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The Prayers of Daniel

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Introduction

Prayer is a matter of life and death in the book of Daniel. The first reference to prayer is found in Daniel 2:18. Daniel and his companions plead with God to reveal the king's dream because the death decree of Nebuchadnezzar threatens their lives. In chapter 3 Daniel's companions are sentenced to death, because they refuse to bow down, worship and pray (implied) to an idol. In chapter 6 Daniel himself is likewise sentenced to death, because he continually and regularly prays to his God.

From a *theological* point of view the prayers of the prophet Daniel are important, because they form part of a divine-human dialogue in this inspired writing which contains dreams and visions as vehicles for divine revelation. Throughout the book the prophet is depicted as a man of prayer. His prayers are effective; they create a divine response. For example: the revelation by a heavenly messenger in 10:12 comes about as a result of Daniel's fasting and prayer.

But the prophet's prayers are also in themselves a response to God. This becomes evident when we look at the *literary* aspect of the book. The document is obviously divided into two parts. The narrative section (chaps. 1-6) is fairly easy to understand, even for small children. "Dare to be a Daniel," we sing. On the contrary the prophetic section (chaps 7-12) seems difficult to comprehend. The revelations are given in visions to a highly educated Jew, a scholar, a wise man, not to Gentile kings with little understanding of the true God.

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I believe this movement in understanding is intentional. Literary patterns and important theological themes and messages from the stories enlighten the visions. (Maybe we have done wrong at times in letting only the children listen to the stories!).

Now, with regard to the literary structure of the book, only two verbally expressed prayers (labelled ‘stated prayers’ by some scholars) are recorded—one in each section. Both are concerned with the issue of understanding. They are responses to God’s revelation.

In chapter 2:19-23 Daniel bursts out in thanksgiving, because God has revealed the content of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and given him the understanding of its interpretation. In chapter 9:1-19 Daniel notes his study of Jeremiah’s prophecy regarding Judah’s seventy year captivity. He understands it, but still ponders its relationship to the time-element (the 2300 days) of the previous vision (chap. 8). In his quest for understanding he pours out his heart to God in a confession of Israel’s sins and his own. We may chart the two prayers and the two sections of the book. (See Table 1).

We will first examine Daniel’s prayer in chapter 2, in the first section of the book. Next, we will consider his longer prayer in chapter 9. Finally, we will compare the two prayers and evaluate their significance for the book as a whole.

Table 1

The ‘Stated Prayers’ In the Structure of the Book

Dan 2: prayer of thanksgiving	Dan 9: prayer of confession
Chaps. 1-6	Chaps. 7-12
<u>narratives</u>	<u>prophecies</u>
Easy to understand (told to the world - Nebuchadnezzar, etc.)	Difficult to understand (told to the people of God - Daniel)

The Prayer of Thanksgiving (Dan 2:20-23)

The story of Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to discover the meaning of his dream is well-known and need not be repeated.

The structure of the chapter (see Table 2) places the divine-

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human dialogue in the center of the narrative. Enclosed by a prayer of petition on the one side (no wording recorded, vss. 17-18) and a prayer of thanksgiving on the other (vss. 20-23) lies the basic theological statement of the chapter (vs. 19): “The secret was revealed to Daniel in the nightly vision.” Revelation is the issue. The question is, “who is giving the revelation?” The answer is “the Lord of Heaven.” God alone is able to reveal the secrets of human hearts and of history. See in Table 3 how the literary structure emphasizes the revelation from God as the central truth in this historical experience.

Table 2
Structure of Chapter 2

- A The dream: Nebuchadnezzar’s emotional reaction, calls his wise men (vss. 1-2)
- B Content and interpretation of dream unknown (vss. 3-6)
- C No human is able to reveal dream/interpretation (vss. 7-12)
- D Death threat: postponed by Daniel’s intervention (vss. 13-16)
- E Prayer to God: petition (vss. 17-18)
- F **Revelation of the secret** (vs. 19)
- E’ Prayer to God: thanksgiving (vss. 20-23)
- D’ Death threat: removed by Daniel’s intervention (vss. 24-25)
- C’ God is able to reveal dream/interpretation (vss. 26-30)
- B’ Content and interpretation of dream made known (vss. 31-45)
- A’ The dream/interpretation: Nebuchadnezzar’s emotional reaction, honors Daniel and companions (vss. 46-49)

The hymn of thanksgiving can be studied in several ways. In Table 3 we point out some of the formal elements of communication, some basic themes of the prayer, and some larger theological issues of importance in describing the God to whom the prayer is directed. The text follows the NIV.

Table 3
The Prayer of Thanksgiving

Text (NIV)	Forms	Themes	Theology
20 "Praise be to the name of God forever and ever; wisdom and power are his.	Address Description (general)	Wisdom and power (God's possessions) Power and wisdom and knowledge <i>given</i> by God (in general)	Creation History
21 He changes times and seasons; He sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.			Creation
22 He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.			Creation
23 I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king."	Motivation for thanksgiving (specific)	Wisdom and power <i>given</i> by God (the specific situation)	History

A close relationship exists between Daniel's prayer of thanksgiving and the narrative. The themes of wisdom and power are central to both the prayer and the narrative. In the account these are characteristic possessions of God, who is the Lord of Creation and the Sovereign of History. The dialectic between creation and history is important, because the constant change of human power in history points to the future eschatological time when God, in establishing his eternal kingdom, will turn the clock back to original creation-time. The fact that God is mentioned in the prayer as the great *Giver* is a challenge to king Nebuchadnezzar in the narrative who wants to emphasize his power by giving life or death to the wise men (vss. 5-9).

Furthermore, notice how prayer and story give the same role and abilities to wise men and kings in general (wisdom and power) as well as to the three friends of Daniel in specific (wisdom and power). And see, how the humility of Daniel, as we know it from the story (vs. 30), is beautifully expressed by the attitude revealed

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in the prayer (vs. 23). So the prayer and the narrative are closely linked together.

Looking at the literary structure of the chapter, as we have done, is to view the story after it occurred, as a final product. But we can also “live” the narrative as it flows in the course of events, as though we did not know the final outcome. Making this kind of approach, we discover that the prayer of thanksgiving slows down the pace of the story and delays the revelation of the secret.

But more than anything, this delay—this taking time to thank and praise God—reveals Daniel’s character and intimate connection with God. Common sense would have prompted him to appear before the king immediately to save his life. He could not know beforehand how Nebuchadnezzar would react when he learned his kingdom would *not* last forever. Yet, Daniel paused to pray and praise. Is this a lesson for us? Not always knowing the outcome, not always sensing the assured presence of God, should we not pause and praise Him for His promised assurances as well as for His future victory?

Other comparisons. We will compare Daniel’s expression in verse 21 with two other references in the book. In this verse, Daniel acknowledges that God “changes [šena’] times and seasons [zeman]. He removes [‘adah] kings and installs [qûm] kings.”

The theme is an important one in the book. It finds a climax in the description of “the little horn” about which it is said: “He intends to change [šena’] times [zeman] and law [dat] (7:25).” So what “the little horn” attempts is to put itself in the place of God in changing the times.

But I suggest that the story about Daniel in the lion’s den (chap. 6) gives yet another link to the interpretation about the horn (7:25). This is but one example of how the stories enlighten the visions. The struggle in the narrative of chapter 6 concerns laws for worship. The enemies of Daniel express their belief that they will not be able to find any reason for attacking Daniel, unless they can do so regarding “the law [dat] of his God (6:6).” In contrast to this genuine religion, the Medes and Persians establish laws that cannot be “altered [šena’]”. . . “laws [dat] which cannot be repealed (‘adah)” (6:9). As said a little later, “No decree that the king issues [qûm] can be changed [šena’] (6:16).”

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The verbal and thematic links between the prayer in chapter 2, the story in chapter 6, and the climactic vision in chapter 7, help us to understand how the attack by “the little horn” on the Lord and Creator centers upon time and the divine law for worship.

The Prayer of Confession (Dan 9:4-19)

Since the content and context of this prayer is generally known, I will note just three features:

1. The Historical Setting. The background of the prayer is related to the vision and its explanation in chapter 8. The three first elements of that vision—ram, goat, and the little horn—had already been explained by Gabriel (8:20-25). The auditive element, that is, the conversation between the heavenly beings regarding time (8:13-14) had not been explained, however. On the contrary, the remarks by Gabriel about this point seemed cryptic (8:26). Daniel’s deep worry that prompted his study of prophetic time in the Book of Jeremiah should be seen against this background. This is generally recognized by Adventists.

2. Daniel’s Concern. Formal investigation of the prayer shows that Daniel’s underlying concern within his prayer was related to *time*. His specific petition is expressed in the phrase: “Do not delay,” (vs. 19).

3. Intercessory Prayer. Looking at the way the prayer depicts Daniel as an intercessor, we see that though he personally is innocent of the sins of his people, yet he identifies himself as guilty with them. This feature forms a link to the prophecy given by Gabriel a few verses later (vss. 24-27) in which the Messiah, likewise innocent in the ultimate sense of the word, identifies with the people through His sacrificial death “to make reconciliation for iniquity” (KJV).

The Two Prayers Compared

The two prayers have several things in common in both themes and setting. Their similarities may be seen by examining the following Tables 4-6.

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Table 4
Corresponding Themes

1. The human inadequacy before God
2. The stress on the honor of God (His name, 2:20; 9:19)
3. The importance of “time”
4. The concern with a view of history

Table 5
Corresponding Patterns in Structure

<i>Daniel 2</i>	<i>Daniel 9</i>
1. Thanksgiving	1. Confession
2. View of history: general specific examples	2. View of history:
3. Specific prayer: thanksgiving	3. Specific prayer: petition

Table 6
Corresponding Pattern of History In the Narrative Context

<i>Daniel 1-2</i>	<i>Daniel 8-9</i>
1. Sin of the people	1. Sin of the people
Leading to	
2. Punishment/exile	2. Punishment/exile
3. Apparent victory of the enemy	3. Apparent victory of the enemy
Suffering	
4. Faithfulness by Daniel	4. Covenant-loyalty by Daniel
Divine answer gives promise of	
5. Establishment of the kingdom of God	5. Redemption

Identifying some of the similar themes and corresponding patterns of these two prayers should not make us overlook their

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differences. These differences need not to be understood as contrasts. Rather, they point to the fact that the prayers complement each other. We chart their complimentary aspects in Table 7 as follows.

Table 7
Complementary Aspects of the Prayers

1. The prayers are found in the two main sections of the book: the narrative and the prophetic.

Chapter 2. Within the historical narratives we find the prayer connected with a prophecy that deals with the future. Chapter 9. Within the midst of prophetic visions about the future a prayer reviews past history.

2. The prayers are examples of the two basic types of prayer in the OT: *praise* and *lament*.

Exilic and postexilic confession of sin (like Dan 9; Neh 9; Ezra 9) is here understood as a development of the lament. Thus, the prayers illustrate the basic complementary aspects in man's relationship with God: presence and absence.

The prayers also illustrate basic themes of the book. The prayer of thanksgiving answers the question "Who?"—Who is in charge, Who is able to reveal etc.—relevant to the first part of the book. The prayer of confession or lament fits into the question "How long?" of the second part (8:13; 12:6).

3. Each of the prayers is unique in making reference to either wise men (chap. 2) or prophets (chap. 9), thereby encompassing two types of divinely appointed messengers in the OT.

4. In their view of history, the prayer in chapter 2 is concerned with the kingdoms of the world in general, while in chapter 9 it deals with the people of God (see Table 8).

No philosophy of history as portrayed in the OT would be satisfactory without both of these aspects. The prayers complement each other perfectly at this point.

5. "The Reversal of Roles." See Tables 8 and 9.

Theological Contribution

These prayers add to the theology of the Book of Daniel as a whole. We will illustrate this by a comparison of king

Table 9
The ‘Reversal of Roles’

<i>Narratives</i>	<i>Visions</i>
1. God through Daniel to the world	1. God through an angel to Daniel
2. Daniel, a wise man (1:4), understands the dreams of kings	2. People of God, wise men (12:4, 10), understand the visions of Daniel
3. The narratives are “hero stories,” and readers identify with Daniel and his friends as representatives of God’s people.	3. The visions: designate “the saints of the Most High as the people of God, and readers identify with them as they study to understand Daniel’s visions.

The importance of this reversal of roles for the significance of the theology of the Book of Daniel can hardly be overlooked. In the stories Daniel and his friends are portrayed as examples to imitate. That is how such stories function. But the appeal in the latter part of the book is made particularly to the people of the end-time. The setting in Babylon therefore provides a microcosmos pointing forward to the situation at the end of the world as the macrocosmos of the controversy between good and evil. The narrative and the prophetic parts thus combine to present a picture of the people of God at the time of the end.

Some of the implications of these observations may be seen in Table 10.

Table 10

God's End-time Faithful	Illustrated in the Book of Daniel
1. Loyal in crises	1. As Daniel and three friends facing death (chap. 3, 6)
2. Honor God's law	2. As the four young men (chap 1) and Daniel (chap. 6)
3. "Wise men" in prophetic understanding (12:3-4, 10)	3. As Daniel received insight in the dreams of kings (2:23)
4. Messengers to the world revealing the secrets of the Danielic visions to the world.	4. As Daniel revealed God's Word to the kings of Babylon.
5. Humble before God	5. As Daniel was not just pointing to the sins of all others, but identified with the people of God by acknowledging, "we have sinned" (9:5)
6. Patiently waiting the divine judgment (Dan 12:12 [Heb. Chakah]; cf. Rev 14:12 "patient endurance")	6. Illustrated in Daniel by the long time period (Dan 8); long prayer (Dan 9); long oral prophecy (Dan 11), "Waiting" is an important OT theme, not least for Yom Kippur
7. In contact with God through prayer—we have often emphasized the aspect of obedience of the people of God in the last days or put the stress on our understanding of the 'truth' in the sense of the right doctrines. Only rarely have I heard any sermon describing the people of God in the end-time as a people characterized by prayer.	7. As Daniel (6:11-12)
8. "One with Christ"	8. Clinging to His sacrifice in our behalf, prophesied in 9:24-27, and trusting Him as our heavenly representatives, the 'Son of Man' in chapter 7.

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Conclusions

We conclude our survey on the prayers recorded in the book of Daniel with some remarks about prayer in general, relating it to basic themes within OT theology.

Presence and Absence. First of all, prayer is an expression of a longing. We long to be with loved ones we have lost. When traveling, we long for the renewed company of our family. We enjoy the brief time we are able once again to converse with friends we have not seen for years. And yet, in our intense longing, or in our joy at their presence, we realize their absence and feel the sorrow. Prayer is an expression of a longing for the everlasting presence of God in the midst of His absence, a desire for His kingdom in the midst of a world of sin, a looking forward to the time when departure is no more.

Freedom. Second, prayer is a sign of trust that my personal life, as well as the state of the world, may be changed through divine-human dialogue. There is a God outside yourself. He is there. Lives may be saved by praying to Him. God may reveal His will as a response to prayers. Genuine prayer speaks against the determinism of the astral religion of Babylon just as it speaks against the impersonal, modern, New Age religion. Prayer is a sign of the belief in the freedom of man and of God. Confession, for instance, is an expression of faith in His personal forgiveness, of trust that He will remove my guilt stricken condition. Prayer is evidence of our realization that it does not help to find yourself, when you actually need Another. Prayer is our confidence that He is there and will make the final change. Prayer is trust in the reality of the kingdom to come.

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Power. Third, prayer to the God of Creation, the Sovereign Lord of History presupposes the powerlessness of the petitioner. We pray to God because we have no power in ourselves, no hope and no future without Him. We pray, because without Him we can do nothing. Nebuchadnezzar did not succeed in reaching God in prayer, not because God was unwilling to show His power, but because the king was unwilling to let go of his. Powerless and humble we bow before God in prayer, and, like Daniel we receive power to speak His Word in front of all earthly authorities.

Praise and Lament. Finally, prayer leads to worship and praise. I recently read an article by some young people who rejoiced in attending a church where there was only praise, no lament. What a tragedy! To renounce reality, close your eyes to the facts of the present world, deny suffering a place in worship, and attempt to escape being sorry for sin, and the need for confession is to miss the full meaning of prayer! But then I read another article in a youth magazine claiming we had nothing to celebrate! We were only to feel sorrow for our sin! What a pity! What a distrust in the kingdom! What a lack of prayerful relationship with God!

We are, as Daniel, to give thanks, though we do not see the final outcome; we are created to praise. In feeling His presence, genuine praise leads to the realization of God's absence in the world and to the acknowledgment of personal sin, and therefore to lament and confession. Genuine confession leads the believer to praise the God who by the cross has taken away the guilt, and has promised a new life.

To Daniel, prayer was praise *and* lament, thanksgiving *and* confession. It was a matter of life and death. So it is for the church today. So it is for you and me.