

THE MYSTERY OF THE SEVENTY SEVENS  
DANIEL 9:20-27

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The study of prophecy is a challenging task. Some pastors and teachers avoid it--- because it is too controversial, or too academic, or just too difficult. In the opinion of most evangelical scholars Jonathan Edwards is the greatest American theologian who ever lived. He lived in New England in the 1700s. Some would put Charles Hodge as number two on the list. (PROJECTOR ON--- CHARLES HODGE)

Hodge was president of Princeton Seminary in the mid-1800s. One of his many contributions to our understanding of the Bible is his 1300 page *Systematic Theology*, a reference work to which I refer from time to time. Despite the size of the book only 90 pages are spent on the subject of end time events and the Second Coming of Christ. At the beginning of that section he writes, **“This is a very comprehensive and very difficult subject. This task cannot be satisfactorily accomplished by anyone who has not made the study of the prophecies a specialty. The author... has no such qualifications.”** Hodge then proceeds to simply summarize various views of end time events. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The study of prophecy can be challenging. But almost one fourth of the Bible is prophecy. The Apostle Paul says that all Scripture is profitable for teaching. (2 Timothy 3:16). We don't need a PhD to understand prophecy. It does take some work and mental discipline, but it can be understood. The Lord left us prophetic teaching not just to tantalize us or confuse us, but to help us understand information about the future. Charles Hodge's primary problem was that he failed to follow a consistent literal approach to the interpretation of prophecy. So much of it didn't make sense to him.

Of all of the prophecies in the Bible many scholars regard the passage before us this morning as the one most crucial to the interpretation of Scriptural predictions about the timing of the return of Christ and the events associated with it. So it is important. If we are serious about understanding how the Bible fits together, if we want to understand God's future plan for humanity, we will have to deal with this passage. Our text is difficult, but we hopefully can make sense of it.

Last week we considered Daniel's prayer of confession in the first part of #9. Daniel, in his early 80s, was reading the writings of the prophet Jeremiah. In doing that he came across the prediction that the Jews would be held in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. It was almost 70 years since the first of three invasions of Judah by the Babylonians had taken place. So Daniel prayed that the Lord might regard the first invasion as the beginning of that seventy year period and that He would fulfill His promise to return the Jews to their homeland. Daniel also confessed the sins of his people. In v. 19 he concluded, **“O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord pay attention and act.”**

I.

In vv. 20-23 we find THE RESPONSE TO DANIEL'S PRAYER. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE RESPONSE TO DANIEL'S PRAYER) A messenger arrives with a response from the Lord. Daniel says that while he is still praying, the angel Gabriel arrives. Daniel refers to him here as a man, probably because he appears to Daniel in the form of a man.

What we should notice here is that God responds when His people pray. Prayers are especially effective when they are based upon God's Word and God's promises. Daniel prayed on the basis of the prophet Jeremiah's prophecy about a promised return to the promised land seventy years after his people went into captivity in Babylon. That return came to pass. Daniel prayed for understanding of his vision. God answered through His messenger Gabriel.

The Lord does not always respond as fast as we might want or in exactly the way that we want Him to, but He does respond. Daniel was convinced about that. He saw significant answers to his prayers.

This week we had a challenging situation involving a homeless gal who came in from the desert behind the church. I felt somewhat helpless in knowing how to help her. Fortunately Dan has had considerable experience in dealing with the homeless. We also got help from Emergency Aid here in town to learn about an agency which might be able to help us. We were praying for direction and help. It just so happened that there was an empty bed at this facility in Las Vegas which helps to detox drug addicts. No money and no identification were required. Our young friend had lost all of her identification. She had nothing. We tried to contact her family. We got no response from them. Our friend was initially resistant, but she finally let us take her to this Las Vegas place, and she was admitted. We sensed quick answers to our prayers. She needs more of them. The Lord responds to the prayers of His people.

In v. 23 in our passage Gabriel says that he is going to give Daniel a message that comes directly from the Lord. The reason that Daniel is to be entrusted with this message is that he is "greatly loved." Literally the term means "precious treasure." It is in the plural form, which we learned last week gives an extra stress upon the quality being described. Thus Daniel is very greatly loved. Because of this judgment from the most important Judge of all Daniel is given the honor of receiving this puzzling prophecy.

What does God really think of us? If we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior, we can know that we are also greatly loved. In Romans #8 vv. 15 and 16 (ROMANS 8:15) the Apostle writes this to fellow Christians, "**For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'** (ROMANS 8:16) **The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...**"

When we trust in Jesus, we become children of God. We become part of His family. In the Roman world parents could disinherit their children. They could legally kick any of their kids out of their family. But if someone was adopted into their family, they could never be expelled. Thus it is that we Christians are adopted into the family of God. We can be confident that we are forever His. We are greatly loved by a perfect Father. He loves to hear from us. He loves to intervene in our lives according to His will.

II.

(II. THE PROPHECY) In vv. 24-27 we come to THE PROPHECY itself. Verse 24 is a summary statement of God's plans for Israel.

A.

It speaks of THE SEVENTY WEEKS. (II. A. THE SEVENTY WEEKS) Chapter 7 contained a vision of four beasts who revealed much about the future course of Gentile history. The remaining chapters of this book focus on the future course of Jewish history. It is appropriate that Daniel has switched from writing in Aramaic to Hebrew.

Gabriel says in v. 24, **“Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.”**

The first thing which we need to figure out is the meaning of the term “weeks.” Literally the term means “sevens.” By itself we don't know whether it is talking about minutes, days, months, or years. But if we remember the context, Daniel was meditating upon the 70 year captivity of Israel in Babylon. Daniel was surely familiar with the Lord's choice of this specific length of time because of the number of Sabbath years which Israel had failed to observe.

In 2 Chronicles #36 v. 21 (2 CHRONICLES 36:21) we are told that Israel was in captivity in Babylon **“to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”** The Old Testament said that every seventh year the people were to let the land rest and not cultivate it. Apparently it had been 490 years since Israel had observed a Sabbath year of rest.

Given this background it would seem that the angel Gabriel is talking about 70 weeks of years, or 490 years. No other time period would make sense in the description of the time framework with which we are dealing. The “sevens,” or “weeks,” must be referring to years. Jeremiah's 70 years involved a literal time period. It would seem most likely that we should take these seventy weeks of years as literal also.

The result of this conclusion is a pattern that looks like this. (UNITS OF SEVENTY) For seventy weeks of years, or 490 years, Israel did not observe the year of Sabbath. This disobedience resulted in God's judgment. For seventy years the Jews were in captivity

in Babylon. But what is to follow in Israel's history is seventy more weeks of years, or 490 years. During this time six things will be accomplished.

These things fall into two groups. (DANIEL 9:24 LIST) The first three have to do with the removal of sin. Daniel's prayer just before this was primarily a prayer of confession of sin. He was grieved about the waywardness of his people. It was their defiance of God which had put him and his countrymen in captivity in Babylon. Thus it is that this coming period of time will finish the transgression, put an end to sin, and atone for iniquity.

The second set of three items relates to the establishment of God's reign of righteousness upon the earth. This coming time will also bring in everlasting righteousness, seal vision and prophet, and anoint the holy place. This is something to which Daniel looked forward. That is something to which God's people have always looked forward.

From what we know about the rest of Scripture we want to figure out what event, or events, are described in this list of six items in v. 24. It would seem that atonement for iniquity, the third item on the list, has reference to the death of Christ. Some might argue that the anointing of the holy place, item #6, was fulfilled after the rebuilding of the temple when the exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. I suspect that it more likely has reference to the dedication of the millennial temple, which is described in the last several chapters of the Book of Ezekiel.

With these two possible exceptions it would be difficult to argue that the other items on the list have been accomplished. Israel, as a whole, is still in apostasy. We could not say in any sense that its transgression, or sin, has ended. Certainly the Jews are not enjoying a time of everlasting righteousness. Vision and prophecy have not yet been sealed up, or concluded.

The event that would seem to provide the conclusion for these six items is the Second Coming of Christ, when our Lord will return to earth and set up an earthly kingdom. The prophet Jeremiah, whose writings Daniel had been studying, spoke about this coming event in his 31st chapter. (JEREMIAH 31:33)

In that passage he writes, **"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (JEREMIAH 31:34) And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."** At the end of the Book of Revelation and at the end of the Book of Zechariah we find that Jesus returns to earth. When that happens, He will judge sin, and He will establish a rule of righteousness upon the earth. Israel will be restored to a position of world prominence.

B.

From what many of us can make of this prophecy the end of the 490 year period is the Second Coming of Christ. It does not take a mathematical genius to realize that it is more than 490 years since the time of Daniel. There still has been no Second Coming. Thus we need to investigate further.

In v. 25 we find that this period of seventy weeks is broken down by Gabriel into smaller units. This verse focuses upon THE 69 WEEKS. (II. A . B. THE 69 WEEKS) That period is further broken down into seven weeks and 62 weeks. The starting point is a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. The implication seems to be that after the first period of seven weeks, or 49 years, the city of Jerusalem is rebuilt. The rebuilding will include "squares and moat." Some commentators and linguists have suggested that "moat" would be better translated as "water system." That would seem to make sense in that Jerusalem has never had a moat around it. But water systems have had an important role in the history of the city.

A key issue here is the starting point for this 69 weeks. The seven weeks followed by the 62 weeks--- the 49 years followed by the 434 years. What is the decree that the angel Gabriel is describing? There are several possibilities.

The **first** possibility is a decree issued by the Persian Emperor Cyrus. In Ezra # 1 v. 2 (EZRA 1:2) Cyrus says of the God of Israel that "...**he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem...**" This decree was issued in 538 or 537 BC. There are a couple of problems with this being the decree that God had in mind. For one thing, it makes reference to rebuilding the temple, not the city as a whole, although some might argue that a larger reconstruction is implied.

But then when we add the 69 weeks, or 483 years, to the date of that decree, we end up in 55 or 54 BC. It is hard to figure out what significance that time would have in the plan of God.

The **second** possibility for the issuing of the decree is an order that was made by the Persian king Artaxerxes in 458 or 457 BC. Ezra #7 speaks of a return to Judah led by the priest Ezra. (EZRA 7:6) Verse 6 of #7 says that "...**the king [Artaxerxes] granted him [Ezra] all that he asked...**" The difficulty is that there is no mention of a specific command to rebuild the city. Supporters of this view would argue that it is implied in the text.

If we add the first seven weeks, or first 49 years, to a start date of 457 or 458 BC, we would come to 408 or 409 BC. During this intervening time we know from Biblical history that Nehemiah showed up in Jerusalem and led a rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. Some of the city was apparently rebuilt. We also have archaeological records from Elephantine in Egypt which indicate that by 407 BC another governor had been appointed by the Persians to oversee Judah. So perhaps by 408 or 409 BC Nehemiah had succeeded in leading a rebuilding effort in Jerusalem and had returned to Persia.

The end point of the 69 weeks, or 483 years, is 26 or 27 AD. Supporters of this viewpoint argue that this was when Jesus was baptized and began His public ministry. This is possible.

The **third** possibility for the start date of this decree is a time later in the administration of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Nehemiah #2 v. 1 says that this happened in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes. This would be 444 or 445 BC. (NEHEMIAH 2:5) In Nehemiah #2 v. 5 Nehemiah requests that the king “...**send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves that I may rebuild it.**” The king grants his request.

If we add seven weeks, or 49 years, to this start date, we come to 396 or 395 BC. It is difficult to know what significance that date has to the completion of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. If we add 483 years to 444 or 445 BC we come to 39 or 40 AD. Everyone agrees that this is after the time of Jesus. Initially this chronology does not seem to work.

One of my seminary professors was a man by the name of Harold Hoehner. Professor Hoehner wrote several articles and a book on the chronology of the life of Christ in which he argued that this prophecy was based upon something called a prophetic year. He points out that Israel operated on the basis of a lunar calendar comprised of twelve months of 30 days each, which works out to 360 days in the year. He also points to the Book of Revelation, which describes a seven year tribulation comprised of two parts of 3 ½ years each. In #11 and #12 in Revelation reference is made to a time period of 1260 days, which works out to 3 ½ years based upon a 360 day years.

(HOEHNER’S CALCULATION) So Professor Hoehner uses a 360 day year and calculates 444 BC as the start point. He calculates the end point as late March in 33 AD. He claim that the particular date is Palm Sunday. That would be neat if he is right. There is still disagreement among the scholars about the time of Jesus’ public ministry and the year of His crucifixion.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty with this viewpoint is that there is no evidence that the Jews ever calculated their years on the basis of a 360 day year. They did have twelve months of thirty days each. But every few years they would add an additional month in order to maintain a consistent solar year.

In Biblical history and in Jewish records outside of the Bible the Jews operated on the basis of a solar year. From what I can tell, a year that didn’t average out to 365 ¼ years over time would have been foreign to their thinking. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So we are left with some uncertainty about the exact start date and the exact ending date of the 483 years, although it would make sense that the ending point would have to do with the life and/or death of Christ. The text of Daniel #9 v. 25 says simply, “**to the coming of an anointed one, a prince...**”

C.

Let's look next at v. 26, which speaks about THE MESSIAH AND THE CITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. C. THE MESSIAH AND THE CITY) This verse says that after the 62 weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing. That expression could apply to the Crucifixion. The original Hebrew word for "cut off" is often used in the Old Testament for "killing." In our Lord's death He was rejected by the Jewish leaders, deserted by His disciples, treated as a criminal, and even forsaken by His Father. He had nothing, in a sense.

The text also says that after the 62 weeks the city and the sanctuary will be destroyed. This could only refer to Jerusalem and the temple. We know from history that both were destroyed in 70 AD. The Roman general Titus ordered that the temple be left alone. Supposedly a Roman soldier threw a flaming spear into the temple and the tapestries caught fire. In the inferno that followed the gold of the temple melted and ran down into the cracks of the stone floor. When the floor cooled, the Roman soldiers tore up the stones in order to get the gold. Since that destruction of Jerusalem the Jewish people have been subject to wars and desolations, as v. 26 indicates.

The other thing to notice about this verse is the reference to the prince who is to come. In previous studies in Daniel we have seen that the Antichrist who will dominate the world scene during the seven year tribulation period will be a ruler of a revived Roman Empire. This verse says that it is the people of this prince who is to come who will destroy Jerusalem. Indeed it was the Romans who destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. It was not the prince himself. He is still to come.

D.

Finally, in v. 27 we come to THE 70TH WEEK. (II. A. B. C. D. THE 70TH WEEK) Verse 26 describes two events that come after the 69th week. The Messiah is cut off, referring apparently to the Crucifixion. The destruction of the city and the sanctuary comes several decades later. Neither one of these events is said to happen during the last week, or after the last week of seven years. If we take v. 27 in any kind of literal sense, we have to recognize that the events described here have not yet taken place. So what happened to the 70th week?

It seems that there is a gap between the 69th and 70th weeks. (DANIEL 7 GAP) It is like the countdown for a rocket launch. The count gets close to the blastoff, but suddenly there is a hold. What puts the countdown on hold here is the appearance and the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the Jews.

The reason that the events between the 69th and 70th weeks are not described is that the focus of concern in this part of Daniel is the future course of history for the nation of Israel in the plan of God. Since the time of the rejection of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, God has turned to a new group as his instrument of revealing Himself to the world. That instrument is the church, composed of Jews and Gentiles alike.

God's use of Israel as the instrument of the revelation of Himself to the world has been put on hold. But the time is coming when God will again pick up the count. Verse 27 gives hints about what will start the clock moving again and what will happen during the last week of seven years.

Verse 27 says that **“he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week...”** (DANIEL'S SEVENTIETH WEEK) The nearest antecedent, or reference, for the pronoun “he” is “the prince who is to come” in v. 26. The people of this prince, v. 26 says, will destroy Jerusalem. So the Romans appear to be in view. They are the ones who destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. They are the legs and feet of clay in Nebuchadnezzar's vision. They are the fourth beast in Daniel's vision. A future leader of the Roman Empire seems to be the author of this agreement. We know that leader more commonly in the Biblical literature as the Antichrist.

The “many” is most likely the Jews, or at least the majority of the Jews. Apparently the covenant that the Antichrist makes with the Jews is a seven year agreement. We aren't told here exactly what that agreement involves, but we do see in this verse that the system of sacrifice has been resumed in the temple. That means that the temple has been rebuilt in Jerusalem. Perhaps the covenant has something to do with guaranteeing the Jews the right to worship and sacrifice in the temple.

Orthodox Jewish rabbis say that the temple cannot be rebuilt until the Messiah comes. He will have it rebuilt. Perhaps the Jewish elders will regard the Antichrist as the Messiah. Maybe this man will have some role in rebuilding the temple.

In any case in the middle of this week--- after 3 ½ years--- the Antichrist will put an end to the temple worship. Then, the text says, **“on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate...”** The imagery here is a bit obscure. It may mean: “Like a vulture that swoops down upon its prey, so too will the Antichrist swoop down upon his victims.” In 2 Thessalonians #2 Paul indicates that the Antichrist will enter the temple and declare himself to be God. Then he will turn his wrath upon the Jews. Fighting and bloodshed will greatly increase during this last 3 ½ years.

Ultimately the conflict will culminate in the Battle of Armageddon when Christ will return to earth, defeat His enemies, and establish His kingdom upon the earth. The Antichrist will be one of the victims of Christ's righteousness. Thus a complete destruction will be poured out upon the one who makes desolate, that is, the Antichrist.

III.

We have gone over this somewhat technical data rather quickly. I hope that you have caught the main gist of what this prophecy is describing. (THE APPLICATIONS) It is also important that we derive APPLICATIONS from this prophecy. We need to consider what practical application all of this has to our daily lives.

A.



One of the two questions which the Book of Daniel answers is this: IS GOD WORTHY OF OUR TRUST? (III. IS GOD WORTHY OF ...) This passage shows that He is. One way it does that is by assuring us that a time of righteousness is coming. Daniel recognized that his own people were guilty of great sin. But he also saw that they were in the control of a people who were even more sinful. Gabriel brought a message of hope in that he assured Daniel that his people's sin was going to be removed and that righteousness would be brought upon the earth. Jerusalem would be restored and the temple would be rebuilt. Justice is coming. In the end evil will be punished, and righteousness will reign upon the earth.

In the midst of an often godless society we need to be reminded of that message also. Righteousness is coming. Therefore God is worthy of our trust. He knows about the evil in our world, and He will do something about it. The danger is that we will become discouraged by the evil we see around us. Unborn babies are killed in the womb because they, too, often are regarded as an inconvenience. Dictators in places like North Korea and Russia and China hurt their people for the sake of their own glory and their own agenda. Evangelical Christians are ridiculed by people around us while immoral lifestyles are glorified. Marriage is redefined. People at work may cheat and lie and seem to get away with it. Perhaps I have a personal enemy in my life who mistreats me and seems not to suffer for it.

The message of this passage is that righteousness is coming. Therefore we should not give up on our trust in God. We need to hang in there. We need to keep praying, though an answer seems slow in coming. We need to keep doing what is honest and right, though others around us seem to get away with lying and cheating. God is worthy of our trust.

This passage also teaches us that God is worthy of our trust because He controls the course of human history. He told us in His word hundreds of years before it took place what would happen to Israel and its Messiah. He provided an exact timetable for key events in its future history.

Leopold Cohn (LEOPOLD COHN) was a rabbi in Europe. As he was studying this passage in Daniel, he became convinced that it was teaching that the Messiah had to have come before the destruction of Israel. He expressed his thinking to other rabbis but was rebuffed. One older rabbi warned him that he was in danger of turning out like one of the apostates in America.

That reference stuck with Leopold Cohn and prompted him to go to America. In March of 1892 he arrived in New York City. One Saturday afternoon he was attracted to a church that had a sign in Hebrew announcing a meeting for Jews. He went in and was exposed to the Christian gospel. He felt uncomfortable and left early. But he later met with the pastor who was himself a converted Jew. Leopold eventually accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Shortly afterward he bought a stable and made it into a meeting house so that he could conduct evangelistic services. That was the beginning of what is known today as Chosen People Ministries.

Like Leopold Cohn, if you too are not a Christian, you need to place your trust in Jesus as your Messiah. His death on the cross paid the penalty for your sins. His resurrection from the dead on the third day confirmed His claims.

B.

The Book of Daniel also answers the question: HOW SHOULD WE LIVE IN AN OFTEN GODLESS SOCIETY? (III. A. B. HOW SHOULD WE LIVE IN...) What we ought to see from this passage is that we could be living in the last days. The beginning of that 70th week could be very near. If we look over at Europe, we see that there is a European Union. We also read that if demographic trends continue there in several decades we could have a number of countries there where Muslims will become the majority.

In the Middle East tensions are rising. Iran is threatening peace in the region as it develops an atomic bomb and threatens to wipe Israel off of the map. Conflict between Israelis and Palestinians continues. A couple of Jewish groups are training students in the proper rituals to be followed in service in the temple. Utensils have been made according to Biblical specifications. The stage could be set for the beginning of the tribulation, the start of the 70th week.

As believers our hope is in the coming of Jesus Christ to gather up His children in the rapture immediately before the beginning of the tribulation. That hope should affect the way that we live in the midst of an often godless society. The Apostle Peter in his second letter described these truths. (2 PETER 3:14) He wrote, **“Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.”** Our focus ought to be on serving and obeying God.

Jesus Christ is coming back. It could be very soon. It could be today. The prospect of that event should motivate us to trust in God and to serve and obey Him in the midst of an often godless society.