: Who man is

Confession is possible because of who God is; confession is necessary because of who man is. God initiates love toward people, but then awaits their response. Those who reciprocate his love and keep his commandments enjoy his continuing love. Love and obedience do not *earn* salvation, but they are necessary for salvation.

But here's the rub: by nature, mankind does not love or obey God. Daniel describes the human baseline: sinners, evil doers, wicked, rebels, disobedient. In love, God sent prophets and gave Scripture, to call people to him, but to little effect. To invert megachurch pastor Tim Keller's

famous quote, “Mankind is more loved than we ever dared hope, yet more wicked than we ever dared believe.” In our natural condition, therefore, we are in deep trouble ... but more on that tomorrow.

Day 3 Daniel 9:7-14 Why confession is urgent: The human predicament.

God’s character and human converge in terrible consequence for the latter. Daniel attributes Israel’s physical condition – destruction and exile – to its spiritual condition. The nation was destroyed and its people deported not because God *could not* protect her from hostile superpowers, but because he *would not*.

Their judgment and suffering does not call God’s character into question. Even as they endure destruction and deportation, Daniel affirms God’s righteousness (9:7), his mercy, and his forgiveness (9:9). The fault lies solely with Israel: they were unfaithful, they sinned against God, they rebelled, they did not obey, they transgressed, they refused to obey. So, instead of enjoying the blessings of the covenant, they suffer its curses (9:10-11). God did not just stand back and watch their enemies invade, he actively brought them in (9:12). Its horror was unprecedented (9:12). Still, they did not repent, turn from their sins, and seek God’s forgiveness (9:13).

The climax to this long defense of God and accusation against Israel comes in 9:14, “The Lord *did not hesitate* to bring the disaster on us.” This is a far cry from contemporary evangelical theology and preaching, which either denies or tip-toes around divine judgment. According to Daniel, God is righteous in everything he does; man does not obey him; so mankind deserves the judgment which God justly pours out on him.

Day 4 Daniel 9:15-19 A plea for forgiveness and deliverance

Daniel does not end on this dismal note. To the contrary, his frank acknowledgement of human culpability drives the chapter toward its climax in a plea for forgiveness and deliverance. The petition has four parts: **(i)** appeal to God’s comparable, prior act of deliverance from Egypt (9:15a), this is less a reminder to God, than a courage-booster to Daniel and his audience that God has delivered his people before, and can do so again; **(ii)** admission of culpability (9:15b), expressing regret and contrition; **(iii)** plea for forgiveness and deliverance (9:16), for a turning aside of God’s wrath from the nation and their homeland; **(iv)** the basis of the plea (9:17-18), not his righteous conduct or the nation’s, nor a promise to reform and live rightly in future, but God’s own mercy (9:18) and his glory before a watching world (9:19).

Day 5 Daniel 9:1-3,20-27 What confession and repentance accomplish

Two factors prompt Daniel to confess the sin of the nation (9:1-3):

(a) God promised through prophet Jeremiah that Israel would be restored to the land of Palestine after 70 years of exile (Jer 25:8-14; 29:10), and, (b) the 70 years were almost up. So what does his prayer accomplish?

Something, though not as much as they hoped.

The epilogue in 9:20-27 focuses on two points, in some tension. First, God responds *immediately* to Daniel's prayer: while he was praying (9:20), while he was still in prayer (9:21), Gabriel came in swift flight (9:21), as soon as Daniel began to pray (9:23). Secondly, the immediacy of Gabriel's coming contrasts with the content of his message: while the nation will indeed return to Palestine after 70 years of exile, their fate will not significantly improve for 7 times that long. For 490 years they will atone for their sin. The city will rebuild, but in troubled, rather than idyllic, times. God's own anointed one – likely originally referencing the high priest Onias, assassinated in the 2nd-century BC by a traitorous rival – would be killed, and a foreign ruler – referencing Antiochus IV Epiphanes – would destroy both Jerusalem and its temple. War will persist, and the temple will be defiled, before God steps in.

Israel had hoped that the destruction and exile of their nation would atone for their sins, and that their return to the land would be idyllic. Daniel repents on behalf of the nation, and God rushes Gabriel to assure him of forgiveness and restoration. At the same time, the effects of their sin will linger, despite their forgiveness and their restoration. It is certainly not what they hoped to hear. Yet they are promised this much: eventually everlasting righteousness will prevail, and God will bless them fully.

Day 6 Daniel 9:1-27 The use of Daniel 9 today

Both continuities and discontinuities affect the use of Daniel's prayer today. Among the continuities: (1) who God is (both powerful and loving), (2) what humankind is (rebellious in nature and disobedient in action), (3) the consequent human predicament (facing disaster and judgment), (4) the remedy (repentance and confession, yielding forgiveness), and even (5) the outline of a prayer of confession and contrition (appeal to God's previous deliverance, admission of culpability, plea for forgiveness, grounded in God's mercy and glory). All this applies directly today.

At one notable point, the prayer receives an important update and heightening: Daniel's appeal was based not on the deliverance of Israel from Egypt; ours is based on the deliverance Christ achieves through his death on the cross, atoning for sin.

A crucial discontinuity, though, occurs when we shift the application from the city of Jerusalem and its temple to us as individual Christians. This is a huge leap that requires some reflection. In the warm-hearted desire to have Scripture direct our lives, we too readily slip into the mode of treating the Bible as though it was written directly to us, and to our personal lives. This text was neither.

The Israelites in exile had disobeyed God and worshipped other gods for centuries. This is 'big-ticket' sin, not the sort of impropriety or misdeed that we might be guilty of day by day, such as speaking brusquely to a family member, or missing our daily quiet time occasionally. Often, guilt-ridden Christians turn molehills of failings into mountains of heinous sin. Instead, this passage better fits persistent moral violations of the sort that the New Testament sin lists identify as disqualifiers from heaven. Or, closer yet, it best fits those who once acknowledged God, and then turned away. Or those who, despite the traces of God written in creation and conscience (see Room 1:18-32), have never acknowledged him in the first place.

Secondly, we must also consider that the prayer of confession focuses less on individual and personal sins than on national, corporate sin. Since no nation is God's people today, the passage applies most fittingly to a national Church (such as Christians in America), or, less directly, to the conduct of a denomination, or perhaps, to the entirety of a local church. Obvious examples could include denominations which ordain pastors who deny the resurrection of Christ or the existence of God.

Or, a small step further removed, to denominations which shelter child molesters, or which ordain pastors engaging in an adulterous or homosexual lifestyle. Or another step removed, this text could arguably also apply beyond sin against God to sin against man, and thus, to the American church and its large-scale complicity in the genocide against Native Americans in the 18th- and 19th-centuries, or its predominate disavowal of the civil rights movement of the 1950s, or our current silence at the exploitation of illegal immigrants laboring in the harvest fields of America. It could apply especially to the linkage of Christian faith to the agenda of left-wing politics in the 1960s, or to right-wing politics in the 1980s and 1990s. And it could apply to Christian capitulation to the tidal wave of greed and materialism that has swept America.

In short, this passage provides a useful guide for local churches, or for the American Church, to confess collective sin against either God or fellow-citizens. Nonetheless, it can still serve individuals as they seek to return to God, provided their transgression is real, not imagined, and severe, not frivolous.