

Daniel 9:1-25a

Introduction

Last week we looked at Daniel's prayer in Daniel chapter nine, and we looked at it—in a sense—out of context. That might sound like a bad thing to do, but there are important principles we can draw from this prayer and then apply to our own practice of prayer. Last week, we looked at this prayer as a model for us. This week, we're going to look at Daniel's prayer *in the light* of its context and see in this light that there's a very real sense in which it's a prayer we no longer pray – because it's already been finally answered, once and for all.

I. Daniel 9:1–3a — In the first year of Darius [539 B.C.] the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

II. The true burden of Daniel's prayer

What is it that Daniel is longing for? The end of exile. That's the theme of Daniel's prayer. But more than that, we have to remember that this promised return from exile was *closely connected* in the prophets with a New Covenant – with the pouring out of God's Spirit on His people and the glorious arrival of Messiah's kingdom (cf. Isa. 11:10-12:6; Jer. 31:Ezek. 20:40-44; 36:24-32; 37:21-28). Watch for this connection in Jeremiah chapter 31:

- Jeremiah 31:10, 12, 23, 31, 33-34 — He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock... They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more... Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... 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. 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.

That was in Jeremiah, perhaps some 60 years before Daniel prayed this prayer. Thirty-two years before Daniel prayed this prayer, the Lord spoke through the prophet Ezekiel (who was living with Daniel in exile):

- Ezekiel 36:24–28 — I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from

your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Can you see that when Daniel prays for the end of exile, he's praying for more than just a return to the land – a return to life as it was before? He's praying for the spiritual renewal and re-creation of God's people – for the forgiveness of all their sins and the writing of God's laws upon their hearts. The whole point of a return from exile is Messiah's kingdom; "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). The key to understanding Daniel chapter nine is understanding the heart of Daniel and the burden of his prayer as he longs for the end of exile and for all that the end of exile would ultimately mean for God's people.

III. "After seventy years are completed"

Daniel had no doubt been praying for these things all along, but now something has happened that causes him to pray with all the more intensity and earnestness. Babylon has fallen to the Persians. Darius is now "king over the realm of the Chaldeans." Daniel says two times: "In the first year of Darius... in the first year of his reign..." It was about 67 years earlier, in the very year that Daniel (then about 15 years old) was taken into exile from Judah to Babylon, that God had declared through the prophet Jeremiah:

□ Jeremiah 25:11–14 — This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD.

It was some twelve years later (593 B.C.?), after a second wave of exiles had been deported to Babylon (597 B.C.), that Jeremiah wrote in a letter sent from Judah to the exiles in Babylon:

□ Jeremiah 29:10–14 — Thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

These are the passages in Jeremiah, among others, that Daniel had been reading. So can you imagine how his heart must have been filling with hope? It wasn't until almost 20 years after Daniel was deported to Babylon that Jerusalem and the temple were finally destroyed and the last major wave of exiles was deported in 586 B.C. We read about this in 2 Chronicles 36.

□ 2 Chronicles 36:20–21 — [Nebuchadnezzar] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah... to fulfill seventy years.

The point, here, isn't that the seventy years of exile began in 586 B.C. (they had already begun 20 years earlier); the point is that this last deportation was an important part of bringing about the fulfillment of the seventy years. So if the seventy years of exile and serving the king of Babylon began with the first deportation in 605 B.C., then when did these seventy years end? The Chronicler goes on to write:

- 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 — Now in the first year of Cyrus [or, Darius] king of Persia [in 539 B.C., the very *same* year that Daniel prayed this prayer], that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.’”

Cyrus issued this decree “[*in order*] that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.” So the seventy years didn't necessarily end at the exact time that this decree was issued. It was possibly a year later in 538/537 B.C. (68-69 years after the start of the exile) that the first group of Jews returned from Babylon to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua.

IV. The meaning of “seventy years”

Now maybe somehow the dates could work out to exactly seventy years, but do you think it really matters if they don't? Seventy is an approximate, rounded number (cf. Isa. 23:15-17 & Ps. 90:10). But there's more to it than this. Why doesn't God say that the exile will last seventy-one years? Or, why not choose to have the exile last sixty-nine years?

We've already seen in Daniel how the numbers “7” and “10” are both numbers that represent completeness. So it's easy for us to see how seven tens, or ten sevens, would represent the same thing (cf. Zech. 1:12-17). In Genesis 46, Moses seems to selectively choose who he includes in the genealogy of Jacob so he can arrive at the number seventy (Gen. 46:27; cf. Hamilton). The table of nations in Genesis 10 also seems to have been selectively put together to arrive at the number seventy. In Exodus (24:1, 9), in Numbers (11:16, 24-25), and in Ezekiel (8:11) we read about seventy elders of Israel (cf. Judges 1:7). We read in Genesis, and then in Matthew:

- Genesis 4:24 — If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is *seventy*-sevenfold.
- Matthew 18:22 — Jesus said to [Peter], “I do not say to you seven times, but *seventy*-seven times.

So what's the big deal about “seventy years” in exile? We read in 2 Chronicles 36:

- 2 Chronicles 36:20–21 — [Nebuchadnezzar] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him... **until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.**

In Israel, in addition to the regular weekly Sabbath, there were also *special* “Sabbath” days and even Sabbath years. Any day of “rest” for the sake of a religious assembly or festival could be called a “sabbath” (even if it wasn’t Saturday; cf. Lev. 16:29-31; 23:27-32) because *sab-bat* just means “rest.” On the other hand, the Sabbath was especially associated with the *seventh* day of the week (Saturday) or with every *seventh* year because it was **on the seventh [se-ba] day** that the Lord **rested [sa-bat]**. Remember that the goal of creation was for God’s people to enter into God’s own eternal Sabbath rest (cf. Gen. 2:1-3; Heb. 3:7-4:13). It was as a constant reminder of this eschatological goal that Israel’s entire calendar was built around the concept of *sab-bat* (Sabbath). The week was structured around the Sabbath, the annual festivals were built around the Sabbaths, and even the passing years were oriented around the concept of Sabbath.

□ Leviticus 25:1–4 (cf. Exod. 23:10-11) — The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the LORD. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the LORD.

Even the land in which Israel lived was to participate in Sabbath rest. This was just another way of pointing Israel to the true Sabbath rest that God’s people would one day inherit by faith and that even the land and the creation itself would one day enjoy with them (cf. Rom. 8:22-23; Isa. 35:1-10; 65:17-25; Rev. 21:1). Can you see, now, why it was so appropriate that the Sabbath should be the sign of God’s covenant with His people and why to break the Sabbath was to break the covenant itself (cf. Exod. 31:16; Isa. 56:6)? To break the Sabbath was to scorn not just God’s laws (cf. Isa. 56:1-2) but also the promise and hope that God had set before His people.

So what would happen if Israel failed to give the land its Sabbath rest once every seven years? God warned that He would enforce that Sabbath rest for the land by removing the people from out of the land and sending them into exile.

□ Leviticus 26:34–35 (cf. 26:43) — Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it.

Even Israel’s exile was something that should have pointed them to the eschatological hope of Sabbath rest. *Why* were they in exile? So the land could enjoy its Sabbath rest. *Why* were they in exile *for seventy years*? So the land could enjoy *all* of its Sabbath rest. The point isn’t that Israel had skipped exactly 70 of the approximately 120 sabbath years since the days of Moses. The point is that the number seventy symbolizes the completeness of this Sabbath rest for the land and therefore the completeness of Israel’s exile from the land.

In Israel, every seventh Sabbath year – or every seven times seven years (every forty-nine years) was followed by the year of Jubilee.

- Leviticus 25:8–12 — You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee.

The year of Jubilee was the ultimate “Sabbath rest” in Israel’s calendar. The weekly Sabbaths and the annual Sabbath festivals were all crowned by the Sabbath year every seventh year, and then every *seventh Sabbath year* was crowned by the most wonderful and joyful “Sabbath” of all, the year of Jubilee. This was the year that “liberty” was “proclaimed” throughout the land. The Jubilee year began on the Day of Atonement and was marked by the sounding of a loud trumpet throughout all the land. The Hebrew word for “Jubilee” is *yo-bel*, which is also the word for the ram’s horn that was used in ancient Israel as a trumpet (cf. Exod. 19:13; Josh. 6:4-13). So perhaps we could say that the Jubilee was the year of the sounding of the trumpet. It was the year of release – the most wonderful and joyous Sabbath of all.

Coming back now to Daniel, seventy sabbath years results in a total of 490 years – or *ten* Jubilees. So in essence, the land was making up for the Sabbath years of *ten* missed Jubilees. And once again, the point isn’t the literal number “ten,” but the completeness of this Sabbath rest for the land and therefore the completeness of Israel’s exile from the land. Can we appreciate a little more fully, now, these words?

“In the first year of Darius... I, Daniel, perceived in the books *the number of years* that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, *namely, seventy years*. Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.”
Can we appreciate and even identify, ourselves, with the longing and the expectation in Daniel’s heart?

V. The true burden of Daniel’s prayer – “Take 2”

This prayer that Daniel prays is a prayer rooted in the covenant. Nowhere else in the book of Daniel do we ever hear God’s covenant name, *Yahweh*. Only here in the context of this prayer do we hear His name—*eight times* (9:2, 4, 8, 10, 13, 14, 20). We’re reminded of God’s *he-sed*—His loyal covenant love—and of the fact that He is the one who keeps covenant with those who love Him and keep His commandments. And then we’re reminded over and over and over again that God’s covenant people are covenant-breakers. The people with whom God graciously entered into a sworn covenant relationship at Mount Sinai have not “just” sinned, they have stubbornly, treacherously broken the covenant (sinning, transgressing, rebelling, acting wickedly, committing iniquity, turning aside, and refusing to obey), bringing down upon their own heads all the curses of the covenant that were written in the Law of Moses. So when Daniel confesses his sin and the sin of his people and then asks God to listen to his prayer and to his pleas for

mercy, what is he really asking for? He's not just asking for the end of the exile. He's praying that God would turn His people from being covenant-breakers by nature to being a people who gladly, joyfully *keep* covenant with God so that they might always enjoy His favor. He's praying that God's people might finally enter into their true Sabbath rest—the one to which all their broken Sabbath's were meant to be pointing. He's praying for that ultimate Jubilee when liberty would be proclaimed to all God's people – when sin would be atoned for and forgiven once and for all, when everlasting righteousness would be granted to all of God's people, when redemptive prophesy and vision would give way to fulfillment, and when the place of God's temple would be sanctified and consecrated forever. The *whole point* of a return from exile is ultimately all of these things. And in Daniel's mind, all these things should be about to happen now, at the end of the seventy years. Can we understand better, now, why Daniel had such a hard time understanding the visions in chapters seven and eight that revealed so much suffering still ahead for God's covenant people (7:15-16, 28; 8:27)? It's with these deep longings in his heart that Daniel cries out to the Lord:

□ Daniel 9:19 — O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name.

I want my heart to be more like Daniel's. I want to long for the kinds of things that he longed for. We read, now, in verses 20-23:

VI. Daniel 9:20–23 — While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my plea before the LORD my God for the holy hill of my God, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, “O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding. At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved. Therefore consider the word and understand the vision.

Many of the details of what the angel Gabriel says next have been more baffling and confusing to Christians than perhaps any other passage in all of Scripture. And yet it's here, in this place, that Daniel himself finally begins to understand. Daniel says, “He made me *understand*.” And notice what the angel says: “I have now come out to give you *insight* and *understanding*... therefore *consider* the word and *understand* the vision.” It was while Daniel was *still* speaking and praying that Gabriel came to him in *swift* flight; it was at the very *beginning* of Daniel's pleas for mercy that a word went out in response to Daniel's prayer; and all this because Daniel was greatly loved. Surely the point of the message Gabriel brings in answer to Daniel's prayer is not to exasperate Daniel (or us) with things that are impossible to understand.

Our problem, today, is that we're often focused more on the details of the historical fulfillment of this message than we are on this message **as the answer to Daniel's prayer**. Maybe we should even confess that our problem today is we're simply not longing for the kinds of things Daniel was longing for. So what is it that Daniel came to understand?

VII. Daniel 9:24–25a — Seventy weeks [seventy sevens] 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. Know therefore and understand...

These are all the very things that Daniel has just been praying for. Daniel was looking for all these things to be fulfilled after the seventy years of Israel's exile. He was looking—and longing—for these things maybe even within his own lifetime. After all, isn't this what the end of exile means? **“Delay not!”** Daniel had prayed. But now God sends the angel Gabriel to Daniel with this message: Jerusalem will soon be rebuilt, even in the midst of much trouble (cf. 9:25), but the things that Daniel longs for the most—the spiritual gathering and renewing of God's people—will still be **delayed**. Israel's return to the land *after seventy years* will only be the preparation for, and a foreshadowing of, that true gathering in of all God's sheep not after seventy years, but after seventy “*sevens*” of years.

What is the meaning—what is the significance—of seventy “sevens” of years? That's ten Jubilee cycles (ten times 49 years) culminating in what? Culminating in the true and everlasting Jubilee of God's people. And so in answer to Daniel's prayer, “delay not,” Daniel is told that he must *wait* (cf. Dan. 12:13)—and that all the faithful among God's people must continue to wait—for these things that they so long to see. I'm reminded of what the writer of Hebrews says in chapter eleven:

□ Hebrews 11:39–40 — All these [men and women (Daniel among them)], though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Seventy “sevens” symbolized for Daniel the time that God's people must wait until they entered into God's Sabbath rest and the joy of that final, everlasting year of Jubilee.

Conclusion

Today, Daniel's seventy “sevens” have been fulfilled – “*already*” (cf. Mk. 1:14-15). This Jubilee that Daniel so longed to see—this Sabbath rest that Daniel so longed to experience—is what we have all entered into in the New Covenant – “*already*.” Daniel's prayer has been answered. No longer are we covenant breakers. Our iniquities have been fully atoned for, the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon us, God's laws have been written in our hearts, all of redemptive prophecy has reached its *telos*—it's fulfillment—in Christ, and now the place of God's temple has been sanctified and consecrated forever.

At the beginning of the year of Jubilee the trumpet was sounded and liberty was proclaimed to all the inhabitants of the land. That word for “liberty” (*d^e-ror*) appears only seven times in the Old Testament. Six of these times it refers to the proclaiming of liberty either in the Sabbath year (Jer. 34:8, 15, 17) or in the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:10; Ezek. 46:17). The only other time this word appears in the Old Testament is in Isaiah 61:

- Isaiah 61:1-2 — The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, **to proclaim liberty [*d^e-ror*] to the captives**, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; **to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor...**

“Today,” Jesus said at a synagogue in Nazareth some seven hundred years later, “this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (cf. Luke 4:16-21). What did Jesus come to proclaim? He came to proclaim liberty to the captives – the true and the everlasting Jubilee of God’s people. He came to bring to us the true and the everlasting Sabbath rest. These are the things that in *Christ*, and through the indwelling *Holy Spirit*, we enjoy *now*—the very things that Daniel so longed to see. Jesus said to His disciples, and He would say to all of us today:

- Matthew 13:16-17 (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12) — Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

But even as we enjoy these things “already,” we still await that “not yet” when the “loud trumpet” will sound and our eternal Jubilee and Sabbath rest will be fully consummated. The prophet Isaiah writes:

- Isaiah 27:13 — In that day a great trumpet [LXX: *megas salpinx*] will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

Do you see the imagery of the Jubilee, when the loud trumpet was sounded and liberty was proclaimed throughout all the land? But when is this Jubilee *finally* and *fully* fulfilled for us, for all of God’s people?

- Matthew 24:30-31 — Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels *with a loud trumpet [*megas salpinx*] call*, and they will *gather* his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-52) — The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, *and with the sound of the trumpet of God*. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

“Already,” brothers and sisters, “already.” ... And “not yet.”