

January 3, 2010

# Prayer, Fasting, and the Course of Nations

Daniel 9:1 – 19

*'I strongly suspect that if we saw all the difference even the tiniest of our prayers make, and all the people those little prayers were destined to affect, and all the consequences of those prayers down through the centuries – we would be so paralyzed with awe at the power of prayer that we would be unable to get up off our knees for the rest of our lives'.* Peter Kreeft

I cannot get away from this thought. It is one thought that haunts me, and since I don't like being haunted alone, I want you to be haunted by it as well. I strongly suspect that if God pulled the veil back just a little so that we could see the awesome effect prayer has made throughout the centuries we would not neglect it even a little. I think the Bible clearly teaches that **God moves in answer to the prayers of His people and the prayers of all those who diligently seek His face.** As we saw last week, when we pray, things happen in the heavenlies. King David talked about the earth reeling and rocking, the foundations of the mountains trembling, coals of fire breaking through the clouds, smoke coming from the nostrils of God and His voice thundering in the heavens – all on account of his prayer to God for rescue.

But I want to draw your attention this morning to another powerful ally of prayer called 'fasting'. While we may pray at times and not fast – the opposite never seems to be an option in the Bible – that is, fasting without praying. The two are inextricably linked and the people of God are often called to pray and fast at strategic moments in history, and turn, as it were, the course of nations.

In Acts chapter 13, the church in Jerusalem had come to such a strategic moment, and the leaders in the church were fasting and praying for the Lord's direction in ministry: *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.* Acts 13:2-3 This marked a turning point, not only in the history of the church, but in the history of nations. John Piper notes that *'Before this word from the Holy Spirit there seems to have been no organized mission of the church beyond the eastern seacoast of the Mediterranean. Before this, Paul had made no missionary journeys westward to Asian Minor, Greece, or Rome, or Spain. Before this Paul had not written any of his letters which were all the result of his missionary travels beginning here. This moment of prayer and fasting resulted in a missions movement that would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within two and a half centuries and would yield 1.3 billion adherents of the Christian religion today with a Christian witness in virtually every country of the world. And 13 out of the 29 books of the New Testament were the result of the ministry that was launched in this moment of prayer and fasting.* (Prayer, Fasting and the Course of History, J. Piper, January 1, 1995) Clearly this time of prayer and fasting was the pivot point on which the history of nations turned.

Prayer and fasting also marked the turning point of the nation of Assyria in the Old Testament. When Jonah carried God's warning of impending judgment to Nineveh, the Scripture records: *The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.* Jonah 3:6-10

In the book of Nehemiah we read that Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king Artaxerxes, was brought a report concerning those who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the nation were in trouble: *"The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."* And Nehemiah's response was to fast and pray: *As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.* Nehemiah 1:3-4 God answered his prayers and fastings by moving Artaxerxes heart to send him with all the material help and support he needed to rectify the situation – and again the history of a nation turned on prayer and fasting. There are so many examples of this in the Bible, not only in Daniel, and Acts, and Nehemiah, but in Ezra, and Esther, and the Chronicles – where prayer and fasting are instrumental in turning the course of nations.

A little closer to home, in 1746, word spread that a French fleet of 70 ships rapidly approached by way of the Atlantic Ocean. The menacing fleet, bristled with guns and carried 10,000 troops. Their orders were to recapture Nova Scotia and destroy New York and burn Boston to her foundations. ...William Shirley, colonial Governor of Massachusetts proclaimed a Fast Day and all good citizens were to stop work, to fast and to gather in the meeting houses to pray for deliverance from the peril that approached. The morning was clear and calm. People had walked to church through sunshine. From the pulpit of the Old South Meeting-house Pastor Thomas Prince prayed before his congregation. ***“Deliver us from our enemy!” “Send thy tempest, Lord, upon the waters to the eastward! Raise Thy right hand. Scatter the ship of our tormentors and drive them hence. Sink their proud frigates beneath the power of Thy winds!”***

A witness to this event writes: 'He had scarcely pronounced the words when the sun disappeared. All the church darkened. A wind shrieked so hard that the great church bell struck twice and the windows rattled. Thomas Prince paused in his prayer, both arms raised. ***“We hear thy voice, O Lord! We hear it! Thy breath is upon the waters of the eastward, even upon the deep. The bell tolls for the death of our enemies!”*** He bowed his head; when he looked up, tears streamed down his face. ***“Thine be the glory, Lord. Amen and amen!”*** The French attack never came. History bears witness to this fact: that a hurricane or sudden storm overcame the French fleet. Ships sank. Two thousand men died. Four thousand succumbed to a pestilential fever. The few remaining ships, half manned, limped off to the southward. There would be no French invasion of America! Again, prayer and fasting turned the course of nations.

And so we come to Daniel: *In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans-- in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking Him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.* Daniel 9:1-3 Daniel had been in the word and had probably read this passage many times before, but at this moment it seemed to leap out at him: *I... perceived in the books the number of years that... must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. And his response was to pray and fast for the accomplishing of God's will.* He didn't say, 'Oh, seventy years is about up – I guess I'll wait to see if it happens'. No, he prayed for it – he fasted for it. He said with his heart, and he said with his body, 'Lord, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!'

**The situation in Daniel's time was that the people of God were held captive by a foreign, godless power because they had forsaken God and turned away from Him as a nation.** Daniel mentions this in verse 11 and again in verse 13 of His prayer: *All Israel has transgressed Your law and turned aside, refusing to obey Your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against Him...As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by Your truth.* I would say we have a similar situation in the church today.

It is tempting to apply this to the state of our nation today, and I do believe we can. However, the slow slide into moral and spiritual decadence in our nation has happened in full view of the Church in America – and it is the church, the people of God, that I want to address first. In 1520, Martin Luther wrote a treatise which he called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which he compared the Jewish captivity centuries earlier to the condition of the church in his day. He maintained that the church had been invaded by powers foreign to Christ and His word that had captured the hearts and minds of the people and the church was in a kind of Babylonian bondage.

And I believe that is the situation in much of the church today. Materialism, moral relativism and moral failure, preaching that focuses on health, wealth, and success, messages designed to make you feel good, concern over political correctness, and a post-modern mindset that echoes what the world says all have crept into the church and captured the minds and hearts of God's people. A large majority of the church-goers today think the way the world thinks and acts the way the world acts, and viewed from outside – there seems to be no difference. In its headlong pursuit to be relevant – the church has lost its savor and really doesn't impact the culture around it the way perhaps it once did.

**Several times Daniel mentions a deep sense of shame that the people of God feel because of their condition:** *To You, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which You have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against You. To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against You.* Daniel 9:7-8

And I would say that in the church, all those who have not embraced the world into the church, who consciously fight against its influence in their homes and lives and churches, nevertheless feel this shame because we know the church ought to be different. Because we know that the church ought to be living as strangers and aliens, citizens of heaven, not of earth – because we cannot pray as we once did in our schools or read and teach God's word there, and the church did not stand up and fight the godless forces that made those changes – because divorce is as common in the church as out of it – because abortion has been institutionalized in our society and many Christians think it is okay – because homosexuality is a choice and a lifestyle and not a sin and has been welcomed into many congregations – because of this, because it is not just society at large that embraces this but increasingly the church – we have a deep sense of shame.

As a result, **the people of God in Daniel's day had become a byword and God was mocked:** *because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people have become a byword among all who are around us.* Daniel 9:16b A byword is a disparaging or abusive word or phrase or even a proverb that speaks scornfully or reproachfully about someone or something. It meant that the nations looked at Israel and laughed at God – they mocked Israel's God. I believe that is the way it is with the church and the world today. Just watch any Hollywood movie or network television production that includes a pastor, priest or some reference to the church and what you get is derision and scorn and mocking. And that in large part is due to the church's wandering away from the clear teaching of the word on sin and righteousness; and the fact that the church no longer reflects the glory of the Lord because it reflects the world. We have made the name of Christ an object of scorn.

So what shall we do? I believe we should do what the people of God have always done when they have sought to hear from God and turn the tide of history – we should fast and pray. Prayer with fasting says to God 'This much, O Lord we want to hear from heaven. This much O Lord, we want to see Your mighty hand move in our lives and in the world around us – to see Your kingdom come and Your will be done – right here, right now!' I believe that if the church of God sets herself to regular times of prayer and fasting we will see God move in ways we never imagined – in our lives, in the lives of those for whom we pray – in our communities – in our nation and in the world. So how should we pray?

First we **pray according to the word of God.** That is where Daniel began and I believe that is where we should begin. *I, Daniel, perceived in the books.* When Daniel got into the word – his heart got burdened for prayer and fasting. Daniel's prayer started with the word of God and it was saturated with the word – sentence after sentence comes right from the text, and the books of Deuteronomy, Exodus, Psalms and Jeremiah are either alluded to or quoted outright. His prayer overflows with truth because it overflows with the word. Jesus linked prayer with the word when He said in John 15:7: *'If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you'*. In other words, if the word of God is filling your mind, if His word is shaping your thinking – then you will pray the kind of prayers that turn the tide of history and bring His will to pass on earth.

Secondly, **we pray confessing our sin.** Daniel spends a lot of time confessing the sin of his people: *I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep His commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from Your commandments and rules. 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.* Daniel 9:4-6 This is simply to speak the truth about our condition – not to soft soap the issue. It means agreeing with God about our wickedness, rebellion and treachery and disobedience. It means owning the shame. It also means recognizing God's righteousness and His mercy and forgiveness. It means that we have a sense of brokenness and remorse and guilt before God – recognizing that our sin has not only offended God but brought reproach on His name and the nations mock Him because of us.

Thirdly we pray remembering the mercy and goodness of God. *And now, O Lord our God, who brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and have made a name for Yourself, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly.* 16 "O Lord, according to all Your righteous acts, let Your anger and Your wrath turn away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy hill, Daniel 9:15-16a It reminds and assures us that if God saved a disobedient and rebellious people once at the Red Sea, He can and will do it again.

**Remembering the past mercies and goodness of God toward His people will sustain prayers for His people in the present.** This is why I love to read historical accounts of the mercy and goodness of God among the nations. I am reading through just such an account called ***The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever*** that chronicles the mercies of God in different eras.

Finally, we pray appealing to God's passion for His own glory. Listen to Daniel: *Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for Your own sake, O Lord, make Your face to shine upon Your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline Your ear and hear. Open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by Your name. For we do not present our pleas before You because of our righteousness, but because of Your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for Your own sake, O my God, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name.*" Daniel 9:17-19 God's people have God's name, and their ground of righteousness is not theirs but His. And because God has a passion for His own glory, He will not let His name be reproached and made a byword forever. But He will act, He will move, He will thunder from on high when His people who are called by His name, humble themselves with prayers and fastings to see His kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So to give this message feet, as it were, I would like to invite you to join with me in regular times of prayer and fasting. What I would propose is that for this year, 2010, we would take one day a week – that is 52 days out of 365 to fast and pray for the church. And because we regularly meet to pray as a church on Tuesday nights, I would invite you all to take Tuesday as a fast day, and mingle it with prayer for the church. And if your schedule won't allow you to join in corporate prayer on Tuesdays, you would take your lunch hour to pray for the church. Or perhaps you are joining the prayer team on Sunday mornings and you would like to take Sunday for a day of prayer and fasting. That works too. The point is not which day, but to take a day and fast and pray. Who knows what God might do through a church fully devoted to fasting and praying for His kingdom to come and His will to be done?

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*Grant us to humble ourselves and pray, to seek Your face and turn from our sinful ways. We have sinned against You, O Lord. We have disobeyed Your clear commands, We have not loved You with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Open Your eyes and see our desperate situation, our coldness of heart and apathy toward prayer and the things of God and forgive us. To You O Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness. O God, incline Your ear and hear. Pour out on Your people the spirit of prayer and supplication for Your Name's sake and Your glory. Ignite a burning passion for Your kingdom to come and Your will to be done. For we do not present our pleas before You because of our righteousness, but because of Your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for Your own sake, O my God, because of Your glory and Your people who are called by Your name, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.*