

Receiving Understanding

Breakthrough Praying:

Daniel 10:1-14

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What hinders your understanding? What prevents you from comprehending situations and God's will? Are confused where to turn in your marriage or parenting? Do you face difficult job decisions? Are you wondering, "Is this the woman or man God wants me to marry?" How will you know? What about the next step after you complete your current schooling? Two questions frequently punctuate our lives: *what now* and *what next*? When we answer them, we rarely have complete information. How do we know the right path, the will of our Father?

The Bible is filled with people making the right decisions, taking God's path after they receive understanding through prayer. King David gained understanding about how to end a three year famine after prayer (2 Samuel 21:1). King Jehoshaphat learned how to face an enemy after he fasted and prayed (2 Chronicles 20:1-17). After rising early and praying, Jesus knew, at the beginning of his ministry, what opportunity to refuse and what path to pursue (Mark 1:35-39). He selected twelve disciples after a night of prayer (Luke 6:12-13). After fasting and prayer Paul and Barnabas understood that they were to go on a mission trip (Acts 13:1-3). These examples are plentiful, but I have a question. I acknowledge that God is responsive to prayer. That makes sense. But why fasting? Why would fasting make any difference?

There are a couple physical reasons that I plan to share on a Wednesday night during Lent, but I believe that the primary spiritual reason is revealed in the experience of Daniel.

Daniel was a man with enormous responsibility. The control of much of the great Persian Empire was in his hands. He recognized that God was his hope and help. God at different times had spoken to him through visions and dreams, and God had given him understanding in interpreting dreams. Most likely Daniel had another vision that he knew was from God, but didn't understand. Why didn't he understand? He expected to. As a result Daniel mourned and fasted for three weeks. He stopped eating meat, ate no rich food (sauces, pastries, desserts) drank no wine and did not use lotions or fragrant oils. Perhaps, his responsibilities did not allow him to embrace the more severe fasting that is recorded about him in Daniel 9. There he replaced his royal clothes for coarse sackcloth and doused himself with ashes. Now, however, Daniel is clean and clothed no differently, but still seeking an answer from God.

Three weeks after Daniel began this fast he was standing on the banks of the Tigris River with some other men. Something happened. Terror came on Daniel's companions while Daniel saw a man dressed in linen. The man's appearance was nearly identical to John's description of Jesus in the first chapter of Revelation (vs.12-16). Could this be Jesus? Daniel had seen earlier a vision of "*one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven*" and receiving from God dominion and from all people worship (Daniel 7:13-14). Paul wrote the Philippians:

(Christ Jesus), although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:6-7, NASU)

Paul writes that Jesus existed before he was made in the likeness of men. It appears that the divine Jesus, before he emptied himself to become human, appeared to Daniel and conversed with him. This is what Jesus said:

Don't be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer. But for twenty-one days the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia blocked my way. Then Michael, one of the

archangels, came to help me, and I left him there with the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia. Now I am here to explain... (Daniel 10:12-14, NLT)

Jesus told Daniel that the first day Daniel prayed for understanding, the first day he humbled himself in a fast, that very first day God had heard and dispatched his answer for insight. However, Jesus' way was blocked. What blocked his way? The spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia! How can a spirit prince block the way of Jesus? Do you recall the prophecy of Isaiah about preparing to receive the Lord Jesus?

Listen! I hear the voice of someone shouting, "Make a highway for the LORD through the wilderness. Make a straight, smooth road through the desert for our God. Fill the valleys and level the hills. Straighten out the curves and smooth off the rough spots. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The LORD has spoken!" (Isaiah 40:3-5, NLT)

When Jesus walked this earth in ministry, John the Baptist fulfilled that prophecy. He prepared the way by calling people to repent from their sins. The only way a spirit prince could block Jesus' access to Daniel is if he had the right or authority to do so. The only thing that could give him that right or authority is people. Listen to Isaiah prophesy to the people of God!

Listen! The LORD is not too weak to save you, and he is not becoming deaf. He can hear you when you call. But there is a problem — your sins have cut you off from God. Because of your sin, he has turned away and will not listen anymore. (Isaiah 59:1-2, NLT)

When people sin, they create a block, so that God's answer is blocked. Sins cut us off from God.

Listen as Peter warns husbands.

You husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat her with understanding as you live together... If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard. (1 Peter 3:7, NLT)

Actually, the translator missed it here. It isn't that our prayers are not heard. They are hindered. The opposing spirit given authority by the sin stands in the way of the prayer's answer. In Daniel's case it was the spirit prince of Persia. Daniel was an Israelite living in

Persia, governing Persians, and the chief demonic angel that had received rights by the sinful actions of the Persian people was saying to Jesus, you have no right to respond to Daniel's request. He's in Persia and is part of my people, drawing his life from my work. However, as Daniel prayed and humbled himself through fasting, God's atoning, sacrificial work was applied to Daniel. Michael, the chief angel of Israel, came to help Jesus. Because of Daniel's praying, mourning and fasting, Michael now could show the Persian prince that Daniel belonged to the holy people of Israel that he served, people who were covered by a blood covenant that freed them from the Persian's prince's dominion. Jesus was now free to answer Daniel's prayer. The best we know is that Daniel was pretty much oblivious to that. All he knew was that three weeks of prayer and fasting brought the understanding he sought.

I often wonder what authorities stand in the way of our prayers for insight, healing, financial help, protection and so on. Have we drawn our life from sins committed against American Indians and African slaves? Was there ever full repentance and restitution? I wonder about the sexual rebellion that became popular in the 1960s. Every word from God on the issue has been dismissed as irrelevant. Even more, in the name of sex, we sell beer, cars, cosmetics, diets, and sports. We gather as Americans to be entertained in theatres by romances that reject any fear of God or respect for his word. As a result who stands in the way of our prayers?

Jesus' atoning death can free us, but not through empty ritual. Only as we are stricken by our need, our distance and our sin, does forgiveness and Holy Communion mean anything. The words "I forgive you" mean nothing to a person who doesn't recognize her debt. Could you be defiled by sin and in debt without your knowledge? Is someone standing in the way? Are you hungry to know God's favor, power and love? Are you hungry to have your prayers heard and answered? Does his favor and grace mean more to you than food? Then why not pray and fast?