

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Characteristics of True Confession

Scripture: Daniel 9:1-19

Code: 80-126

I want you to turn in your Bible to a text of Scripture that deals with confession, Daniel chapter 9...Daniel chapter 9. I called last Sunday morning from the east coast and I asked Alastair Begg what he was going to preach on, I said, "I want to pray for you, what are you going to preach on?"

He said, "I'm going to preach on Daniel 4."

I said, "Well that's wonderful because next Sunday I'm going to speak on Daniel 9."

He said, "Good, they'll think I influenced you." (Laughter)

So you've had a good dose of Daniel, I guess, from last Sunday and I'm going to listen to the tape. But I want you to look at Daniel chapter 9 because I believe you have in Daniel 9 a model prayer of confession, a man who shows us what it means to be repentant, who shows us what a contrite and a broken spirit looks like and sounds like and feels like. Daniel here is coming before the Lord and he's acknowledging his sin and he's crying out for forgiveness, for cleansing, and for cursing to turn into blessing, and captivity to turn into freedom, chastening to turn into joy.

The prophet Daniel wanted God to bless Israel. He wanted the captivity of his people to end and for them to be restored to their homeland. He wanted to see God's favor on them rather than His judgment. He wanted to see cursing become blessing. But for that to happen, he knew that sin had to be dealt with and that there had to be confession and repentance. He knew God to be a forgiving God, a merciful God. And if there was in the hearts of his people genuine repentance, God would forgive and the cursing would end and the blessing would come and the captivity would be over and the restoration would take place.

And so here you have in the first part of chapter 9 a model prayer of confession coming from the heart of a man who wants to know blessing for himself and his people. In this prayer we see the elements that characterize true repentance, true condition, true penitence, true confession. The setting is given in the first two verses. "In the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans-in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, observed in the books, or the scrolls, the number of the years which was revealed as the Word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years."

Here is Daniel doing what he, no doubt, did daily and that was search the Scriptures, and he was reading through the scrolls of the Old Testament which were available to him and he was reading particularly in Jeremiah. Several places in Jeremiah's prophecy, namely chapter 25 and chapter 29, the prophet predicted that the captivity of Israel would be limited to seventy years. Daniel comes across that reading and is reminded of the fact that the captivity is only to be seventy years, and in fact, that seventy years is well nigh complete. He is reminded that God has put a limit on His cursing, a limit on His chastening, a limit on His judgment and thus there's a limit on the captivity. And that is to say that God intended it to be remedial. God intended it, as it were, to pull out of the people the proper kind of confession of sin that could result in the captivity ending and blessing being restored.

But he also knows this, that before God will end the captivity and halt the chastening and the cursing, before God will give back the blessing and restore them to the homeland, his people have to confess their sin. Or, God may just add to the seventy years. So the fact that God had laid out a plan does not mean that there was to be no responsibility on the part of the people, quite the contrary. The seventy years would come to an end when the hearts of the people were broken and contrite and sought to confess their sins. And so, we find them beginning in verse 3 that Daniel gives himself to the matter of confession on his own behalf and on behalf of his people, knowing that this is and must be a component in God's promise to release them from the prison they were in in the Middle East.

Now as we follow Daniel's prayer, and obviously in a brief time we can't cover all of it, but as we follow Daniel's prayer all the way down to the end of it in verse 19, there are a number of characteristics that are demonstrated to us here, characteristics of true confession. Here's what repentance looks like. Here's what a broken and a contrite spirit is like. Here is what true confession is like. If you're wondering about that, you've come to the Lord's table today, you know that you cannot partake in an unworthy way, you want to make your heart right with God and you want to confess your sin and repent from your sin and you want God to turn the mourning into song, you want to turn the darkness into light, the cursing into blessing, the captivity into freedom, you want God to pour out His goodness in your life and you want to confess your sin, but what does that mean? Here's how you can understand what it means. Here is a magnificent pattern of what true confession is like.

First point, confession is characterized by fervency. True confession is characterized by fervency. Verse 3, "So I gave my attention," or literally in the Hebrew, "I set my face toward the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications with fasting, sackcloth and ashes."

Now admittedly here is probably the best man among all Israelites, or members of the southern kingdom of Judah, Judah and Benjamin, here is probably the best of them, the noblest, the man who was living at the highest spiritual plain, a man so devoted to God that his prayer life could not be

withstood, it could not be altered even if it meant throwing him in a den of lions. Here was a man of immense, uncompromising character. Here was a man who couldn't be bought. Here was a man who wouldn't equivocate on what he believed, a man who never deviated from following his God faithfully. And yet...would you notice the intensity of the attitude that he brings to confession? "I set my face, or I gave my attention," there's a resoluteness here, "unto the Lord," that's *Adonai*, not *Yahweh*, "unto *Adonai* my sovereign Master, my authority, my Lord, to seek by means of prayer and supplication," which means begging or pleading or entreating for mercy. And not just that, "But also with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." This further stresses the depths of his intensity. Sackcloth and ashes was a customary expression of deep concern and genuine brokenness and genuine contrition. It was heaping upon oneself the dirt and the ashes that were emblematic of one's own worthless, useless, dirty, wasted character. Fasting wasn't something you did in order to gain something. Fasting was something you did because you had no appetite. So deeply concerned about his sin was he that he couldn't eat. Deeply concerned about his sin and wanting to manifest his ugliness before God he covered himself with sackcloth and ashes, the kind of cloth you make flower bags out of.

This is a far cry from the Pharisee who said, "I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I have and I am so thankful I'm not like other people," in Luke 18. In the Old Testament the posture here is oft repeated. We see people wearing sackcloth sitting in ashes frequently. We see in some cases that people demonstrated their intensity in confession by shaving their heads, sometimes smiting their breast, sometimes crying, sometimes throwing dirt in the air and on their heads, sometimes ripping their garments, sometimes groaning, sometimes crying out loud, sometimes agonizing. Daniel then is employing every normal indication of persistent, deep-felt urgency. Much needs to be learned about this. Those who treat their confession flippantly will be deemed to have treated their sin flippantly. If you can pass your confession through your lips with little attitude of remorse, and little intensity, then that is the way you view your sin in truth. The kind of confession and contrition and brokenness that God is seeking is that which is manifest by a sense of being overwhelmed by one's own iniquity. Here is the best of men seeing himself as the worst. And so in despair is he over his iniquity that he cannot even eat.

Resolutely he brings himself before God and we don't see here so much the frequency as we see the fervency. We know he prayed frequently, he did it all the time, that's what got him into so much trouble. The issue here is not frequency, it's fervency. True confession is fervent.

Secondly, there's another thing we see in this particular picture of Daniel as he prays and that is that the heart of one that is truly confessing is not only fervent but humble and certainly those go together. But I want you to notice what he says in verse 4, he said, "I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed." There's no place for self-confidence, there's no place for self-seeking, there's no place for self-righteousness. All of that is lost in true confession. Whatever positive wickedness he knew

was in his life, whatever deafness to the divine voice, whatever disobedience to the clear and plain commands of God, whatever contempt of sovereign lordship, whatever it was, it all brought Daniel to the place of humility and he lays the axe at the root of the tree of his own pride. And he says I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed. And the intent of the Scripture here is that this was an ongoing kind of confession. This was tracking back through the sin of his life, unmasking it. His attitude is reminiscent of that of Abraham who in Genesis 18, you remember, tarried before the Lord and then he said, "I have taken it upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but dust and ashes." I'm here and I have no right to be.

So Daniel's soul is clothed in the same just shame. Daniel knew that whoever ascends the holy hill must have clean hands and a pure heart and he knew he wasn't worthy but he knew that God would forgive if he was willing to confess. And he went through the terrible tragic litany of his own iniquity. There's humility there. It's not the self-righteousness of the man who thinks he's not like other people and Daniel had ever reason to think he wasn't. The fact of the matter was he was better than everybody else from the standpoint of virtue. But the way he saw himself was not so, like the apostle Paul who though he was the best of men, said I am the chief of sinners. True contrition makes no over-estimation of itself but is cloaked in humility. Even as one who ministers the Word of God, one who, I suppose, from the standpoint of human viewpoint might be esteemed to be closer to God than most, I know full well my own sin. I have often prayed the prayer, "O God, I know that I often do Your work without Your power and sin by my dead, heartless, blind service, my lack of inward light, love and delight, my mind, heart and tongue moving without Your help. I see sin in my heart in seeking the commendation of others. This is my vileness, to make men's opinion my rule. It is my own deceit to pray and preach and stir up others' spiritual affections in order to beget commendation for myself, whereas my rule of life should be daily to consider myself more vile than any man in my own eyes." And the truth of the matter is, the more feeble we see ourselves, the more fit we are to be used because God pitches His tent of greatness in the ground of weakness.

One Puritan prayed, "Give me a deeper repentance, a horror of sin, a dread of its approach. Help me chastely to flee it and jealously to resolve that my heart shall be Thine alone. Plow deep in me, great Lord, heavenly Husbandman, that my being may be a tilled field, the roots of grace spreading far and wide until Thou alone art seen in me, Thy beauty golden like summer harvest, Thy fruitfulness as autumn plenty."

There is even in the one who is a servant of God, the pastor, the elder, the leader, the prophet like Daniel, a recognition of one's own sin before one can be used by God in any measure to lead people. And here Daniel comes to the point of true contrition. All the masks are off. Everything is unguarded. Everything is out. It's all for God to see and Daniel goes through the litany of his own iniquity. True confession is fervent and humble. It holds nothing back. It makes no assumption of goodness or virtue.

Thirdly, and this is a very important point that is made in this text, true confession, and these flow right out of each other, they actually overlap, identifies with God's people. And by that I'm just following through that humility concept because, as I said, they're all overlapped and interlinked here.

It would be easy for Daniel to say after he's confessed all of his sins, "Lord, I know this is bad stuff, but You ought to hear what these folks over here are doing. I mean, I'm not into idolatry and I'm certainly not into adultery. And I'm certainly not into some of the sins that these people are into. There's none of that."

There's a sense of solidarity here. He doesn't see himself as better than others at all, in fact he sees himself in solidarity with everybody.

And I want you to notice that in verse 5, and notice the use of the plural pronoun. "WE have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances." In no way does he elevate himself above his people and no way does he separate himself out and try to qualify somehow his own goodness as some...in some way distinct from anybody else's sin. Verse 6 he says, "WE have not listened to Your servants, the prophets." In verse 7 he says, "Righteousness belongs to Thee, O Lord, but to US open shame." Verse 8, "Open shame belongs to US." Verse 9, "WE have rebelled." Verse 10, "WE have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God to walk in His teachings." It's US and it's We. The end of verse 11, "WE have sinned." The end of verse 13, "WE have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from OUR iniquity and giving attention to Thy truth."

Not only have we sinned, but we haven't sought forgiveness. Verse 14, the end of the verse, "WE have not obeyed His voice." Verse 15, end of the verse, "WE have sinned. WE have been wicked." Do you notice he completely identifies with the iniquity of his people. Here was a man who understands that he is just a sinner among sinners. The identification is so complete that he feels the pain of others, he feels the guilt of others. He feels the failure of others. He regards the sins of the people, the sins of the priests, the sins of the prophets, the rulers, the judges, the kings as his own, much like Isaiah who in chapter 6 said, "I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell amidst a people of unclean lips," and he saw himself not as elevated above the people, though he had the best mouth in the land as a prophet who spoke for God, nonetheless he saw himself as one with a sinning people. This is the true nature of brokenness. It doesn't see itself as better than others, it sees itself as the same, if anything worse. It makes no effort to sort its own sin out from the sins in general, as if somehow they're more heinous than the ones committed by a more faithful individual.

Where there is a true confession in the heart, where there is true penitence and brokenness and contrition, there will be fervency in that confession. There will be humility in that confession. And

there will be a sense of identity with that confession with the one confessing with all the rest of the people who are also unfaithful. Self-righteous people don't make true confessions. Daniel would never say, "I thank Thee that I'm not like other people." Instead he said, "I'm just like everybody else, and I'm in there with them." And the identification, by the way, with God's wayward people makes him not a critic but a partner in the intercession. His own sin reveals that he has been part of the problem.

Then I want you to notice the nature of the confession. It is fervent, it is humble, it is identified with the rest of sinners, and I want you to notice it starting in verse 5, it is comprehensive. Where there is real confession, there's a certain comprehensiveness. It's not just flipped through the lips briefly, there's a dwelling. It takes from verse 5 clear down to verse 15 before he gets through this. "We have sinned...committed iniquity...acted wickedly and rebelled." Now why does he have to use four different Hebrew words to explain it? Because it's important that the depth of his heart be given expression. He feels the weight of sin so heavily, it's very heavy, you don't just dump it one fell swoop. He uses four terms which gives us a comprehensive definition of sin.

Verse 6, he digs a little deeper. "We have not listened to Your servants, the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers, and all the people of the land and righteousness belongs to Thee, O Lord, but to us open shame as it is this day-to the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are nearby, those who are far away and all the countries to which they've driven them...Thou hast driven them because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against Thee. Open shame belongs to us, O Lord, to our kings, our princes and our fathers because we have sinned against Thee. To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness for we have rebelled against Him. Nor have we obeyed the voice of the lord our God, to walk in His teachings which He has set before us through His servants the prophets. Indeed all Israel has transgressed Thy law, turned aside, not obeying Thy voice." You see, it just goes over and over and over and over. This is the repetition of brokenness. It is not easily spoken. It is heart searching and it is thorough.

And there's another component here. Where you have true confession, you have fervency, you have humility, you have identification with other sinners. You have this thoroughness. And then you have another thing, and it is this, an acceptance of chastening as right. Please, I want you to notice this. Verse 11, "Indeed, all Israel has transgressed Thy law and turned aside, not obeying Thy voice, so the curse has been poured out on us, along with the oath which is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, for we have sinned against Him.

In other words, whatever distress, whatever pain, whatever agony, whatever death, whatever trouble we deserve it. Verse 12, "He confirmed His words which He had spoken against us and against our rulers who ruled us to bring us great calamity." God said, "You disobey Me, I'll bring you judgment."

"And truly, under the whole heaven there has not been done anything," verse 12 says, "that was like what was done to Jerusalem. As it is written in the law of Moses," verse 13, "all this calamity has come on us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our iniquity and giving attention to Thy truth. Therefore the Lord has kept the calamity in store and brought it on us," here it is, "the Lord our God is righteous with respect to all His deeds which we...which He has done but we have not obeyed His voice."

If we're in pain, if we're being afflicted, if we're suffering, if we're dying, if we're in captivity, it is exactly and precisely what we deserve because we have not dealt with our sins. And here is another characteristic of true confession and never questions God, it never questions His integrity, it never questions His justice, His righteousness, His love, never. His fairness. It simply acknowledges we are getting exactly what we deserved. True confession doesn't say, "Well I want to confess my sin, Lord, but I hope You know how touch it is living like this in the circumstances You've placed me. I want to confess my sin but I'd like to also let you know while I'm confessing that I don't appreciate the way I've been treated." That is not true confession. True confession is marked by fervency, humility, identification, thoroughness, and acceptance of responsibility for all the trouble has come because of your sin.

That's what it looks like. There's one other component to it. True...true confession is confident...true confession is confident. What does that mean? It believes God will forgive. It's not despairing as deep as the pit may be, as broken as your heart might be, as contrite, as humble as you may be, as fervent and passionate as you may be, it is not despair that reigns. Why? Because we know our God. And if you go back to verse 4, we have a great and awesome God who keeps His covenant and loving kindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments. We have a great God. We have an awesome God. We have a faithful God who will maintain grace for those who belong to Him.

Down in verse 7, "Righteousness belongs to our God." Down in verse 9, "Compassion and forgiveness belong to our God." Therein lies the hope in confession. It is not despairing, it is hopeful. And Jubilant sung it so very well, "He is willing to forgive." So we don't come in despair, we don't come yelling, as it were, against the empty vault of heaven. We don't come smashing against iron gates that will not open. We have a God who is willing to forgive, a God who is faithful, who has steadfast love and mercy, a God who is righteous and merciful and will forgive.

And there's another component to our confidence, another component. Down in verse 16, in verse 15 he said, "Lord God, You brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and You made a name for Yourself as it is this day, and we have sinned and we have been wicked. Your reputation is unsullied, God, You made a name. I mean, the whole world knows about You. Boy, what You did getting us out of Egypt nobody's ever forgotten that. You have quite a reputation. We

don't, but You do."

But then listen to verse 16, "O Lord, in accordance with Your righteous acts, let now Your anger and Your wrath turn away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain, because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Thy people have become a reproach to all those around us." God, there's an issue at stake here. You know what's happening? Your reputation is getting sullied. Reproach is coming on Your name and You're being accused of being an impotent God. You see, God, You made this great name when You brought us out of Egypt, but now look at us. And the whole world was saying, "What a God, what a God is the God of Israel, He delivered His people from Pharaoh's great army and that was only the beginning. He brought them into the promised land and destroyed all their enemies and He was a formidable God. Witness the stories of His great victories over the Philistines. In fact, there was no God like this God of the Israelites, but look now, God, what do You think Your reputation in the world is now? What do You think the folks are saying about You now? Well what kind of a God is that God of Israel? That whole place was destroyed, all the people were taken captive, many were slaughtered and there is no temple and the city of Jerusalem is in shambles and whatever testimonial was supposed to have been to Jehovah God, it turns out to be a very negative one at that. God, Your reputation is on the line. It's because of our sins and because of our iniquities but we've become a reproach and You're suffering defamation because of it." Verse 17, "So now, my God, our God, listen to the prayer of thy servant and his supplications and for Thy sake, O Lord, let Thy face shine on Thy desolate sanctuary. O my God, incline Thine ear and hear, open Thine eyes and see our desolations in the city which is called by Thy name for we are not presenting our supplications before Thee on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Thy great compassion. O Lord, hear, O Lord, forgive, O Lord, listen and take action for Thine own sake, O my God." That's the point, do it for You. Do it to put Your power on display, do it to put Your mercy on display, do it to put Your grace on display, do it to put Your loving kindness and Your goodness and forgiveness on display. Do it for Your own sake.

And I really believe that that is a component in the true prayer of a confessing penitent. It isn't that we say, "God, please forgive my sin and make me holy for my sake so that I might be considered some great one, or that I might be highly esteemed in the eyes of lesser people. The idea here is not to save me from my sake, God doesn't really need you and He doesn't need me and He could do it well without us, and more often than not we're in the way rather than a help. But he says to Him, "God, Your own reputation is the issue and what's the world going to think if You aren't a God of grace and mercy and forgiveness and power. So put Your own power on display."

That's the stuff that true repentance is made out of. It is characterized by fervency, by humility, by identification with other sinners. It is characterized by thoroughness. It is characterized by acceptance of chastening as deserved and never questions God. And it is characterized by hope for forgiveness, based upon who our God is and how He wants to display His glory. Now that is the kind

of prayer that Daniel prayed. And by the way, the prayer was answered by God's mercy soon after the captivity ended when the hearts of the people were turned away from sin to God. This is the kind of confession, this is the attitude of heart that we need to have if we're going to deal honestly with our sins. It's not something we can do lightly. It's something that should be done not just once a month when we have communion or once a week on Sunday, but daily this kind of heart attitude should be characteristic of every believer.

Father, we come now to You asking that Your Holy Spirit would work this work in us. We can't even properly confess our sins in our own strength, we're really dependent on You, even for that. We pray, Father, that You would cause us to search our own hearts right now, reveal to us the sin and may we truly begin to set a course of genuine confession and contrition.

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