

# Seventy Weeks and the Messiah's Coming

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Daniel 9:24–27  
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Last Sunday, we looked at Micah's prophecy that foretold *where* Jesus would be born, viz., in Bethlehem of Judah. The Savior's birth in this small town showed both his humility and his descent from King David.

Today, we want to turn our attention to *when* the prophets said Jesus would be born. Do they actually give us a date? The answer is, 'Yes, but it takes a little more work to see it.' Actually, they told us when Jesus would be crucified. We then take that date and work backward to get the date of his birth.

The key passage for this information is Daniel 9:24–27. Now, as soon as I mention Daniel, we have a problem. His prophecies — not just those that are specifically about Jesus, but also those that tell of the great world powers leading up to Jesus — are so specific that even unbelievers can't ignore them. They usually deal with them by claiming that Daniel wrote history, not prophecy. They say he lived in the second century BC after the events he wrote about, and not in the sixth century BC before they happened. Yet, they also claim Daniel wrote as if he lived earlier only because he wanted to give a prophetic flavor to his book, to give it more credibility. There's no evidence for any of this, but they know that it's the only way to avoid acknowledging that Daniel predicted things that took place several hundred years after he lived.

As Bible-believing Christians, we don't have a problem with predictive prophecy. Our God governs the world and everything in it. He certainly knows what he's going to do before he does it. Acts 15:18 says, *Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.* And further, we take Scripture at its word. The time references in Daniel clearly show that he lived during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, i.e., in the sixth century before Jesus was born.

## Daniel's Seventy Weeks

Regarding today's text, Calvin wrote, "This passage cannot be understood otherwise than of the advent of the Messiah." In fact, the coming of Jesus is so clear in it that many have called it "the backbone of prophecy." There's a lot we could say about it. If I were teaching the book of Daniel in a Bible study, I would spend several weeks on the few verses we're looking at now. But today, my only

goal is to highlight what Daniel wrote about the coming of Jesus. We'll leave most of what Daniel wrote untouched.

Let's first consider the number seventy. Verse 24 says, *Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy.* Interestingly, though, the original Hebrew doesn't say, *Seventy weeks*, but 'seventy groups of seven.' Groups of seven could be weeks, depending on the context, since a week is by definition a group of seven days, but they don't have to be weeks. The important thing is not weeks but how the Bible deals with groups of seven.

I believe the key to understanding this is Leviticus 25:8, which says, *And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years.* Here the Lord told his people how to count to the year of Jubilee. They were to count sabbath years. Sabbath years were observed every seventh year; during these years, the land rested. Seven sabbath years equals forty-nine calendar years. After seven sabbath years, God's people were to return land to its original owners, set slaves free, and cancel debts. Thus, the year of Jubilee was a celebration of liberty and restoration, as well as rest.

Years later, when God's people disobeyed him in the days of Jeremiah, he chastened them by calculating the sabbath years differently — no longer seven times seven, but seven times ten. During this time, they would have no rest. Instead, they would *serve the king of Babylon* (Jer. 25:11), after which the Lord promised to punish the king of Babylon.

Daniel lived during this seventy-year period and was well aware of Jeremiah's prophecy. In fact, he explicitly mentioned it earlier in chapter 9. Daniel 9:2 says, *In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.* But Daniel had a problem: he didn't know how to count the years. When had they begun? When would they end? So, he asked the Lord to show him. God answered his prayer by sending the angel Gabriel with a new prophecy — one that didn't cancel Jeremiah's original prophecy (the exile would still end after seventy years) but added to it. The new prophecy concerned another group of seven — seventy of them, to be exact. Seventy sabbath years equals 490 calendar years, making this the biggest group of sevens yet. Calvin commented on it as follows:

Sorrowful darkness has brooded over you [God's people] for seventy years, but God will now follow up this period by one of favour of sevenfold duration, because by lightening your cares and moderating your sorrows, he will not cease to prove himself propitious to you even

to the advent of Christ. This event was notoriously the principal hope of the saints who looked forward to the appearance of the Redeemer.

Now, to understand Daniel's prophecy, we have to consider its three divisions. First, we have seven groups of seven or forty-nine years, similar to the year of Jubilee. According to verse 25, this represents the time between the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and Messiah the Prince. The Persian king Artaxerxes issued the decree to rebuild Jerusalem in 458 BC, which, according to the seventh chapter of Ezra, took place in the seventh year of his reign (vv. 12–26). Forty-nine years later, the walls and streets of Jerusalem were rebuilt and its moat was filled, just as our text says: *The street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.* Messiah the Prince came to his people by guarding and protecting them.

Second, after the seven groups of seven, there would be another sixty-two groups of seven. When we add these together, we have sixty-nine groups of seven or 483 years. This is the amount of time between the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the Messiah being cut off. Four hundred and eighty-three years take us to AD 26, which is the year Jesus began his ministry. I believe this is what verse 26 means when it says that the Messiah will be cut off. When he began his work, the Jewish leaders almost immediately turned against him.

And third, following this, the Messiah will confirm the covenant for one more week, and in the middle of this week, he'll end sacrifices. The book of Hebrews says repeatedly that Jesus ended animal sacrifices by his death on the cross. Of course, the Jews continued to offer sacrifices for another forty years afterward until the temple was destroyed, but their sacrifices no longer had any meaning. Jesus' death in the middle of the seventieth week reduced them to empty ceremonies. This puts Jesus' death in AD 29 or 30.

So, how do we get Jesus' birth from all this? It's clear in Daniel's prophecy that the Messiah would function as a priest. Verse 24 says that he would *finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy.* And verse 27 adds that he would end the ineffectual sacrifice of animals. In the Old Testament, the Levites, which included the priests, began their work at thirty years of age. Numbers 4:3 says, *From thirty years old and upward even until fifty years old, all that enter into the host, to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation* (cf. vv. 39, 43 and 47). If we subtract thirty years from AD 26, when the Messiah, according to Daniel, would begin his ministry, we have a birthdate for Jesus of approximately 5 BC. We know from other sources that our calendars are off by about this much. And further, Luke 3:23 says that Jesus began his ministry when he was *about thirty years of age.*

## The Fullness of the Time

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul wrote that Jesus came in *the fulness of the time*. Galatians 4:4–5 says, *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. The fulness of the time was the time appointed for Jesus to come into the world to be made of a woman, made under the law.*

The timing of Jesus' birth is important because of the mission he came to accomplish. He wasn't born like every other baby. Rather, he came to redeem us from our sins. Redeem means to buy back. There's a story of a little boy who made a sailboat. He worked very hard on it, and when it was finished, he took it to the lake to test it. Unfortunately, a strong wind blew it out into the lake where he couldn't retrieve it. A few weeks later, he saw his boat in a store window. He told the owner what had happened, but the owner wouldn't let him have the boat without paying for it. So, he ran home, took all the money out of his sock, and returned to buy it. As he was leaving the store with tears in his eyes, he exclaimed, "Now you are doubly mine; first I made you, and now I've bought you."

This illustrates what it means to buy something back. Like the little boy and his boat, the Lord made us and then he bought us back. But the story misses a key element. Jesus didn't redeem us with silver or gold, but with his precious blood. That's what it cost him to adopt us as sons. That's what it took to finish the transgression, make reconciliation, and give us everlasting righteousness. It took our Savior's accursed death on the cross to satisfy for all our sins. Paul wrote, *Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree* (Gal. 3:13). By his Holy Spirit, he also gave us liberty — the ability to live before him in godly fear. The apostle wrote again, *For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another* (Gal. 5:13). Augustus Toplady, an Anglican pastor and hymnist, wrote about this twofold redemption in "Rock of Ages." He put it like this: "Let the water and the blood, From thy riven side which flow Be of sin the double cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r." The Lord Jesus took our nature upon himself to redeem us from the sin that made us guilty before God and the punishment we deserve.

Daniel compared the seventy years of Jeremiah with the seventy groups of seven to show how much greater God's grace is than his judgment. The exile lasted only seventy years, but God's people would experience redemption for seventy times seven years until the Messiah came and took away their sins.

What amazing compassion the Lord had for his people of old, extricating them from the heaviest consequences of their sin and replacing their misery with help and comfort! His redemption highlights the awesome contrast between what the people had a right to expect and what God actually gave them. It's all grace. And it's the same grace he gives us today.

Today's text shows that the Lord works all things according to his eternal and unchangeable plan. He revealed some things to his people and kept other things to himself. But one thing he revealed that we shouldn't miss is that today is the day of salvation. Today is when we should call on the Lord — not Tuesday or next Sunday, not even a year from now. Today. As one commentator noted, this is not an endless day. So, do it right away!

Our text also shows that the Lord does more for us than we think or ask. Daniel prayed for the end of the captivity, but God sent Gabriel instead to direct him to an even greater redemption in Jesus Christ. We can never outdo God. We can only stand in awe at all the wonderful things he's done and continues to do for everyone who believes in his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord's mercy also teaches us to be merciful. When Jesus' disciples asked him how often we should forgive those who are truly repentant, he said, *Until seventy times seven* (Matt. 18:22). We must imitate the generosity of God's grace.

But you have to believe. Put your trust in Jesus, who came in the fullness of time to redeem you from all your sins. Amen.