

Merit and Mercy

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, morning folks. Lovely to be with you today and special welcome to those who are joining us this morning as visitors. It's so lovely to have you with us. What a passage you have picked to drop in on. We need God's help with this this morning. If ever there was a passage that we do is this one. So why don't we pray and then we'll get into it together.

Heavenly Father, we think of the words of Psalm 119, that you would open our eyes to behold marvelous things in your word. So Father, I'm so aware this morning of my inadequacy.

I'm so aware this morning, Lord, of our limited understanding. And we pray that your spirit would come and would he illuminate these words so that we would leave this morning with a bigger vision of Jesus and a deeper affection for him. And we pray these things in his name. Amen.

Well, if you've got the passage open in front of you, let me try and get us to the big word that's at the heart of this chapter. And it's the words that gets us to the heart of the Christian faith. And it's a word that I think doesn't come naturally to us in the 21st century West.

So before we moved to Edinburgh 12 years ago, we lived in a city in the south of England called Bristol. And I remember when I first moved to Bristol, I'm a bit of an extrovert, loved to get out there, started walking around the city to get to know the sites. These were kind of before Sat Nav was popular, was trying to work out where everything was in the city. And I got to the middle and there was a statue that had stood there for years of this man in Bristol called Edward Colston.

[1 : 3 7] Now, he was one of the greatest contributors to the city's prosperity. And yet he was a highly controversial figure because so much of his wealth came from his involvement in the slave trade during the 17th and 18th century in Britain. And that's why, if you know his name, it's probably because of the scenes that hit our news screens about four years ago. Because this volcanic outcry came against this man from the local Bristolians that justice needed to be done. That this man needed his just desserts for what he'd done in history. And what they did is they took his statue, they toppled it, and they threw it in the river because this man needed to get what was coming to him.

Now, let me ask you, how did you feel in that moment as you remember those scenes? Some people might have had questions over how it was done, but I think all of us resonated with why it was done. And here's what I think it shows. The very fact that that phrase, just desserts, if you Google it, it's got nothing to do with ice cream. Actually, it's all from that French word, *desiree*, isn't it? Meaning to get what you deserve. The fact that that phrase has been around, I think, since the 15th century, we're still using it today. I think it tells us something about human beings.

I think it tells us that we are hardwired for justice. Justice, wanting justice for others comes really naturally to us. And what we're going to see, what we thought about the last few weeks, what we're going to see right at the end of this morning is that this God, right at the heart of his heart, is justice. But here's what Daniel 9 says to us in a world where we can so easily want justice on others, where we are encouraged to take on the role of judge, jury, and particularly the victim. It asks us to consider, have you ever thought of yourself as the accused? Have you ever thought about the fact that you might be, we might be guilty? And it stems from the fact that so often we make the wrong comparison, right? We play our own little game of comparethemarket.com and what we do is we look horizontally when it comes to judging morality, don't we? We think, well, I'm not as nosy as my neighbours. I think about the fact that my kids aren't as, aren't as misbe, they don't misbehave as much as other peoples do. We think about the fact that in the office, I'm not the one that gets up to all these crazy things. And yet the Bible would say, friends, that we make all the wrong comparisons when we look vertically, horizontally rather. And it tells us that we need to be looking vertically. And with that, we arrive at the difference between Christianity and every other religious system in the world. A difference that you can sum up in two five-letter words beginning with them. And we want something to hold on as we go through this. Grab these two words. See, in every other religious system, how it works is the word merit. And it's intuitively how we think it should work with any kind of God of the universe. If he does exist, that he should reward us on the basis of what we do, of how we perform, of how much effort we put in. But you come to the pages of the Bible and you soon discover that the word at the heart of the gospel, and it's the word that's draped right across this chapter, if you're looking for something to hang your coat on, it's the word mercy. And you'll notice it there. It comes five times, I think, in Daniel's prayer from right at the end, from verses 18 to 20, sorry, 16 to 20. It's the word mercy.

Of course, Jesus tells the Pharisees, doesn't he, to stop looking at the speck that's in other people's eyes. And I take it in a little bit of kind of first century comedy, he says, well, all the while you've got the log in yours. And what Daniel 9 is, right at its heart, is this man Daniel, he's owning the speck in his own heart. And he's owning the speck in the people's hearts.

And God, as he speaks about the future, here's what Daniel realizes, and I think this is what is to be drilled down into the hearts of God's people. The only way, friends, as glorious as the future is, that we can have a share in it, is as we seek this God for forgiveness and mercy.

[6 : 07] Here's Australian evangelist Glenn Scrivener, I love this. He perceives this about God's people. He says, other kingdoms would sing of their greatness, but Israel's songs were full of their faults.

So what you see is you go through the Psalms, full of their faults. Come with me to chapter 9 in, let me give you the key to unlocking the safe that is this chapter.

And the key to it is understanding when Daniel 9 happens. Have a look at verses 1 and 2 if you've got it there. This is the first year of Darius. Now that means we're about year 539 BC.

And that means two things for God's people. It means firstly that the Babylonian empire, the very people who had brutally dragged them into exile in the first place, have been defeated by the Medes and the Persians. So that's the first thing that it means for Daniel at the beginning of chapter 9. But the second thing to see, and you get this at verse 2, is that the 70 years of exile that Jeremiah had spoken about are almost up. So we're roughly about year 66 or 67 of those 70. And you see how that's what Daniel perceives as he reads his Bible, as it were, that in terms of history, it's almost time for God to take his people home. And here's what I reckon would be the real temptation for Daniel and his contemporaries at this moment. It's to think that God is taking us home because he is vindicating us in the eyes of the Babylonians. Because we are his special people, because he had made the promises to us. And it's almost as if Daniel leads himself and the people in repenting and saying that the only way we have got to share in God's future is nothing to do with our merit. And it's everything to do with his mercy. And this chapter invites us, friends, to come to this God for forgiveness.

That's what's on offer for God's people here. As we think about the glorious future, the only way that it's ours is if we come to the cross, come to Jesus and plead to him for forgiveness.

[8 : 22] And so here's the two points this morning that will take us through this chapter today. Here's the two invitations that God makes to his people. Here's the first one. And it's to take his mercy to heart.

And Daniel's a wonderful example here, isn't he, of prayer. And may God just stir in us this year prayer. A real desire to seek him in prayer. Would that not be wonderful if this was the response that we make to this today, amongst other things, that there was just a real desire to declare our dependence on our God in prayer. What we get in chapter 9 may well be the template prayer that Daniel's been praying all the way through this book, all the way through his time in Babylon, the kind of which gets him thrown in the lion's den at chapter 6. So this may well be the prayer that he's been praying for 70 years. Notice two things about his prayer, and it's a prayer that's bookended, verse 3 and verse 18. Do you see it? 3 and 18.

With a plea for mercy. Notice, firstly, this is always a great thing if you're wondering how to structure a Bible study. Think about these two things. What does the passage tell me about me and about humanity?

And what does it tell me about God? That's what we're going to do with this prayer. Notice, firstly, what he knows to be true about him and his people, verse 7. Just track with me, verse 7. Daniel says, To us belongs open shame.

We have not obeyed the voice of the Lord. In fact, verse 8, we have sinned against you. Daniel talks in this prayer, do you see it? Verse 11, about the curses which him and his people deserve. Now, what he's doing there is he's telling us that he understands the exile, not politically.

[10 : 20] He understands it theologically. Daniel's thinking in his mind there about the covenant curses that God had said he would bring on his people if they disobeyed him.

And that means that if Daniel perceives the problem to be a theological one, it means that the answer is a theological one, not a political one. Because if that's what Daniel knows to be true about him and his people, if he's owning the speck, do you see what Daniel knows in stark contrast to be true about his God?

Right, verse 4. Take these in. Breathe them in. Verse 4. The great and awesome God who keeps, and get this word, who keeps covenant and who keeps steadfast love.

To him belongs, verse 7, righteousness. Verse 19. This God, it's his right to forgive. And here's the question, maybe just a pit stop at this point.

The question to ask ourselves is, what role does repentance play in our lives? You know, I came down to Alex last night, and the kids were misbehaving.

[11 : 29] I went up, and I said, you know what, I lost my cool. And it just struck me. It was like, should that not be something that we do in our lives, just to put our hands up as Christians and say, I got it wrong.

And to seeking God for forgiveness, and then seeking the kids this morning for forgiveness as well. Friends, what role does repentance play in our lives? When was the last time that we put our hands up and said, I got it wrong?

And when was the last time we put our hands up and said, will you forgive me? Does our heart break over our sin like it does Daniel's?

You know, I always joke about my mum. Years and years, years of raising three boys, she has what we call in our culture asbestos fingers. Do you know that? She's just got this inability to be able to take things out of the oven without wearing any gloves and not feel a thing.

And our hearts can so easily do that with our sin, that we just become numb to what it is doing in our lives and how it offends our holy creator God.

[12 : 35] Can I encourage us to embrace the fact that repentance in the Christian life is a really healthy thing? Because it reminds us of the one place that we can run with our sin.

Knowing that we do not need to pretend to be sorted when we run to Jesus and run to the cross and know what he's done to deal with our sin and free us from the bondage of our sin.

But friends, when we grieve and when we lament over our sin, when we call it for what it is, when we own the speck, how have you ever thought about the fact that that longing, that this just would not be true in my life, that I wouldn't struggle with the things that I keep struggling with, is a little longing for the perfect world which we were made for.

It's a longing for heaven. When we own our sin, and we say, God, would you be merciful to us, it is a longing for heaven.

When these things will not be true, when the sin that plagues our lives will not be a thing anymore because Jesus will have banished it. Here's the key thing to see. This is the only place in the book of Daniel over your intifacts that the covenant name of God is used.

[13 : 52] Covenant name of God, capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D. This is the God who has revealed himself as the mighty warrior. The God who has saved his people from Exodus.

It's the name of the God who makes promises and he keeps them. It's the name of the God who has plans and purposes to redeem a people and bring them to be with himself. When Daniel pleads the name of the Lord in this prayer, it's him saying that our only hope is that the Lord is the Lord.

It's our only hope that the Lord is the Lord. First invitation, friends, is to see that God wants us to take his mercy to heart.

Second invitation that God makes to us here is to keep his timeline in mind. Because I think Daniel realizes as he ends this prayer and as he thinks about God taking his people back to the land, that what's going to happen is just Groundhog Day.

You ever watch that film? Was it Bill Murray? I can't remember did that film called Groundhog Day. I can't work out if the film came before the phrase or the phrase came before the film. But it's this thing about, we use this phrase, don't we, Groundhog Day, every day is the same.

[15 : 09] History is just going to keep repeating itself and repeating himself because Daniel understands that while a change of scene is wonderful, the sin in our hearts is just the same.

You know, we always talk about, don't we, in our culture about booking a holiday so that we can get away from it all. Right? As if going on holiday is going to help us escape our problems.

And it helps a little bit, don't hear me wrong. But how often have you gone on a holiday and you've realized that the problems in your mind and the regrets and issues that are still in your hearts are still there?

Yeah? I met a friend I had after university that went on a gap year to find themselves and then came back early and realized, actually, we couldn't escape the things that were going on in our lives. Change of scene isn't the answer.

What follows from verse 20 is God's answer to Daniel's realization.

[16:12] And what's going on here is God telling Daniel about what he's going to do to deal with Daniel and his people's greatest problem. And it's God telling Daniel about a greater home that he's taken his people to.

And because of that, it's God telling Daniel about the longer road that he's going to take his people on. Do you see, this God is not just after getting his people back to their homeland, as important as that is.

No, no, no. This is about this God and his desire to make a way to bring his people back to himself. And that's what God sends Gabriel to tell Daniel.

Do you see, this man who is greatly loved by God. And as we journey through this section, friends, if you get lost, keep coming back to verse 24.

Because this is what God is saying he's going to do. Do you read the phrases there? He's going to finish the transgression. He's got to put an end to sin.

[17:14] He's going to atone for iniquity. He's going to establish everlasting righteousness. That's the plan. That's what God's going to do. And that's what the number, I think, if you're freaking out at this point, that is what the number 70, 77 is there to communicate.

This number, number seven in the Bible, that's always symbolic, isn't it, of perfection. In fact, you can probably go a bit further than that and say actually it's the number that indicates perfect completion of God's rest, of God's shalom, of God getting his people to enjoy eternally his rest.

God's going to finish this work. And you say, finish what? He's going to finish the stuff that's there at verse 24. Because our God is a finisher.

He doesn't have loose ends. He will finish things. And I think where we've gone wrong in the church over the years is that we've read these verses and make no mistake, they're some of the most difficult to understand in the Old Testament.

But what we've done is we thought, I think, that this is God giving us a microscope. And what we have done is we've gone straight in there for the details.

[18:32] And what that's led to is unnecessary speculation. I think what it's led to is division. And ultimately, I don't think it's why it's there. Because this, God telling Daniel this, is not to promote speculation in Daniel's heart is to encourage him.

So this is not about God giving us the microscope so that we can zoom in. Actually, this is God giving us not the microscope but the telescope so that we can look right through down to history where God says he is taking his people.

And we can know what the future holds. And what does a telescope do? Does it make things smaller or bigger? Answer. Come on. Not rhetorical. What does it do? Oh, come on.

What does it do? Makes it bigger, right? So this is what God is doing here. He's saying, I'm going to finish it. I'm going to finish this work that's so much greater than anything you could get your head around, Daniel.

I don't want it to be smaller in your mind. I want to encourage you that it's bigger. It's not the microscope. It's the telescope that he's giving them here. And it seems to me that what we get here, if you remember that 70, how we're to understand it, theologically, what we have here, I think, is three periods.

[19 : 48] In other words, this is God telling Daniel how he's going to do this down the line in the future. And we've got a seven, we've got a 62, and we've got a one. Now, I'm no math genius, but what do those three numbers add up to?

70, yeah? So this is God telling Daniel, this is what I'm going to do to bring about the completion, to bring about the end of sin, to bring about the fact that I want you, my people, to be with me in my presence.

70. So this is how God is going to complete the work that he's mentioned at verse 24, which I think is why we need to understand these numbers, not literally, but theologically.

Now, here's my stab at it, and if you disagree with me, friends, I come at this humbly and gently, and we can thumb war it out of the back of the service once we're done, and I'm good at thumb wars, okay?

You've got three things in here, and maybe this is about God saying how he's going to do this. You've got these seven weeks to see that in verse 25, which start with the going out of a word.

[20 : 58] I think that's the moment when Cyrus, the king of Persia, says to God's people, you can go home. It's just about to happen. Cyrus says, you can go home. Cyrus may well be the anointed one that's referred to here, because he's referred to elsewhere in Scripture as the anointed one.

But as joyous a moment as that is going to be, as God's people are told they can go home, God's got greater and he's got longer plans. And then we get these 62 weeks, and this is a time when you see it, when the temple will be rebuilt, and that's going to be a wonderful, a glorious moment in the lives of God's people.

You can read about that in Ezra, Nehemiah, but it's going to happen with great opposition. Again, that's what you'll find as you read those books. People around about opposing the work that's going on.

But as joyous a moment as that is, God has got greater and he's got longer and he's got bigger plans. And then we get the one week at verse 27, and let me tell you there are more opinions on this than there are on England's shocker of a performance the other night, okay?

And here's my best guess, said with humility and respect. May it well be the case that verses 26 and 27 are to be read not in a sequential manner, but a parallel manner.

[22 : 21] In other words, 26, 27, they're talking about the same things. The same two things, in fact. Do you see how what we have here, we have this figure called the Anointed One who's going to appear on the scene, who'll be cut off, who'll make a strong covenant with many, and from there we get the second half of the one week, he'll make an end to the need for sacrifice and for offering.

And it seems to me that that is a very good description of the person and work of Jesus, who died for our sin, and who's done away with the need for the Old Testament sacrifices.

This second half of the first week, the church age you can understand it as. That's big thing number one, the person and work of Jesus, right? Big thing number two is the destroying of Jerusalem, the destroying of the city, most likely the Romans who destroy it in AD 70.

Now, why mention that? Well, this is going to completely rock the lives of God's people when this thing is destroyed by the Romans. But God wants his people to know that everything that needed to be done to deal with our sin has been done by the work of this Anointed One.

And this is why if you look back right to the start about God's justice, that this is what it is telling us about God, that God does not just sweep our sin under the carpet.

[23 : 58] His mercy is not about overlooking all the wrongs that us, we have done and are in the world. Actually, the cross is the place where Jesus bore the full wrath of God that we deserve on himself.

And that is why God is both the just and the justifier. He is perfectly just. Jesus bore the wrath of God for us, friends. That is why there's forgiveness on offer this morning for all the things that we have done.

For all the things that Daniel owns, the open shame that is his, friends. Do not wallow in your shame. Come to the cross for forgiveness. This is what it's telling you. But regardless of where you are on those weeks and it's worth thinking about these things, don't run away from them.

Have a think about it. What we need to see here is the final thing that God says needs to be done to complete all this work. Do you see verse 27?

He calls it the decreed end. When God, the righteous judge, hands all authority to the Son of Man, this figure who we've been thinking about in the book of Daniel and for whom the finishing play in all of history is of this Son of Man, banishing evil and opposition to him and bringing about God's people, being with him in the new heavens and in the new earth, the place where no more death and there's no more sin.

[25 : 22] This is the place where Jesus rules. And this is the thing that we wait for today. God's people, by very definition, we are a people who are waiting.

We are waiting on this Son of Man coming back to usher in this decreed end. And this is all because of his mercy. Not because of our merit.

All because of his mercy that he is going to bring about the return and completion of the 77s. Now, just as we close, let me help us think about what this calls us to do and how we should respond to this.

You know, a letter arrived three days ago in the post for Alex. And it said, due date for baby number four, the 1st of July.

Now, I'm terrible at birthdays, so I'm really glad if that is the case, it turns out to be on the 1st of a month. I am seeing that as a win. I'm not great on dates.

[26 : 34] And yet, every time this has rolled around, I'm remembered about what it is to wait on the next one. Right? And I say this, this is the whole pregnancy journey and I say this with sensitivity because I know for many of us this has been a painful experience.

And we want to be a church that speaks about these things. Happened to us before Chloe was born. It's really painful. But all of this is to say the pregnancy journey. What happens? You find out you're having a baby.

And what happens next is you look forward to what? The 12-week scan. And once you get to the 12-week scan, what's the next thing on the horizon? It's the 20-week scan. And after the 20-week scan, what happens to you is you start thinking about the day when this is going to be completed.

Waiting. And the thing about waiting is it's never a passive thing, is it? It's what you do as parents, isn't it? It's about this thing that we call nesting. Right? Get the cot, get the changing table, get the sous de creme, make sure it's all in, get the overnight bag.

We know what it is to prepare ourselves for the next big thing. And it totally changes how you wait. It's not about kind of waiting for a bus and twiddling your thumbs, refreshing your phone to see when this bus is going to come.

[27 : 50] Waiting in the Bible is always an active thing. It's about trust, it's about hope, and it's about expectation. And what God is giving us here is the next big thing.

The next big thing, friends, is for Jesus to return. Like we've been singing about, and bring in this new heavens and the new earth.

How do we respond to his mercy? Well, I love, and this is where we're going to finish, what Paul says in Romans 12, 1 and 2. In view of God's mercy, what do we do? We offer our bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and pleasing to God.

That is our true and proper worship. And here's Stephen McAlpine. He's written a great book called Future Proof. And I read this quote recently. I thought this is bang on the money.

We finish with this. He says this, we need a deep conviction that King Jesus is calling us to a holy, patient life. of remembrance.

[28 : 58] A deep interest in and commitment to our eschatological hope, I mean, the future, right, is not defined by the end time charts we embrace or the prepper bunkers we own, but by godly lives of hope centered around the total victory that Jesus will bring his people.

let's just finish by corporately praying this together. And these are great things that the church have done down the ages. Just use these prayers, prayers of confession and repentance, but also of assurance about who our God is and what he's done.

So just thought it would be great off the back of today just to pray this together and then we'll close our service by singing. So just on my lead, if you want to pray this, let's do it together. Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide and too deep to undo.

Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment.

Free from a past that we cannot change, open to us a future in which we can be changed and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image through Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

[30 : 30] Amen.