

Nothing in Our Hands

Daniel 9:1-19

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Well, good morning. It's so good to see everyone here this morning on this beautiful Palm Sunday. If you don't know, I'm Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and this morning it's my privilege to open God's Word for us. If you've been with us over the last couple of months, then you know that we're nearing the end of our journey through the book of Daniel. And so it's good for us to remember where we are in the story. Jerusalem lies in ruins. The temple's gone. The people of God have been scattered among the nations. And Daniel himself has spent most of his life far from home, in exile in the court of foreign idolatrous kings. And yet he's lived faithfully. He's endured constant pressure to compromise. He's watched the world change around him. And God has continued to speak to him through visions. In fact, we saw this just last week in chapter 8. There, Daniel saw rampaging animals, clashing kingdoms, even a little horn making war on God's own sanctuary. You remember? These were visions that were so overwhelming, they left Daniel sick for days. But in our passage this morning, something shifts. There are no visions or dreams. Instead, we're given something different, something deeply personal. And we're privileged to overhear Daniel praying.

So I invite you to open your copy of God's Word, if you haven't already, to Daniel 9. We're going to be looking at Daniel 9, verses 1 through 19. Hear the Word of the Lord.

“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. 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. 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. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. 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. He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity. For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has

been done against Jerusalem. 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. Therefore the LORD has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice. 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.

O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, 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. 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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we bow before you. We bow before you, covenant keeper, creator of all things, seen and unseen, the one true God, full of righteousness and justice, steadfastness, mercy and grace. We bow before you. We praise you and we ask that you will teach us today. We ask that you will turn us toward you. We ask that that you will cause us to listen to your voice as you invite us to come. Thank you, Lord, for this passage. Teach us by it. By your spirit, open our eyes and ears that we might understand more about who you are and what you have done in Jesus and what you call us to as your people. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

So one of my favorite poems is a short piece. Some of you might be familiar with it. It's a piece by the 17th century poet George Herbert. It's called simply Love. I memorized it back in college and I've carried it with me for years. It's a dialogue between God, whom Herbert calls love, and a soul. And in it we hear love inviting the soul to feast at the table, at his table. But the soul keeps drawing back. Love bids it welcome. He invites it in. But the soul hesitates at the threshold. It feels unworthy. You see, it's been unkind, ungrateful. It's marred what love has made, what love has made. It's despised his gifts. And it knows it. It can't imagine that love really wants it, this soul, with this history, to simply walk through the door and sit down. And so it resists. And it says, “I, the unkind, ungrateful, I cannot look on thee.” So love presses and says, “you shall be a worthy guest.” But the soul can't receive it. It objects again. And when love goes further still, the soul's response is to reach for something, something to offer. “My dear,” it says, “then I will serve.” Almost as if it's saying, at least let me be useful. At least let me bring something. Let me earn the right to be here.

You see, the soul can't simply trust the invitation. Its guilt won't let it. And you know, I think the reason this poem has meant so much to me through the years is that Herbert has put his finger on something deeply true about us. When we've sinned, when we feel the weight of the guilt that we have before God, our instinct isn't to run toward him. It's to draw back. We

hesitate at the threshold. We begin to believe that our guilt disqualifies us, that his invitation isn't really for people like us. Not now, not after what we've done. And for followers of Jesus, this has a devastating effect on our prayer lives.

When we feel most guilty, we tend to pray least boldly. When we most need the Lord, we're most apt to pull away. Have you ever found that to be true? Friends, Daniel's prayer confronts that instinct directly, because Israel has every reason to feel disqualified. After all, decades of covenant breaking, generations of ignored warnings, a ruined city, and a demolished temple, all of these things stand as visible monuments to their own failure. And yet Daniel doesn't draw back. He comes urgently, honestly, and boldly, because he trusts that God means what he said. So what I'd like us to do this morning is simply follow Daniel through his prayer, what moves him to pray in verses 1 through 3, what he confesses in verses 4 through 15, and what he asks for in verses 16 through 19. And I think as we do this, we'll find that honest confession and bold prayer belong together, and that the only thing that makes both possible is trusting that God's invitation is actually real. So let's start with verses 1 through 3.

Belshazzar is gone. The Babylonian king whom we last saw in chapter 5 at that idolatrous feast, reading the writing on the wall, he's dead. And in his place, there's a new ruler, Darius the Mede. Something seismic has happened. Babylon, the superpower that destroyed Jerusalem and carried God's people into exile, has itself been conquered. And the Medes and Persians have assumed power in the region. But Daniel's still there. He's an old man now, probably in his 80s. He's outlived Nebuchadnezzar. He's outlived Belshazzar. He's watched the whole arc of Babylonian power from his window. Its rise, its glory, and now this. So I want us to put ourselves in Daniel's shoes for a moment and imagine what's going through his head. The empire that held his people captive for 60 years is gone. And for a man who'd spent his life immersed in scripture, I think a moment like this would have sent his mind racing. What does this mean? What does God's Word say about this? And somewhere in that searching, his mind landed on a prophecy he'd known for years, perhaps carried with him since his earliest days in Babylon. Jeremiah had predicted not only that Jerusalem's destruction would last 70 years, he'd also said that after those 70 years, God would turn his attention to Babylon and judge it. Listen to what God says in Jeremiah 25:12. He says, "After 70 years, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation and will make it an everlasting waste." Well, Babylon is now waste. And Daniel knows it.

And as he continues reading, he finds something thrilling. He hears Jeremiah speaking a word of hope directly to the exiles. God will restore them, he says, and bring them back to their land. But it wouldn't happen automatically. "Call upon me and come and pray to me," Jeremiah says, "and I will hear you." You see, there's a turning, a seeking, a coming back to the Lord that's required. And now Daniel's doing the math. He's been in Babylon since he was a teenager. The 70 years, however precisely we reckon them, they're nearly up. The empire's gone and the pieces seem to be moving. And you know, it wouldn't surprise me if his heart skipped a beat. But I want us to slow down for a moment and think about something. If you'd been living in exile for 60 years and you suddenly had reason to believe the end might be in sight, what would you do? Wouldn't you want to tell someone? Or maybe you'd stand at that window and look toward Jerusalem with that first cautious stirring of hope.

You'd almost stopped allowing yourself to feel. But Daniel doesn't do that. Instead, verse 3 tells us that he turned his face to the Lord God with fasting sackcloth and ashes. And sackcloth and ashes was the unmistakable posture of mourning and repentance. Remember Jonah? After preaching what may be the shortest sermon in history, the king of Nineveh and

all his people put on sackcloth, cried out to God and turned from their evil ways. That's what sackcloth signals. It's not just grief. It's grief that has turned toward God. It knows where to go. And that's exactly what Daniel's doing. He sees clearly. He perceives what Jeremiah's words require, what the moment's calling for, and yet what hasn't been done on Israel's behalf. But he's not just checking a box. He feels it. He's genuinely broken by it. He's a man who understands what needs to happen and who grieves deeply that it hasn't. Like Moses at Sinai, he's not a detached observer. He's someone who loves his people enough to stand in the breach for them.

But this raises a question worth sitting with. We know what sackcloth and ashes mean, but why is Daniel wearing them? After all, he's been one of the most faithful figures in the entire narrative. Not a single word of reproach against him. He's been righteous and courageous. He's been unwavering. Well, the answer is in what he's about to pray. And notice where he starts. Before he utters a single word about Israel, he fixes his eyes on who God is. "Oh Lord, the great and awesome God", he says, "who keeps covenant and steadfast love." Notice what he reaches for first. Not Israel's need, not his own grief, but the covenant-keeping character of God. That's the only foundation the whole prayer rests on.

And it's only then, after he's fixed his eyes on who God is, that the confession begins. "We have sinned," he says, "and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules." Friends, did you catch that? He says "we", not "they", not "them" - "we." That word runs through the entire confession like a thread. Again and again, we. Daniel doesn't pray from a distance. He doesn't stand outside the failure and observe it. He steps into it and makes it his own. And that might raise a question for us. After all, the Bible teaches individual accountability before God. Ezekiel 18 is explicit about this. "The wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself," it says. So is Daniel doing something wrong here? Is he confessing sins that aren't his to confess? I don't think so. You see, what Daniel's doing isn't claiming personal guilt he doesn't have. It's something different. He's choosing solidarity over distance. And you know, he had every right to stand apart. Again, nowhere in Daniel do we get even the slightest hint that he participated in the sins that led to exile. If anyone could have stood apart and said, forgive them, Lord, it was Daniel. But he doesn't say forgive them. He says, "we have sinned."

And you know, I think it's worth asking ourselves, could we do that? Could we stand before God and identify ourselves with the failures of our community at CTK? Not because we caused them, but because we belong to them. Our instincts run, our instinct runs the other direction, doesn't it? We want to distance ourselves from failure. We want to be seen as the exception. And yet, Daniel, righteous, faithful Daniel, he takes his place among his people as one of them, not above them. It's the posture of a shepherd, not a judge. And friends, what he goes on to confess is honest to the point of being painful. Kings failed, princes failed, fathers failed, all the people of the land failed, leaders and led alike. "To us belongs open shame," he says in verse 8. Everyone, no exceptions. And did you pick up on the contrast running through these verses? God and Israel set side by side. God keeps covenant. Israel's broken it. God is faithful. Israel's been faithless. God is righteous. To Israel belongs open shame.

Daniel isn't just cataloging sins, he's measuring Israel against the character of the God they belong to, and the gap is devastating. But it's also worth noting what he doesn't do. He doesn't mention the Babylonians. He doesn't say, "we were conquered by a cruel empire, we were dragged from our homes, we were subjected to relentless pressure to compromise." All of that was true, yes, but Daniel doesn't go there. And that's because Daniel knew that Israel was

in exile, because Israel had broken covenant with God. And up to this point in Daniel's story, we've seen the exile framed as God's sovereign act. He was the one who gave Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. It was purposeful and controlled. But here, Daniel goes deeper. He names the reason behind the reason. God had given them into Nebuchadnezzar's hand, yes, but why? Because they'd sinned. They'd rebelled. The Babylonians were the instrument, but Israel's sin was the cause. And Daniel knew exactly what sin he meant. In verse 11, he says, "the curse and oath that are written in the law of Moses have been poured out upon us." You see what he's doing here? He's pointing straight at Deuteronomy 28. There, God had been explicit. If Israel turned from him, the curses would come, and they'd be defeated, scattered, and exiled. And there's no question that Israel had turned. Again and again, despite warning after warning through the prophets, we have not listened to your servants, the prophets, he says in verse 6. God kept sending messengers, and Israel kept ignoring them. And, you know, 2 Chronicles 36 captures it in terms that are almost unbearable to read. "The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers because he had compassion on his people. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy."

No remedy. That's where Israel's stubborn refusal had brought them. And if that weren't enough, there's something in verse 13 that makes it worse. Even after all of this, even after Jerusalem fell, even after the exile came, Israel still had not turned to the Lord. The exile itself was a final, unmistakable wake-up call. The suffering should have driven them back, but it hadn't. So Daniel isn't just confessing the sin that caused the exile, he's confessing that even the exile failed to produce repentance. That's not just failure, that's compound failure. But perhaps the most remarkable thing of all is what Daniel says in verse 14. He says, "the Lord our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice." He's saying God was right to do this. The exile wasn't arbitrary, it wasn't cruel, it was the act of a God who said exactly what he would do, waited with extraordinary patience, and then when his patience had run its course, did what he said. He was righteous, even in judgment, especially in judgment. What about Israel? To them belongs open shame.

Friends, when things go wrong in your life, when a relationship fractures, when circumstances collapse, when you find yourself in your own sort of exile, what's your first instinct? Is it to look inward, the way Daniel does here, or is it to look around for an explanation that doesn't require that kind of honesty? I think Daniel's confession here is extraordinary, precisely because of what he doesn't include. No mitigating circumstances, no blame shifted on the Babylon, just this, "we sinned, you were righteous, the shame is ours." Tremper Longman puts it this way, he says, "repentance is the road to reconciliation." I think he's exactly right. There are no shortcuts past confession, not in Daniel, nowhere in scripture, and yet this isn't where the prayer ends. His confession is relentless, yes, but it has a purpose. He's not wallowing in guilt, he's clearing the ground, so that when he finally makes a petition to the Lord, it will rest on the only foundation that can hold it.

And this brings me to the third and final movement of this remarkable prayer. In verses 16 through 19, Daniel begins to make an appeal to the Lord, and I want us to notice where he anchors it. You see, he doesn't begin with what Israel needs, he begins with what God has done. He looks back at the Exodus, the great act of redemption that defined Israel's identity. There, God had acted powerfully and publicly, and from Jericho to the Philistine coast, the nations had heard and trembled. His name had become great. But now Daniel's looking around, Jerusalem's in ruins, the temple is rubble, and he knows exactly what that looks like to the world. It looks like defeat. It looks like the God of Israel couldn't protect his own city.

He couldn't protect his own people. He couldn't even protect his own name. The shame Israel had brought on themselves hadn't stayed with them, no. It had spread upward onto God himself, whose name they bore. And it's precisely this, God's name dragged into disrepute, that drives Daniel's appeal. Not Israel's suffering, not their need, not even their repentance, no, twice. Daniel says the same thing twice. "For your own sake, O Lord." Not ours, yours. And you know, he's not the first to pray this way. Moses asked the same thing at the golden calf: "What would the Egyptians say?" It's the cry of Psalm 79: "Why should the nations say, where is their God?" You see, Daniel here is standing in a long tradition of intercessors who understood that God's reputation was bound up with the fate of his people. And what's more, who were bold enough to appeal to it. It's as if he were saying, "Lord, your name is on these people. Your name is on this city. Their continued desolation is an ongoing public reproach to you. So act, not for our sake, but for yours."

But perhaps the most profound part of his appeal comes in verse 18, when Daniel says, "we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy." Friends, there it is. The ground of the entire prayer stated plainly, not our righteousness, not Daniel's 60 years of faithful service, not Israel's suffering, nothing we bring, only his mercy. Friends, this is what the soul in Herbert's poem couldn't quite get to. It kept reaching for something to offer, but Daniel offers nothing. He comes with completely empty hands. And yet paradoxically, I think that's exactly what makes the prayer so bold. You see, he's not resting the petition on something that could be questioned or undermined. Instead, he's resting it entirely on who God is. And God's character does not waver. And you know what I love about the way Daniel closes this prayer is the sheer urgency of it. Did you notice that? He doesn't trail off. He doesn't qualify. He presses in. He says here, "forgive, pay attention, act, and then do not delay."

This isn't the hesitant prayer of a man half convinced he'll be heard. This is the prayer of a man who's taken God at his word and is holding him to it, not presumptuously, but faithfully. He sounds like the psalmist crying out, "incline your ear, hear my words." You know, he sounds like a man who knows exactly who he's talking to, doesn't he? And then, right at the end of the prayer, there is something beautiful I don't want us to miss. In his final urgent cry, Daniel calls him "my God." He's not merely Israel's God. He's not the God of the covenant in abstract. He's my God. It's personal, it's intimate. It's the intimacy of 60 years of faithful relationship. And it's precisely that intimacy that makes Daniel's boldness possible. You see, he's not approaching a stranger with some legal argument. He's coming to the one he knows and loves.

Friends, this is what I want you to see. And it brings us right back to where we started. The soul in Herbert's poem stood at the threshold and drew back. It felt guilty. It couldn't trust the sincerity of the invitation. It kept reaching for something to bring. Some way to earn the right to enter. And so it couldn't simply come. Not openly. Not empty-handed. Daniel's prayer is what it looks like to trust the invitation despite the guilt. He doesn't draw back. He comes honestly, boldly, with nothing in his hands. And he prays with a boldness that has no business being there except that it's grounded entirely in who God is. That's what I want us to see. Honest confession and bold prayer. They belong together. And the only thing that makes both possible is trusting that God's invitation is real. And this brings us to a question I think this passage quietly presses on all of us. Do we trust him enough to come?

As we close, I want to bring us back to something. This whole time we've been picturing Daniel holding Jeremiah's scroll in his hands. But Jeremiah, the same prophet whose 70-year prophecy set this whole prayer in motion, he spoke of something else. Something Daniel could see only dimly, if at all. But what Jeremiah says matters deeply for us this morning. You see, the exile Daniel was mourning, it actually has two layers. There's the surface layer. The ruined city, the demolished temple, the scattered people. But then there's something deeper underneath. The broken relationship between God and his people. The distance that that sin creates. The shame that separates us from him. And friends, no political restoration could reach that. Jerusalem could be rebuilt stone by stone and the deepest problem would remain. Which is why Jeremiah doesn't just promise a return from exile. In chapter 31, he promises something more. He promises a new covenant, not like the one Israel broke. Not one written on tablets of stone, but one written on the heart. And the promise at its center was this. "I will forgive their sins and I will remember their sins no more." And that's what Daniel's praying for. Even if he can't yet fully see it. And when the answer comes, it comes in an upper room on the night before a crucifixion.

After Jesus takes a cup and he says, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Friends, that's the new covenant Jeremiah promised. Fulfilled in the blood of Christ. And at the cross, God did exactly what Daniel prayed for. He acted for his own name's sake. He vindicated his righteousness and his mercy at the same time. Paul says it in Romans 3, "God put Christ forward to demonstrate his righteousness so that he could be both just and the one who justifies." The name that Israel's sin had brought into disrepute was glorified not by overlooking the sin, but by bearing it. And now because of what Christ has done, we can draw near with confidence. We can draw near with boldness, not because we're worthy, but because he is. And friends, since we celebrate the Lord's Supper together here every week at CTK, I want us to think for a moment about what we're doing when we come to this table. You see, we're doing what Daniel did. We're coming with nothing. No merit. No record to point to. We come because of his mercy. Because of his name. Because of what he's done in Christ. We come despite the guilt because we trust that the invitation is real. Love bids us welcome. And we sit down and eat.

Which brings me back to Herbert's poem and to another man who learned the same lesson centuries later. Augustus Toplady. He was an 18th century Anglican clergyman. He was converted young and unexpectedly, overwhelmed by the realization that he had nothing to bring. And out of that experience, he wrote one of the greatest hymns of confession in the English language, *Rock of Ages*. And I want to close with his words because I think he says better than I can what Daniel's prayer has been showing us. "Not the labor of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands. Could my zeal no respite know? Could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not atone. Thou must save and thou alone. Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress. Helpless look to thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die." Friends, that is Daniel's prayer. That's the posture. Boldness with empty hands. Complete dependence on the mercy and the name of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The soul in Herbert's poem stood at the threshold and drew back. Daniel didn't, and neither should we. Not because we're worthy, but because he is. Friends, the invitation is real. Love bids us welcome. Come, sit down, taste God's mercy. Let's pray.

Father, thank you. Thank you for your mercy. Thank you that you are trustworthy. Thank you that you mean what you say and that you invite sinners to come. Father, may we hear your words and obey. Thank you, Lord. We pray all this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.