

1/6/2008

Rev Robert Denham

Has reading the Bible ever caused you to do anything? In Daniel 9, we find Daniel, that great man of wisdom, that great man of prayer and that great man of boldness, was moved by his reading of the prophet Jeremiah to pray. And the prayer was not a light and fluffy: "God bless aunt Jemimah and uncle Ted, and thanks for our window views."

He was reading a part of the Old Testament during the first year of the reign of King Darius. The Babylonians had been defeated, and Daniel found something in the writings of Jeremiah the prophet which made him stop eating, change his beautiful clothes for hessian, and his foundation and eyeliners for charcoal. No, it was not because of the morbid nature of the prophet's message, nor was it in sympathy with him because he was persecuted so much.

He fasted, and wore sackcloth and ashes as part of his contrition. He confessed not only his own sins, but also the sins of his people.

But what had he read? Most probably it was from passages in Jeremiah 25, where we find in the 1st year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon Jeremiah's message from God to the people of Judah was: *For 23 years... the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have persistently spoken to you, but you have not listened. And though the Lord persistently sent you all his servants the prophets, you have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear when they said, "Turn now, everyone of you, from your evil way and wicked doings, and you will remain upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your ancestors from of old and forever; do not go after other gods to serve and worship them and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm." Yet you did not listen to me, says the Lord, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.*

*Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. and I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall*

*serve the king of Babylon 70 years. Then after 70 years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon 70 that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.*

Daniel had lived through the devastation by Babylon. He knew the pain of being deported to exile. And he had lived the 70 years in exile. Jeremiah made sense and was accurate. But that didn't bring him to fasting, sackcloth and ashes. But words in Jeremiah 29:10-14 did.

*For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's 70 years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

In response to genuine prayer in response to God's word (unlike the block-our-ears attitudes of the previous generations), God would rescue his people, and return them to Jerusalem. Daniel loved to pray. He had been thrown into the lions' den because he prayed 3 times a day, even when praying to God meant death. So having read God's word through Jeremiah, Daniel prayed. And it is a meaty prayer.

Like our collects, it describes aspects of God's person and promises, and then calls on God to do what He has promised.

Like our confessions, Daniel honestly tells God that he has sinned and has turned away from doing what God wants, and is in need of forgiveness.

As it is an Old Testament prayer, it is also a prayer of confession for the whole people of God, not simply an individual's prayer.

And it is a prayer of confession about deep wounds. The wounds had been his people's reluctance to listen to God, and their stubbornness in not obeying His word. We have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments.

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It is a humble, yet powerful prayer of trust, which has many links to the prayer of confession in the Book of Common Prayer's Communion service.

And even as he was praying it, God answered. The angel Gabriel came, and in a complicated prophecy, assured Daniel that his prayer was answered, and the people would return to the land, but he also points to a time when the Messiah would come, who'd put a finish to their transgression, 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.

We are living in the light of that event. Jesus did come, just as Gabriel told Daniel over 500 years before. He came and took our sin on himself, and gave us his righteousness in the divine transaction that occurred on the cross. It's spoken of in Colossians 2:13-15 *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with X. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

When Daniel prayed, we are told by Gabriel that God began his new work of restoring Jerusalem, which would eventually lead to the coming of the Messiah, and to the situation we now face, we are God has forgiven us our sins, having nailed them on the cross of Christ.

Keep trusting him and keep seeking on-going forgiveness.