

Series Daniel

Scripture Daniel 9:20-27

When Daniel became aware of the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, he was especially impacted by the statement that “the desolation of Jerusalem would last 70 years.” Daniel had been an exile in Babylon for almost 70 years, and he immediately concluded that there could be a change in the status of the Jewish people and in the condition of the city of Jerusalem. Daniel’s response to the prophecy of Jeremiah was to pray. The first part of chapter 9 is a description of Daniel’s intercessory prayer. The last part of the chapter describes God’s response to his prayer.

Read Daniel 9:20-27

There are a lot of particulars to sort out in these few verses. The angel Gabriel appeared with a concise explanation about the times and movements of future history, but what the angel said, while informative and helpful, must have generated many questions in Daniel’s mind.

These verses in chapter 9 are very significant for us, just as they were for Daniel. They provide us with an abundance of information which helps us to understand the sovereign plans of God and the timeline of Scripture. We have already been given a lot of information about the broad sweep of history from the earlier visions in the book of Daniel, but that information was primarily about the history of Gentile powers. The verses in chapter 9 are exclusively focused on the people of Israel, God’s chosen people.

The two passages of Jeremiah which captivated Daniel thoughts were from chapters 25 (*verses 11-12*) and 29 (*verses 10-14*). Both of these texts spoke of the end of Israel’s punishment and the return of Jewish people to and the restoration of Jerusalem. In Jeremiah 29 there were statements about the plan of Yahweh to bless and prosper His people: “This is what the LORD (Yahweh) says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place (Jerusalem). For I know the plans I have for you’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (*Jeremiah 29:10-11*).

Based on the accumulated information that he had received, Daniel was undoubtedly puzzled. How could God's promise of prosperity for the Jews be reconciled with the predictions of long term Gentile domination and oppression? How could the return of the Jews to their homeland lead to spiritual and material blessings for them when they would be persecuted? How could God in His sovereignty work out the destinies of both His chosen people and His enemies?

God did not delay in responding to Daniel's prayer. In fact, verse 20 indicates that the angel interrupted Daniel "while he was speaking and praying." The angel was given the message to deliver to Daniel "as soon as Daniel began to pray."

Yahweh sent the angel Gabriel to give Daniel "insight with understanding." Daniel was to be provided insight into God's plan for the Jews, as well as insight into how God was going to work out that plan during the time of Gentile domination. In particular, Daniel needed perspective about how long it was going to take to work out the details of God's plan. Up to this point, Daniel had not yet been given as much information concerning His people as he had been given concerning the Gentiles. Chapter 9 brings God's work among His chosen people and Gentiles into better balance.

The first instruction given to Daniel concerned the matter of time. Daniel's attention had been focused on 70 years of Jewish exile, after which, he assumed, God would resume His plan of national and spiritual redemption of Israel. Gabriel informed Daniel that God was going to stretch out Jeremiah's prophecy by a factor of seven. Instead of thinking that the covenant blessings would be realized at the close of seventy years of exile in Babylon, Daniel needed to understand that a period of "seventy sevens" was decreed for the Jewish people and the Holy City, and that it was only at the conclusion of this period of 490 years that the nation of Israel would be able to enter fully into its covenant relationship with God.

The verb "decreed" in verse 24 has the basic meaning of "cut," "cut off," "divide," or "separate." Let me illustrate what the angel meant. Suppose you had a large slab of meat but you only wanted a slice or two for your meal. You would cut off the portion you wanted to cook from the slab. By using the word "decreed," the angel was indicating that a period of 490 years was to be severed from a greater length of time. The 490 years is like the slice of meat.

Up to this point in the Book of Daniel the emphasis had been on the “times of Gentiles,” the period of Gentile domination of the Jews. This period began with Nebuchadnezzar and will extend to the second advent of Jesus. It has already lasted about 2600 years. When Gabriel said “seventy sevens are decreed” for the Jewish people, he meant that God had a special program for them. The “times of the Gentiles” would continue without interruption, but in the midst of the activities of the Gentile powers, there would be 490 very significant years that would be of exclusive concern to the Jewish people.

Next Daniel was told what God was planning for those 490 years. There are six great achievements mentioned in verse 24: “Seventy sevens are decreed for your people and your holy city 1) to finish transgression; 2) to put an end to sin; 3) to atone for wickedness; 4) to bring in everlasting righteousness; 5) to seal up vision and prophecy, and 6) to anoint the most holy.”

These six items are arranged in two groups of three. The first three relate to the removal of evil. “Transgressions,” “sins,” and “wickedness” are undesirable characteristics that God intended to deal with. The second set of three have to do with the establishment of God’s righteousness. They are desirable spiritual characteristics which God planned to implement.

Let’s briefly analyze these phrases. “To finish the transgression” has the idea of “closing, shutting, and restraining” rebellion against God and disobedience to His will.

The second goal was “to make an end of sin.” The basic meaning of the word “sin” here has to do with “missing the mark” in terms of appropriate behavior in individual daily lives. It is a more general word than “transgression,” which has the sense of rebellion against authority.

The third phrase was “to make atonement for wickedness.” The word “wickedness” was one of the most common Hebrew words for sin. It referred to the general quality of being unrighteous, and can be linked to the perverted sinful nature which makes people to willfully do what is wrong.

The fourth accomplishment in God's plan was "to bring in everlasting righteousness." Righteousness is the opposite of sinful actions. Righteousness refers to correct and proper behavior — doing what is pleasing to God. The word in this phrase which captures our attention is "everlasting." Something would happen before the end of the 490 years which would introduce everlasting Godlikeness into Jewish experience.

The fifth accomplishment was "to seal up vision and prophecy." This phrase conveys the idea of completion or fulfillment. "To seal up" a prophetic statement does not mean to hide it or prevent it from becoming known. Rather, the "sealing" of a prediction means it has been fulfilled and confirmed.

The sixth and final achievement to occur in the 490 years is "to anoint the most holy." The verb "anoint" in the Old Testament meant to designate and consecrate for religious service. The term "most holy" or "holy of holies" was a reference to the temple sanctuary, which, in Daniel's time, would have to be a future restored temple.

These six items represented goals that God had for the Jewish people. Daniel had prayed for an early deliverance of the Jews from their exile in Babylon. In His response to Daniel's prayer God revealed His plan to deliver the Jews from sin. Big difference! It was God's plan to do something about their basic, inherent problem of evil attitudes and behavior.

All of these goals had been stated previously in the Old Testament. For example, the third phrase, "to make atonement for wickedness," was associated with the Mosaic sacrificial system. As another example, the Old Testament had numerous prophecies about the kingdom of God and the age of everlasting righteousness. What was unique in verse 24 was that the six goals were specifically linked to a time reference.

Verse 24 was the general overview statement of what Daniel needed to know. In verse 25, Gabriel continued with a more detailed explanation of the 490 years. He wanted Daniel, and us, to have reference points by which the beginning and ending dates could be determined. Fortunately, we can look back in time and understand Gabriel's words more clearly than could Daniel. First Gabriel focused on the first 483 years of the 490, the years of "sixty-nine 'sevens.'" Gabriel provided two main clues associated with the 483 years: "the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem," and "the cutting off of the Anointed One." The period of time which would pass between these two points is 483 years, the combination of "seven of the sevens" or 49 years and "sixty-two of the sevens" or 434 years.

Our first task is to identify the decree which led to the rebuilding of Jerusalem, with its streets and a trench around the walls. There were three possibilities, three edicts by Persian kings concerning Jerusalem. The first was issued by Cyrus a few months after this encounter between Daniel and Gabriel. The first group of Jews who returned to their homeland completed a small temple structure after 22 years of work, but they did not invest a lot of time in the restoration of the city of Jerusalem. The second decree was issued about 80 years after the first one (*Ezra 7:1-26*), authorizing the priest Ezra to strengthen the religious practices of the Jewish people. It seems that Ezra intended to repair some of the ruins of the city and perhaps the wall around the city, but he did not have the resources to do much work. The third decree was issued after another 13 years to Nehemiah (*Nehemiah 2:5-8*), who was specifically given the mandate to rebuild the walls and the city.

Our second task is to determine the closing date of the 483 years (*the sixty-nine sevens*). This would be the time when the Anointed One would come (*verse 25*). This Anointed One would be "the ruler," literally, "the Prince" or "the one who goes before." The Anointed One in the prophecy can be no other than Jesus Christ.

Possible dates which would apply to His coming would be at His birth, at His baptism, which was at the beginning of His public ministry, which was in AD 26, and His Triumphal Entry into the city of Jerusalem a few days before His crucifixion, which was in AD 30.

Bible scholars have spent a lot of time studying the technical aspects of these dates, but let me simplify the information and give you the fascinating conclusion: If we start with the decree issued to Ezra and use the solar calendar, we come up with a closing date which falls near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. If we use the decree which was issued to Nehemiah and use the lunar calendar which was in common use in the time of Daniel, we come up with a closing date near the time of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Daniel was not the first prophet to predict the coming of the Messiah, but he was the one who provided information about the time the Messiah would be on earth and how the Messiah fit into God's plans.

Now think back to the six great achievements that were to be part of God's plan. All six were closely linked to Messiah's ministry.

Gabriel had more information to share. Verse 26 states that the "Anointed One would be cut off" "after" the sixty-second "seven" (*really the sixty-ninth 'seven' or 483rd year*). This word used for "cut off" was sometimes used to describe the execution of a person, an obvious reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. Gabriel was indefinite about the timing of the word "after." He simply said that the crucifixion would be sometime "after" Jesus' public ministry, that is, after His baptism and "after" His triumphal entry, but He did not indicate how long after.

Verse 26 describes other events which will come after the Messiah is "cut off." What we have in the concluding sentences in this chapter is a description of activities associated with the resumption of the "times of the Gentiles." Remember that this prophecy was a slice of time taken out of the overall theme of the Gentile world empires. The majority of Gabriel's report focused on God's plan for the Jews leading up to the announcement that the Anointed One would be cut off. In the remainder of his report Gabriel gave information about the oppression of the Jewish people by the Gentiles leading up to the seventieth and last "seven."

First, Gabriel announced that a ruler would come, and the people associated with this ruler would destroy the city and the sanctuary. Most commentators agree that this was the event which occurred in 70 AD when the Roman army arrived to put down the rebellion of the Jews, an action which ended with the destruction of the city and the temple.

The next couple of sentences indicate what will happen after the destruction of Jerusalem. “The end will come like a flood; war will continue until the end.” Notice that the final “seven” reenters Gabriel’s explanation in verse 27. This final “seven” will not occur until after the wars and desolations mentioned in verse 26, which indicates that there is an indeterminate interval between the sixty-ninth “seven” and the seventieth “seven.” From our standpoint, it has already been almost 2000 years since the first advent of Jesus (*the sixty-ninth “seven”*). The second advent of Jesus (*at the end of the seventieth “seven”*) is still future.

Gabriel ended his explanation with the description of an individual who would confirm a covenant, and then break it, who would “put an end to sacrifice and offering,” and “set up an abomination in the temple.” We can best understand this individual if we recall information from Daniel’s visions in chapters 7 and 8. In those visions Daniel saw a king arise who would “speak against the Most High and oppress the saints,” who “would cause astounding devastation,” who would “try to change set times and laws.” This will be the person who will be judged, slain, and destroyed by God at the end of the age. Gabriel was confirming this scenario of the end.

It might have been a challenge for Daniel to shift his thinking from the near future — the release of Jewish exiles from Babylon, to events much more distant and significant. The enlargement of Jeremiah’s prophecy by Gabriel did not cancel out the truth of Jeremiah’s literal seventy years. Rather, Gabriel’s explanation helped Daniel to see that God had much bigger plans than the rehabilitation and rebuilding of Jerusalem.