

Pattern for Prayer

Daniel 6:1-10

Introduction

So let me ask you. When setting out to do something new—knitting a scarf, building a picnic table, or cooking a gourmet meal—do you prefer to follow a pattern, a blueprint, or a recipe? Or do you like to make it up as you go along? Unless you're a natural-born engineer or your name is MacGyver and you can build a helicopter out of soda cans and bailing wire, most of us are more confident if we have a pattern to follow. In fact, even those who are experts in their field had some kind of map or mentor when they first started out. Few of us are creative enough to invent something new out of thin air.

Cheryl, for example, has been making and mending clothes since before we were married, which was 36 years ago this past Monday, and yet, she still follows a pattern whenever she sews. Once she finds a pattern she likes, she can make alterations and adjustments as needed, but she still wants a pattern before she begins.

Or, here's something you may not know about me—I took 10 years of piano lessons as a kid and played in at least 30 different concerts and recitals. But unlike the musicians on our worship team like Len and George and Gary and the rest, I had to rely on sheet music to play, which isn't nearly as fun as being able to play by ear. So once I graduated from college, I gave it up to pursue the other things I was interested in like Greek and Hebrew and the other things you learn in seminary.

And I doubt you're much different than we! When setting out to learn a new skill, you want a model or mentor you can follow. And transitioning to our topic for this morning, there's no area where that's more important than the area of prayer.

That's one reason I found our concert of prayer so helpful last Sunday night—not only did it give us the opportunity to lift our voices in unison and glorify the God of heaven; it also gave us, through the leadership of Dave Cetti, a model and pattern for prayer. Lord willing, I want to be just as practical this morning as I bring this the last of our messages on prayer. At first, I thought I'd present a message on the prayer life of Jesus, which led His disciples to ask Him at one point, "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." But then I realized that could be a whole series in itself, there's so much on the prayer life of Jesus. It could also be a little intimidating—trying to live up to the perfect example of the Son of God! So I chose another example from the life of an Old Testament prophet, who wasn't perfect, but was a great example of prayer. And at first, you may wonder if that's applicable to us, given the difference between the experience of Old Testament saints and our own. For example, we who are followers of Jesus Christ now have the Spirit of the Lord Himself living within us. But then I read Daniel 5:14 where Belshazzar the new king of Babylon calls for Daniel the prophet who faith-fully served his father,

Nebuchadnezzar, and he now calls on him to interpret the handwriting that's appeared on the wall of his banquet room. And why does he call on Daniel? He explains it like this in verse 14. He says, "I have heard of you, that the Spirit of the Holy God is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you."

And he was right! Not everyone in the Old Testament enjoyed the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit, but Daniel did! Daniel was filled with the Spirit from his youth all the way through the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Cyrus the Great, and Darius the Mede, making his experience very much like our own. It was the Holy Spirit who encouraged him, empowered him, and guided him in all of his praying and serving. And for that reason, I think he's an excellent model for us, and I want to draw 3 important lessons based on his prayer life, and the first lesson is this: Daniel had a fixed time for prayer. Our passage is Daniel 6:10, if you'll open your Bible there now.

1. He had a fixed time for prayer.

First, a little bit on the story behind the story. Persia has conquered the Babylonian empire. And yet, even though they've been conquered, Darius, the king of Persia, is so impressed with Daniel that he keeps him on as a member of his administration, and he turns out to be such a great leader that verse 3 says, "The king planned to set him over the entire kingdom." But that didn't sit well with the rest of his cabinet who are jealous of Daniel. But because God is with him, they can't find anything to use against him. So they attack him in the only place he's vulnerable and that's in his relationship with God, which isn't right or fair, but then who said our enemy fights fair? If he can't find a chink in our armor, he'll try to exploit our strengths instead, which was easy in Daniel's case, because he had a very predictable devotional life that was well-known to everyone.

So that's where the enemy attacked. First of all, they appeal to the king's ego. They say in verse 7, "O King, live forever!" All of your administrators agree that you, the king, should "issue an edict and decree that anyone who prays to any god or man in the next 30 days, except you, O King, shall be thrown into the lions' den." And like many of us, when we're flattered and someone tells us how great we are, he didn't bother to ask himself if they truly admired him or what the fallout of his actions would be. That's why, as someone has said, "Flattery is like perfume. It's to be sniffed not swallowed." So the king agrees not only to issue the decree but puts it in writing which, according to the laws of the Medes and the Persians, means it could never be repealed because unlike other monarchies, the king of Persia wasn't over the law, he was under the law like everyone else. So the trap is set and the unholy sting operation is about to begin. Verse 10 says: "When Daniel learned that the law had been signed, he went home and knelt down as usual in his upstairs room with its windows open toward Jerusalem. He prayed 3 times a day, just as he had always done, giving thanks to his God." Daniel had a fixed time to pray every day, and he wasn't about to compromise that even in the face of death! Is it any wonder, then, that he enjoyed such great power with God? Imagine how powerful our prayers would be if we were determined to do it "even if it kills me!" Daniel could actually say that because it was literally true! He was willing to die rather than give up his daily time with God.

3 times a day he prayed, and you know what that brought to my mind? The Muslim call to prayer! Every morning at 5 am, that's how we were awakened during our visit to Egypt, by the call to prayer from the top of the minaret, all the faithful Muslims taking out their prayer mats and bowing before their god, which sounds admirable until you realize why they do it. It isn't out of

love for their god. Allah is a distant deity who offers no fellowship with himself. They do it out of fear of being punished, their prayers coming not from the heart—they're rote prayers that have to be memorized and repeated word for word not 3, but 5 times every day! And that is not what Daniel was doing. What he did, he did not to earn his salvation, but out of love and gratitude to the God of grace who invites us to come "just as I am without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me." But I emphasize this because I believe that's one of the simplest and most effective ways to develop a prayer life that is pleasing both to us and to God—setting a fixed time every day when we lift our hearts in prayer. You say,, "That sounds like law, not grace, and besides, I'm not a very structured person. I'm more of a free spirit. I like to pray throughout the day as I drive to work in my car, wash the dishes, mow the lawn." So do I! I like to pray about everything all day long. I think that's what the Bible means when it says, "Pray without ceasing." But I also believe it's important and helpful to set aside a special time every day for prayer and worship.

But I could be wrong, so I tried it on my wife. Instead of setting aside a specific time to talk about the things that are important to us, I told her it'd be better for me if we did it during the commercials as we watch the O'Reilly Factor. But she didn't like the idea, especially last week when I suggested we celebrate our anniversary at halftime during the Seahawk game. Actually I didn't do any of those things because I already knew how she'd feel. She'd be hurt to think that I didn't love her enough to make the effort and set aside the time to do something special. So we went out to dinner Friday night and spent the rest of the evening alone, just the two of us.

The same is true of God. Time is His love language. If you want to develop a relationship with Him, you do it by setting aside a special time every day when you let everything else go and spend time together, just the two of you. All you have to do is go down the list of those who've been closest to Him—Martin Luther, John Bunyan, John Wesley, William Carey, David Brainerd, George Mueller—and you find the same consistent pattern. They all spent 2 or 3 hours in prayer every day, which is how they became the great saints that they were. We haven't reached that level yet. Someday I hope we will. We have two prayer times every day—an hour at 6:30 in the morning or earlier depending on when the Lord wakes us up and 7:00 o'clock at night for another half hour or so. We're nobody's role model but I can tell you this—our lives are much more joyful, peaceful, and fruitful when we take that time for God. And I encourage you to do the same even if it's only 7 minutes to begin with. Set aside a regular time for prayer and worship. Daniel did that. He had a fixed time of prayer. And there's a second thing to notice about his prayer life—

2. He had a fixed place of prayer.

Verse 10 says: "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home and in his upper room with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees 3 times that day and prayed and gave thanks before his God as was his custom since early days." No fear, no shame, no hiding! Daniel had seen His God work in miraculous ways many times before in his life—revealing the future to him in prophetic dreams, saving his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the burning, fiery furnace. So it wasn't a stretch to trust Him again. He probably didn't even think about it. He simply did what he always did in the place he always did it: on his knees in his upper room with the windows open facing Jerusalem. That's why it's called a spiritual discipline. It's something you do again and again until it's such a habit that you no longer even think about it like brushing your teeth, combing your hair, tying your shoes, locking the door, starting the car, putting on your seatbelt. Do you know how much mental energy we save by doing those things without even thinking about them? And

that's how God intended it—to build spiritual habits into our lives that become such a natural part of us that we hardly even know that we're doing them. The hard part, of course, is getting started. But once those habits are in place, it's amazing how much less stress and mental energy it takes to keep them going!

Case in point—my dog Samson. The first thing I do in the morning is let him out of his crate. But before he can go outside, he has to put on his collar, so he very patiently sits in front of the couch while I do that. And then I let him outside and he runs up the stairs to meet me at the kitchen door where I toss him his vitamin pills, one at a time which he catches in his mouth. And then, before he eats breakfast, I brush him, which he likes. So he quietly sits there while I do it. Then it is breakfast time for both of us. So he quickly chows down his dog food outside the sliding glass door while keeping his eye on me at the kitchen table. Then it's back downstairs for Bible reading and prayer. He doesn't actually read the Bible. He watches and waits while I do, and then it's time to follow me into the bathroom where I take a shower.

That's how it is every single morning. And at first, it was exhausting because he fought me every inch of the way. But no more! Now it's almost fun because not only does he know what's expected of him, I think he's actually proud of what he's learned. I share that because the same thing is true in our battle against the flesh. The breakthrough comes when we begin to replace those old habits with new ones, which is hard at first, but so much more enjoyable when they're finally established.

So let me encourage you, if you want prayer to be a major force in your life, set aside a regular time and place to do it—the table in the kitchen, a chair in the living room. What matters isn't where you do it as long as you find a place that works for you. My only caveat is: Don't try to do it in bed unless you want to fall back asleep! The devil will make sure of that! John Wesley, the human force behind the Great Awakening, prayed so consistently in the same place every morning that if you visit his house today, you can still see two worn spots on the wooden floor where he spent the first 3 hours every morning kneeling before the Lord in prayer. For me, it's a chair and table in our bedroom where I keep my Bible, a pen, and a prayer notebook. That's a holy place in our house not because I pray in that spot but because that's where God has met me again and again. Remember Jacob's experience in fleeing from his brother Esau? God appeared to him in a dream promising to bless him. So what'd he do when he woke up the next morning? He was afraid and said to himself, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I didn't know it!" So he took the stone he'd used as a pillow, set it up as a pillar, poured oil on it, and called it which translated means "house of God." And I believe the same thing is true of that holy place in your house. If you set it apart for prayer, you can literally make it "the house of God!" By the way—

While I'm talking about places of prayer, let me express my belief that what's important to us individually is just important as a church family—dedicating a special place where we can rally together and pray for one another in a time of need. In the Old Testament, that was the Temple in Jerusalem. God promised His people that even if they sinned and were driven from the Land in punishment, if they'd repent and pray toward His temple, He would hear their prayers, forgive their sin, and return them to the Land, which is why Daniel prayed with his windows open facing Jerusalem. The Temple had actually been destroyed years before by the Babylonians, but Daniel continued to pray in that direction by faith, believing that God would still keep His promise, forgive His people, and return them

to the Land, which is exactly what He did. So taking a cue from Daniel, what I'd like to do following our service this morning is take a few minutes to join together and dedicate the rooms across from our Worship Center as holy places set aside for prayer. We've already started using those rooms for that purpose before and after our services, but one day soon I'd like to see this building become such a house of prayer that people are coming all day and all week long to lift their hearts to God in this place. And I know God no longer dwells in a temple made by hands. He dwells in the hearts of His people. But I also know that we're physical people and it helps us, just as it did Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to set aside holy places to remember how God met us in prayer. Daniel had a set time and place for prayer. And finally, the most important fact about his prayer life—

3. He had a fixed purpose for prayer.

Listen again to verse 10: "When Daniel knew the writing was signed, he went home and in his upper room with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days." And I don't know if you know the rest of the story but just as the enemy had plotted, Daniel was caught in the act of praying and dragged before the king, who had no choice. He'd foolishly signed the decree into law banning prayer to anyone but himself. So finally, after frantically searching for a way to undo his mistake and failing, the king is forced to throw Daniel into the lions' den. And yet, what's amazing about it is that it isn't Daniel, it's Darius who suffers from anxiety and insomnia. Verse 18 says when the king returned to his palace, "he spent the night fasting and refused his usual entertainment, unable to sleep even one minute that night, whereas Daniel is at perfect peace, and why?

Two reasons: 1) Daniel knew his Bible and its promises like Isaiah 26:3, "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you because he trusts in you." And he also knew God and what He was able to do. So he chose to trust Him one more time casting all His cares upon Him, knowing that He cares for us, which takes us to the very purpose for which Daniel prayed. Sometimes we get the idea that the reason God wants us to pray is for His benefit as if He's somehow dependent on us for His happiness. But nothing could be farther from the truth. God is by His very nature an infinitely happy Being who has, from eternity past, enjoyed an infinitely fulfilling relationship with His Son, making Him dependent on us for nothing. God has no needs. But we do, and that's why we pray—not for His benefit, but for our own.

To illustrate that, let me take a few more minutes to tell you about another great man of prayer named George Mueller, who pastored the Baptist church in Bristol, England for 64 years from the age of 28 until the day of his death at age 92 in 1898. He was also one of the most gifted evangelists of his day.

But that isn't what people remember about him. What we remember are his social reforms on behalf of orphans. Before Mueller, there were accommodations for only 3,600 orphans in all of England with over 7,000 orphans under the age of 8 locked up in prison, whereas 50 years after Mueller began his work, there were over 100,000 orphans being cared for in England. Mueller himself built five large orphanages and cared for 10,024 orphans even though he himself was penniless.

In fact, he said that was the very reason he chose to do it. He wanted to prove to the people of England, who'd lost their faith in God, how faithful God is to meet His children's needs. So he took on a project that could only be accomplished with the help of God. He also did it without ever asking for donations because he wanted everyone to see that it was God alone who had done it in answer to his prayers. And another fact you may not know about Mueller is that

he was also one of the biggest givers to missions in England, even though he never took a salary from his church and had no money of his own. For example, he was by far the missionary, Hudson Taylor's biggest supporter, giving more than \$3 million to his ministry, simply by kneeling before the Lord and asking for money that he would then give away.

And I don't know about you, but having thousands of orphans depending on me for their daily bread and having no means to provide it would make me anxious. But not George Mueller! He actually welcomed every problem that came his way as a chance to prove the perfect and sovereign goodness of God. You say, "Where did he get such great confidence and faith?" I'm going to let him explain it himself.

He said in a message to new believers: "According to my judgment, the most important point to be attended to is this—above all things see to it that your souls are happy in the Lord. Other things may press upon you, the Lord's work may even make urgent claims upon your attention, but I deliberately repeat: It is of supreme and paramount importance that you should seek above all things to keep your souls happy in God Himself. Day by day seek to make this the most important business of your life. This has been my firm and settled condition for the last 5 and 30 years. For the first 4 years after my conversion, I knew not its vast importance, but now, after much experience, I specially commend this point to my younger brothers and sisters in Christ—the secret of all true and effective service is our joy in Christ."

Why is this such an important thing? He gives two reasons. The first reason, he says, is because this is what glorifies God. After telling about his wife's illness, when he almost lost her, he said: "I have stated this case so fully, to show the deep importance of being satisfied with the will of God not only for the sake of glorifying Him, but also," he adds, "as the best way, in the end, of satisfying the desires of our own hearts." That, he goes on to say, is the key to a love that is willing to sacrifice and risk. "Whatever be done," he says, "must result from the joy we have in God."

But where does such a peace and joy come from? This is how he finishes his message, and it's also the way I want to finish mine. He says, "My dear Christian friend, will you not try it this way? Will you not know for yourself the preciousness and the happiness of this way of casting all your cares and necessities on the Lord? This way is as open to you as to me. Everyone is invited to trust in the Lord, to trust in Him with all his heart, and to cast his burden upon Him, and to call upon Him in the day of trouble. Will you not do this, my dear brethren in Christ? I long that you may do so. I desire that you may taste the sweetness of that state of heart, in which, while surrounded by difficulties and necessities, you can yet be at peace, because you know that the living God, your Father in heaven, cares for you.

That was George Mueller's spiritual secret, and it was Daniel's method as well. I also hope it's what we'll choose to do together in the months and years ahead—to continually lift up our praise and petitions to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, casting all our cares upon Him, believing that He, our Heavenly Father, cares for us as well.