

## HOW LONG?



Daniel 9:1-27

Tenth Message

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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Two weeks ago Sue and I attended a concert for the first time in two years: Bach's *Mass in B minor* at Stanford's Bing Auditorium. Our previous concert had been at the same venue, on March 4, 2020. That started with an announcement that it would be the last event: Stanford was canceling all events with over 150 people. Over the next two weeks the Bay Area rapidly shut down, and by March 19 the entire state was under a shelter-in-place order. On March 22 I preached to an empty auditorium.

How long would this last? We all thought it would be just a few weeks, then we would return to normal. But there were some doctors saying it was more serious. It did indeed turn out to be much more serious. We're still not out of it.

How long? When will it end? Is there an end in sight? Questions we've all been asking. Questions the Psalmist asked, as we read in our Call to Worship: Psalm 13 with its fourfold "How long?" in the first two verses. Perhaps now we have more sympathy for our kids who ask on a road trip: How much longer? Are we there yet?

Today we come to Daniel's third vision. It is the first year of Darius the Mede. The Babylonian Empire has ended, swallowed up by the rapidly-expanding Persian Empire. The year is 539 BC. Daniel, ever the faithful Jew, has been reading the Scriptures, and specifically the writings of Jeremiah, the Lord's faithful prophet who had not been afraid to confront his people with bad news from God:

**Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon...my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon...and I will bring [him] against this land and its inhabitants... This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and [they] will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.**

**But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt. (Jer 25:8-12 NIV)**

That year was 605 BC, the year that Jerusalem first came under the power of Nebuchadnezzar, and also the year that Daniel was carried off to Babylon. How long? God's disobedient people would be under Babylonian power for 70 years.

Eight years later in 597 Jeremiah sent a letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. False prophets were claiming that the exile would last just two years, then they would be back in Jerusalem: life would quickly return to normal. Jeremiah told the exiles to adjust to a new normal: long-term life in Babylon. He told them to build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat their produce, marry and have children and grandchildren. He told them to seek the welfare (*shalom*) of their city of exile, for in its welfare (*shalom*) would be their welfare (*shalom*) (29:5-7). But there was hope far off:

**When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... I will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the**

**nations and places where I have banished you... and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile. (Jer 29:10-14)**

### i. Daniel's Prayer (9:3-15)

Now the Babylonian Empire has ended. Daniel has been in Babylon for 66 years. The seventy years must be nearly up. The hope that was once far off is now close. Several passages in the OT promise that if God's people, in exile for their disobedience, seek the Lord in humility and confession, then he would remember them.

And so Daniel does exactly this. He seeks the Lord in prayer: in confession and petition. He has been faithful to the Lord throughout his many years in Babylon. He has been faithful in prayer, risking even the lions' den to keep praying. Nevertheless he identified with his people. He prepared himself by fasting, and putting on sackcloth and ashes, all symbols of repentance and sorrow. Then he prayed a great prayer of corporate confession and petitioned the Lord for mercy. This is one of the great prayers of the OT.

His prayer is not original. It draws upon the reservoir of language contained in Scripture. He had existing language to use. Often evangelicals look down on set prayers as being inauthentic, rote, empty ritual. But set prayers are well thought out.

The church has another great reservoir of set prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer*, prepared in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for the fledgling Church of England. He drew on another reservoir: a thousand-plus years of liturgy of the Western church. The Prayer Book has in turn become a reservoir from which God's people have drawn for 450 years. I'll draw from it today.

There are four major aspects to Daniel's prayer: he praises God's character, confesses Israel's sin, laments Israel's sorry condition, and petitions the Lord for mercy.

First, he praises God: "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love" (4). Later, "The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving" (9). This was fundamental to God's self-revelation. Atop Mt Sinai, after the episode of the golden calf, Moses asked God to reveal his glory. The Lord declared himself to Moses as:

**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exod 34:6-7)**

This became for Israel a credal statement about God, repeated throughout the OT. Who is Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one true God? This is as good a formulation of God as any.

Secondly, Daniel confesses the people's sin. He includes himself, even though he has been faithful. It is "we" not "they." This is a prayer of corporate confession: "we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled" (5). He repeats at the end of his confession: "we have sinned, we have done wrong" (15). Sinned, done wrong, been wicked, rebelled. This is comprehensive. But it is

even worse.

He piles on terms to express the depth of Israel's sin. He repeats sin (8, 11) and rebelled (9). He adds yet more terms. Unfaithfulness (7): we have been disloyal with disloyalty. Israel has violated its legal obligations under covenant. Four times he says we have not listened, either to the Lord (10,11,14) or to his faithful prophets who spoke in his name (6). Instead, we turned away and transgressed the Lord's commandments, his Torah (5, 11). This is as comprehensive a confession as there is in all Scripture. He doesn't whitewash, or trivialize what the people have done. He doesn't sweep it under the carpet.

We find similar honesty in the Prayer Book. In both Morning and Evening Prayer, so twice daily, the General Confession begins:

We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.

This, too, is comprehensive. Sins of omission: we have left undone those things which ought to be done. Sins of commission: we have done those things which ought not to be done.

In a chiasm that NIV completely obscures, Daniel contrasts the Lord's character with Israel's sin (7-9):

**To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us [belongs] open shame... To us belongs open shame... To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness. (7-9 ESV)**

On Israel's side is "open shame"—literally "shame of face." Shame that is openly visible all across one's face. Many of you are from honor-shame cultures, so you understand this language. This is illustrated in Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Both went to the temple to pray, but that was their only similarity. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." But the tax collector hung his head: his face was so full of shame that he could not look up to heaven as he cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

"To us belongs open shame... to us belongs open shame." Who is the us? Daniel casts the net very wide: "the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us" (7); "our kings, our princes and our ancestors" (8). Who is us? It is everyone!

Why is God's people so shame-faced? "Because of our unfaithfulness to you" (7); "because we have sinned against you" (8). In the inner pair of the chiasm, God's people is as bad as can possibly be.

Now the outer pair. On the Lord's side is Righteousness (7), and Mercy and Forgiveness (9). All three words have the article in Hebrew, so I've capitalized them. To us these might seem contradictory.

First, his Righteousness. Many think of this as a dry, legal concept, a forensic term. It is personal. God has acted rightly and faithfully in all that he has done. He has been true to his character, to his covenant, to his promises. What he says, he does. This is his Righteousness.

Secondly, his Mercy or Compassion and his Forgiveness. He has a tender heart: the same heart a woman has towards the child of her womb.

Both sides of this are expressed in the Lord's self-revelation to Moses. He is "abounding in love and faithfulness"; that is in *hesed* covenant loyalty, and in truth or reliability. He is also "the compas-

sionate and gracious God, slow to anger...and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." It is because God is characterized by Righteousness that he is also characterized by Compassion and Forgiveness. The two meet in him. He pursues restorative justice rather than only retributive justice.

Why is God a compassionate and forgiving God? Daniel gives the reason in verse 9b, but translations differ in how they render the conjunction. Does God forgive "*even though* we have rebelled against him" (NIV and others), or "*for*" (ESV), or "*because* we have rebelled against him"? Is God a forgiving God despite our rebellion or because of our rebellion? He forgives because we are rebellious.

Similarly, the evil of the human heart was grounds for divine judgment in the Flood, but also grounds for God's mercy in not repeating that act. It is because "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" that God keeps the world going (Gen 8:21).

Similarly, at the episode of the golden calf, Israel's stiff-necked nature was grounds for divine judgment, but also for divine mercy. Moses petitioned the Lord: "*Because* this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and sin" (Exod 34:9).

This is the second aspect of Daniel's prayer: a comprehensive statement of Israel's sin both on its own, but also contrasted with God's faithfulness and his forgiving compassion.

Referring again to the Prayer Book, in the Prayer of Humble Access, in the liturgy of Holy Communion, we pray:

We do not presume to come to this your Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies.

Thirdly, Daniel laments the sorry condition of people and land. The Lord has brought on them "great disaster," the desolation of Jerusalem, both city and temple.

Finally, he petitions the Lord to "turn away your anger and your wrath" (16), "to look with favor on your desolate sanctuary" (17).

Four times Daniel has confessed that we have not listened/obeyed. But he now petitions God to listen to his pleas. We haven't listened to you, but please listen to us!

Twice Daniel petitions the Lord to act "for your sake" (17-18). What do we mean when we say "for his name's sake"? Daniel has a God-centered not man-centered perspective. God needs to act for his sake not for Israel's sake or for our sake. Both Jerusalem and the people bear God's name. So God's honor and character are at stake. God has called out Abraham and his descendants to be a new humanity, to which purpose he has bound himself in covenant. He will succeed in this purpose. This is his Righteousness. He said he will do something, and he will do it. He will fulfill his purposes. Because the other party to the covenant is flaky, he will forgive and restore, so that he be proved faithful and succeed in his purposes. Now, this is to the great benefit of his people, but it is not primarily for his people. It is for the honor of God's name: that he fulfill what he set out to do. This is why it is important to hold together God's Righteousness and his Compassion and Forgiveness. These meet together in "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God...abounding in love (*hesed*) and faithfulness."

Daniel ends with an impassioned plea: "Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act!" (19). Will God hear? Will he forgive? Will he act? How long will it take?

## 2. Gabriel (9:20-23)

While Daniel was still praying this corporate confession, the angel Gabriel came to him in a vision. He said, “As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you” (23). Looking again to the Prayer Book, this time the Collect for the Twelfth Sunday of Trinity:

Almighty and everlasting God, who is always more ready to hear than we are to pray and who wants to give more than we desire or deserve, pour down upon us your abundant mercy, forgiving us those things in which our conscience is afraid and giving to us that which our prayer dare not presume to ask...

Daniel didn't have to harangue God to hear and see. He didn't have to try to get the right formula. As soon as he prayed God heard. And Gabriel was sent to enable Daniel to understand the times, to give him insight and understanding. But what Gabriel says in vv. 24-27 seems counterproductive to insight and understanding!

## 3. The Seventy Weeks (9:24-27)

**Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place. (9:24)**

Jeremiah said that God's judgment of exile would last 70 years. These 70 years are nearly up. But Gabriel seems to be saying that this is insufficient time. Both people and city need much longer for restoration: 70 “sevens.” Gabriel specifies six purposes for these 70 sevens, arranged in two triplets.

The first triplet concerns transgression, sin and wickedness. To finally put an end to them and atone will take much longer than seventy years. It will take 70 “sevens.”

The second triplet is positive. Firstly, to bring in everlasting righteousness. Daniel's prayer confessed that righteousness belongs to the Lord and Israel has none. Secondly, to seal vision and prophecy: to authenticate the prophetic vision as true. And thirdly, to anoint the Most Holy Place: to reconsecrate the inner sanctuary of the Lord's sanctuary in Jerusalem that currently lies in ruins.

It is assumed that the “sevens” are weeks, hence the widespread reference to the Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9. It is further assumed that each “seven” is a period of seven years. So, the seventy weeks are 490 years.

Gabriel breaks down the seventy sevens into three periods: an initial seven sevens, then sixty-two sevens, and a final seven, in the middle of which something happens.

Much has been written about these three verses (25-27). Yet again I am in the position of speaking to two different audiences. A few of you know a lot about the Seventy Weeks, and are eager to see what I am going to say. But most of you have no idea; you have no insight or understanding of these seventy sevens or weeks.

Many take the seventy “sevens” as a literal 490 years, divided into 49, 434 and 7 years. But these many interpretations differ widely on their timelines.

They disagree on when to start the clock. It starts “from the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem.” But which word is this, and when was it given? Is it one of Jeremiah's prophecies? But which one: in 605, or 597, or 587? Or is it a decree by one of the Persian kings? The decree by Cyrus allowing Jews to return to rebuild the temple (538)? Or the decree by Artaxerxes allowing Ezra to return

(458), or Nehemiah to return (444)? That's a range of 160 years just on when to start the clock!

They disagree on the speed of the clock. One popular view requires running the clock at 360 days per year rather than 365. They disagree on whether the clock runs continually. Some interpretations stop the clock for an extended time-out. So, there's wide disagreement on the clock.

They disagree on the two references to an anointed one. The seven “sevens” run until an anointed ruler (25). Who is this anointed one? NIV has capitalized this and added the article: “the Anointed One.” Because in Sunday School we learn that the answer is always Jesus! But this is not at all evident. Others take it as King Cyrus, who is called the Lord's anointed (Isa 45:1), or Joshua or Zerubbabel, also called “anointed” (Zech 4:14).

After the 62 “sevens,” an anointed one will be cut off, presumably by death (26). Is this the same anointed one as in v. 25? NIV clearly thinks so. But this requires combining the 7 sevens and the 62 sevens into one block. But this is contrary to the Hebrew text.

And so the problems continue. Those who interpret these verses literally have produced a large number of wildly different timelines.

I do want to detail one of these literal interpretations because it has been so influential as a core part of dispensationalism. I know that many of you have grown up with this view. It is deeply ingrained in the thinking of some people.

The clock starts with Nehemiah, then runs at an accelerated pace of 360 days per year. The two anointed ones are both Jesus. He comes on Palm Sunday, entering Jerusalem as Israel's King. But on Good Friday he is put to death, rejected by his people. The clock stops with the death of Jesus, and has remained stopped. During this stoppage God pursues plan B, the Church Age, which was not foreseen in Daniel 9 nor elsewhere in the OT. The Church will be raptured out of the earth, whereupon the clock starts ticking again for the final “week,” the final 7 years. This is the Great Tribulation. Antichrist will come and destroy city and temple. But wait, there is no temple in Jerusalem. It was destroyed in AD 70. So, the Jerusalem temple has to be rebuilt before the final week, so that it can be destroyed. This is why so many American evangelical Christians are so interested in rebuilding the temple. The “week” ends in Armageddon, which ushers in the millennium. I'm sure some of you grew up with detailed charts and timelines of this interpretation, which claims to be a literal interpretation.

Is there a different way of reading the text? Is there a way of reading it symbolically? I think there is. All the clues are given within Scripture itself, if we just allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. There are two important passages to help us.

Firstly, we note how Israel's Scriptures end. Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew canon. It ends with a summary of the exile (2 Chr 36:15-23). Because of their repeated unfaithfulness, God gave his people over to Nebuchadnezzar who took them into exile in Babylon, where they served him until Persia came to power. During this period the land enjoyed its sabbath rests for 70 years. At the end of the 70 years King Cyrus of Persia proclaimed that God had appointed him to rebuild his temple. God's people could go home, and “may the Lord their God be with them.” Thus ends the Hebrew Bible. The reason for 70 years of judgment is so that the Land can enjoy its long-overdue rest. The decree by Cyrus is a liberation for the people from slavery to Babylon. They are free to go back home.

The other passage is Leviticus 25-26. Can anything good come



out of Leviticus?!! These two chapters teach us how to count. First, the Sabbath Year (25:1-7). The land was to work for six years then rest for a year. Next the Jubilee Year (25:8-55). After seven sabbath cycles, that is 49 years, in the fiftieth year people in slavery were restored to freedom. God provided both land and people with a periodic reset. Chapter 26 contains warnings of punishment for disobedience. Four times Israel is warned that if it persists in not heeding the Lord, he will punish their sins seven-fold (26:18, 21, 24, 28).

This is sufficient to construct a symbolic timeline. The seventy years of exile was God's judgment on his people for their sin. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests, suggesting that for 420 years it had been denied rest. By the end of the exile Israel the Land was restored and ready for work again. But 70 years was not enough to restore Israel the People. God imposed seven-fold judgment: 70 sevens. But this period is also ten jubilee cycles. The first period of 7 sevens is one jubilee cycle, which is also the exile, ending in freedom as Cyrus allowed Israel the People to go home to Israel the Land. The people had been freed from slavery to Babylon. But it was only a limited freedom. The completion of Israel's seven-fold judgement is also the completion of the tenth jubilee cycle. So the expectation is of a grand Jubilee, a proclamation of freedom for the people. But just before that liberation the final seven is a dark time. As I covered last week, the darkest and coldest hour of the night is just before dawn.

This interpretation shows that God cares about both Land and People. Both needed restoration. The sabbath years were for the Land. The jubilee years were for the People. The exile restored the Land. But it takes sevenfold to restore the People in a grand Jubilee.

In Luke's telling of the story of Jesus, after he had been baptized and filled by the Spirit, and had faithfully passed the test in the wilderness, his first act was to speak in the synagogue in Nazareth. He quoted Isaiah 61:1-2.

**“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,**

**to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)**

Then he said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”  
The Jubilee has arrived in Jesus!

But Jesus was rejected and killed. It was the darkest hour. But it was also the finest hour as a human being finally fulfilled the human side of the covenant. There finally was a loyal, faithful partner. Jesus did what both Adam and Israel had failed to do. For this he was killed by a rebellious humanity. The darkest hour of all was killing the one true faithful human, the only loyal one. God vindicated him in resurrection. Then, amazingly, God spreads his arms wide and bids all come and find forgiveness in Jesus. Because he is a compassionate and forgiving God. He invites all to come and enter into his Jubilee. To find liberation from bondage and slavery to sin.

We have seen that sin is dark. It is much worse than we thought. You may feel deep shame, that your sin is a burden too heavy to bear. But, secondly, we have seen that God's character combines his righteousness with his compassion and forgiveness. They meet together in him and supremely in Christ Jesus.

God has a purpose: a purpose for the world and a purpose for people. He has created the world as an expression of his love, to be a vehicle for his glory, and to be the place where he dwells with his people. He has created people in his image to represent him in the world. And to ultimately be his people over whom he spreads his glory, drawing us into his eternal glory. He accomplishes this in Christ Jesus. And ultimately there will be a new heavens and a new earth, in which he dwells with his people. God will be faithful to his intentions for both world and people. This is his righteousness.

Thirdly, we have seen that God is abundantly ready to hear our prayer when we cry out, “Lord, have mercy.” He responds in compassion and forgiveness, because this is who he is. He restores because he is a righteous God. He invites us into freedom, in Christ Jesus. He invites us into his Jubilee.

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