

# “To the Lord Our God Belong Mercy and Forgiveness”

## The Sixteenth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

*Texts: Daniel 9:1-19; Romans 4:1-8*

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The ninth chapter of the Book of Daniel contains one of the most debated and difficult passages in all the Bible—the famous vision of the seventy weeks found in verses 24-27. This vision, given to Daniel through the Angel Gabriel, is often taken to be a prophetic revelation focusing exclusively on the end times. While the vision does extend to the time of the end, the focus is explaining how it—if, as Israel’s prophets have foretold, the seventy years of exile in Babylon are about to come to an end—that God will extend this time of exile for seventy more weeks. The news of an extension of Israel’s exile (a form of covenant curse) takes a surprising turn, as Gabriel now reveals to Daniel. As promised, God’s people will return to Jerusalem and rebuild both the city and the temple. How then can the people still be said to be in exile? In Daniel 9, the root cause of this extended time of exile is revealed to be human sinfulness. Because God is holy, human sin must be dealt with once and for all before the time of exile finally and ultimately comes to an end. As Gabriel now reveals to Daniel, this is the work of the coming Messiah, who will truly restore Jerusalem, the temple, and the sacrifices, but will also put an end to sin, atone for wickedness and bring in an everlasting righteousness. Although many take the prophecy of the seventy weeks to predict specific events at the time of the end, rather, Daniel 9 is better understood as one of the most important messianic prophecies in all the Bible. It foretells of a coming Messiah, who will overcome all his enemies and ours, and who will once and for all put an end to the guilt and the power of human sin. It is this covenant-making Messiah—not a future Antichrist—who is the key figure of the seventy weeks.

If such an understanding of Daniel 9 is correct, why do so many believe the passage to be a map to the end times? The very nature of this passage—with its mysterious numbers of weeks, the important themes it addresses, and the historical and doctrinal questions it raises—has provided fertile soil for all kinds of bizarre interpretations and problematic doctrines. What are the “weeks” and how long do they last? When do the seventy-weeks begin and when do they end? How do we calculate such things? Because of such factors this is admittedly a difficult passage to interpret. Much of the difficulty goes away, however, if we interpret the passage in the light of Daniel’s previous visions (especially those in chapters 2 and 7), and in light of Israel’s own history and covenantal dealings with YHWH.

For some of us, it will be hard to unlearn what we’ve been taught as orthodoxy. Many of us are very well familiar with widely-held view in American evangelicalism that this passage teaches us to expect a future seven-year tribulation period and an end-times Antichrist, who makes a peace treaty with Israel before suddenly turning on God’s people, setting the stage for the final battle of Armageddon. Sadly, this interpretation is based upon a serious misreading and misunderstanding of Gabriel’s message relayed through Daniel the prophet. As I hope will become clear, this amazing prophecy is best interpreted in light of Daniel’s prayer (the first 19 verses of the chapter, our text this morning) as well as in the light of the two previous visionary dreams; Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a metallic statue Daniel 2, and Daniel’s vision of four mysterious beasts (chapter 7). Both of these visions foretell of the rise of four great empires (Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome), and, as we will see, these visions define the time and the nature of the seventy sevens of exile decreed for God’s people, now revealed by Gabriel to Daniel.

Once we realize that Gabriel is not speaking exclusively of events at the end of time—although the vision of the seventy weeks does extend to the end times, even to eternity—it quickly becomes clear that Gabriel’s revelation to Daniel is best understood as a messianic prophecy which predicts a glorious messianic age yet to come, an age which centers around the coming Messiah (especially his person and his work), who is also the same figure who was lead into the presence of the Ancient of Days in the vision recounted in Daniel 7. In effect, the prophecy is given in response to Daniel’s prayer of repentance which opens the chapter and which will serve as our text. The ninth chapter of Daniel is unique in that it opens with Daniel taking the initiative in offering a heart-felt prayer of repentance to YHWH on behalf of Israel (vv. 1-19). This prayer, in turn, leads to one of the most important prophetic revelations in all the Bible (certainly in all the Old Testament)—a vision of “seventy weeks” decreed for the people of God (vv. 20-27).<sup>1</sup>

We will concentrate upon Daniel’s understanding of Israel’s seventy years of exile in Babylon (vv.1-2), before we turn to Daniel’s confession to YHWH of his own and the sins of his people, Israel (vv. 3-6). We will then consider the contrast Daniel draws between YHWH’s righteousness and Israel’s sinfulness (vv. 7-11), before taking up Daniel’s discussion of God’s judgment upon Israel (vv.12-14) and Daniel’s prayer that YHWH will at some point turn his anger away from Jerusalem (vv. 15-16). Finally, we will consider Daniel’s petition/plea that once again YHWH make his face to shine upon Jerusalem and the temple (vv. 17-19).<sup>2</sup>

Then, in the weeks ahead, we will take up in some detail verses 20-27 and consider the specifics of what amounts to a messianic prophecy of Jesus’ active and passive obedience (his suffering on the cross and his life of perfect obedience). The Messiah’s actions fulfill the prophecy given by Gabriel and ushers in the ultimate Jubilee. According to Leviticus 25, the Jubilee Year (every 50<sup>th</sup> year) follows after “seven times seven years” (49 years). Upon the declaration of a Jubilee Year, all slaves are to be freed, all debts forgiven, and God shows his mercy to his people. The focus in the prophecy upon the seventy weeks clearly points to the Jubilee Year, but also ties the prophecy to the eternal Sabbath (our entrance into rest in the presence of YHWH), which is why the weekly Sabbath was given to Israel in the Law (the fourth commandment), because a day of rest (the Sabbath) served as God’s chief sign to his people that the blessings of his covenant will be gloriously realized in heavenly rest (what we commonly speak of as “eternal life” and “heaven”).<sup>3</sup> So, there are a great many elements in this passage which are overlooked when it is treated exclusively in terms of an end times prophecy, and not considered as focusing upon the dawn of the messianic age and the ministry of Jesus.

As we have seen throughout the visions given Daniel, the chapter opens with Daniel giving us both the date and the setting. We read in verses 1-2, “*in the first year of Darius 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.*” There is much packed into these two verses. Darius the Mede (Cyrus) began his rule over Babylon on March 28,

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 181.

0. I am utilizing the outline given in, Steinmann, Daniel, 434-442.

<sup>3</sup> See Meredith G. Kline, “The Covenant of the Seventieth Week” in The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Oswald T. Allis, ed. by J.H. Skilton. [Nutley, NJ]: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974, 452-469.

538 BC, almost immediately after Belshazzar's death (Daniel 5). This would place Daniel's prayer and Gabriel's visitation shortly after Daniel had been miraculously delivered from the den of hungry lions (as recounted in Daniel 6).<sup>4</sup> No doubt, Daniel was very thankful for his deliverance from the lions as well as being vindicated by YHWH before all those who mocked his faith and doubted YHWH's power.

The time line here is important. Recall that Daniel had been taken to Babylon in 605 BC and the temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. This was approximately the same time in which the prophet Jeremiah had been active in Israel. No doubt, Daniel talked with many of those present and heard first hand about the gory details of the temple's destruction and the plight of the people. We do not know for sure if these exiles brought Jeremiah's prophecies with them (The Book of Jeremiah as we know it was not complete until about 550 BC), or if these prophecies arrived from Jerusalem later. But Daniel knew of them and considered Jeremiah's prophecy to be the word of God, because such writings of the prophets were regarded as "canonical" (Scripture) simply because YHWH had given his very words to the prophet to proclaim to YHWH's people. The common notion that the content of God's word was determined by religious officials huddled together in secret conspiracy is completely bogus.

It is also worth noting that this is the first time in his prophecy Daniel uses YHWH as God's name. Daniel usually speaks of "the Most High" or "The Most High God."<sup>5</sup> But since this entire chapter, especially verses 24-27 is covenantal in both content and context, this is important point to notice and consider, especially when we come to verse 27 and read of someone who shall "*make a strong covenant with many for one week.*" Most of our Christian friends believe that Daniel is here speaking of a future Antichrist making a seven year peace treaty with Israel (marking the beginning of the so-called tribulation period), when in fact, it is YHWH's Messiah who makes ("cuts") a covenant with his people, not Antichrist. Get this wrong and you end up confusing Christ's work in cutting a covenant with his people through his shed blood (v. 27) with the work of Antichrist making a treaty with Israel. This is why pointing out such details (that the context is covenantal) earlier in the passage is very important in properly interpreting the seventy weeks in verses 24-27. YHWH's covenant with Israel is a theme which appears throughout Daniel's prayer and again in Gabriel's revelation.

That Daniel refers to Jeremiah's prophecy regarding Israel's exile is utterly remarkable, especially when we consider that it was uttered in the very same year (605) that Daniel was taken captive. In Jeremiah 25:11-12, the prophet proclaims YHWH's word as follows. "*This whole land [Judah] 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, making the land an everlasting waste.*" Judah will become a ruin and a wasteland for seventy years, during which time Judah, along with other surrounding nations, will serve Babylon. Daniel and his three friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) are living proof of this, serving Nebuchadnezzar at court in Babylon. We have seen throughout our time in Daniel (and earlier in Ezra and Nehemiah) the pin-point accuracy of this particular prophecy from Jeremiah.

There is another specific prophecy of the seventy years in Jeremiah's prophecy, this one given later (597), after an initial group from Judah was taken into captivity (which included people like Daniel). In Jeremiah 29:10-14, we read the following:

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<sup>4</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 434.

<sup>5</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 435; Kline,  
<http://www.meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/the-covenant-of-the-seventieth-week/>

For 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. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

At some point—after seventy years have passed—YHWH will bring his people back to land of Judah, and will restore the people’s faith and their fortunes. This implies the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple. YHWH will turn his people back to him and away from idolatry—something we see especially in the ministries of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the prophet Malachi. The exiles are to hope for this great day when they are set free to return home and rebuild their city and temple.

Daniel has been in Babylon for most of this time (605-539 is sixty-seven years). As we know, he was likely instrumental when Cyrus (a Persian) defeated the Babylonians and captured Babylon and made Daniel one of his chief advisors before issuing his famous decree to allow the Jews to leave Babylon, return home, and rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. Daniel knew the promise from Jeremiah’s prophecy that YHWH—the faithful covenant keeper—had promised to release his people and let them return home after seventy years had passed. Daniel also knew from Jeremiah’s prophecy, as well as from the two visions given him, that YHWH also promised judgment upon Babylon. By simply looking at the calendar, there is now a sense of urgency on Daniel’s part. Babylon has just fallen. Its king (Belshazzar) was struck down by the judgment of God a short time before the events described in this chapter. Daniel knew that the end of the seventy years was at hand, just as Jeremiah had predicted.<sup>6</sup> The time elapsed from when the first group of exiles was taken to Babylon from Judah in 605 BC, until their release in 538, is sixty-eight years. And so knowing the time was near, in the prayer which follows (vv. 3-19) Daniel prays for Jerusalem’s restoration along with that of his people, their land, and their temple.

By invoking YHWH as the God of the covenant, Daniel personally seeks God’s favor in prayer. And yet as many have noticed, Daniel virtually assumes the role of mediator on behalf of his people. It is remarkable that Daniel does this since he is not a priest, yet makes intercession for his people. In some ways we can see in this (in seed form, perhaps), the future priesthood of all believers, when any and all of God’s people can intercede in prayer for others. In verse 3, the prophet tells us, “*then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.*” These gestures are the signs of deep mourning brought about by the condition of Daniel’s people (exiles from Judah) and genuine repentance (an awareness that YHWH’s people must turn from their sin as a condition of covenant blessing). Daniel pleads for mercy, i.e., that God would show his favor.

But if Daniel is to pray for his people, he must begin by praying on his own behalf. Daniel is as guilty before YHWH as anyone for whom he is praying. He tells us, “*I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, “O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules.”* In this prayer Daniel uses virtually the

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<sup>6</sup> Kline, <http://www.meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/the-covenant-of-the-seventieth-week/>

same words Nehemiah will use later, (Nehemiah 1:5).<sup>7</sup> He begins by confessing that YHWH is great and awesome. This is a bold confession that YHWH is mightier than all pagan gods who are nothing but the figment of sinful human imagination. Daniel's confession includes yet another reminder of YHWH's covenant made with his people which YHWH keeps and which includes the promise that YHWH will bless those who trust in him (showing his boundless love to them, even as sinners) and who are therefore obedient (keep his commandments). Yet, those who confess this of YHWH do so, knowing that they nevertheless fall short of YHWH's righteous demands in his law. Those whom YHWH loves, are those who confess (in addition to his greatness and faithfulness to his covenant) that they are sinners, who do wrong, act wickedly, rebel, and turn aside from God's Law. Daniel confesses that all those who seek YHWH, must trust in his promise, repent of their sins, and seek to obey YHWH's commandments.

The gravity of the people's sins against YHWH cannot be overlooked. Even though YHWH has kept his covenant promise, the people of Israel have repeatedly broken theirs. In verse 6, Daniel laments that *"we have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land."* It is the people of all Israel (all twelve tribes, and not just Judah), who together with Daniel, who have sinned, done wrong, acted wickedly, rebelled, and ignored God's commandments. In doing so, the people of Israel, have *"not listened to God's prophets,"* whom YHWH has repeatedly sent to call his people to repentance. It is the prophets, who, in effect, bring the indictment from YHWH and the heavenly court to the covenant breakers, the people of Israel. By rejecting the prophets whom YHWH has sent, and in not repenting for their sins, the people of Israel come under God's covenant curse and now find themselves as exiles in Babylon, far from home, and forced to live in a pagan land, under the thumb of a pagan king in oppression and shame.

Israel's sin is easily seen when contrasted with YHWH's righteousness. Daniel begins to confess this contrast in verse 7. *"To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you."* If YHWH is righteous, then the people of Israel are in shame for acting treacherously against him, as spelled out in verse 8. *"To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you."* Israel's history is the history of a sinful people who continually rebel against a loving, patient, and merciful God.

Although the people of Israel sinned and acted treacherously, *"to the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets."* YHWH is gracious and forgives the sins of those who certainly do not deserve such kindness. The list of Israel's sins is long: rebellion, not obeying the voice of God, not walking in accordance with his will revealed through the series of prophets God has sent to warn his people to repent. Despite all of this, God remains gracious, even though no one in Israel can claim innocence. As Daniel confesses in verse 11, repeating the previous list of sins, *"all Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him."*

The covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai is a national covenant between YHWH and his people Israel. The Sinai covenant reflects both the works principle in the covenant of works God which

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<sup>7</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 437.

made with Adam in Eden (the Ten Commandments reiterate the substance of God's prior covenant with Adam in Eden), and the covenant of grace, in which after the Fall, God promises to provide a remedy for human sin through the work of a messianic redeemer. In the Sinai covenant there are blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience for Israel as a nation. Daniel brings this to mind in verse 12 of his prayer, when he recalls YHWH's longsuffering mercy coming to an end in light of Israel's shameless sin and idolatry. *"He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity. For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has been done against Jerusalem."* Judah is in the fix it is in—the land and the temple in ruins and many of its citizens held as exiles against their will in Babylon—because Judah broke the covenant which YHWH faithfully keeps.

In verses 13-14, Daniel spells this out. *"As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by your truth. Therefore the LORD has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice."* But if YHWH directs the affairs of men and nations, and directed the Babylonians to bring God's judgment against Judah, then God can bring judgment on Babylon, while at the same time, restore the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem.

Knowing that the seventy years of exile have nearly run their course, in verses 15-16, Daniel pleads, *"and now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and have made a name for yourself, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly. "O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us."* If God rescued Israel from Egypt and the Pharaoh, then certainly he can rescue his people from their current captivity in Babylon under Cyrus. YHWH can so order things that Jerusalem itself might be restored and the shame his people feel be lifted from them.

Daniel continues his intercession on behalf of his people in verses 17-19. *"Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. 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."* It is YHWH who made covenant with his people and promised his blessing to those who fear him and call upon his name—which Daniel now does as the time of exile (the seventy years foretold by Jeremiah) comes to an end.

But even as Daniel was speaking, we read in verses 20-21 that, *"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."* The content of Gabriel's vision will be revealed in verses 24-27 in the vision of the seventy weeks in which Daniel will get confirmation of God's mercy and favor in that a messianic king and priest will come to atone for sin and put an end to human wickedness. Daniel will also learn that Jerusalem will be rebuilt, the temple restored, and that YHWH's chief foe (Antichrist) will be forever and finally defeated.

Yet, Daniel will also learn that even though Judah's seventy years in exile in Babylon are almost over,

there is a much greater exile which remains in effect. Seventy weeks are decreed by God and must run their course before this exile ends. And only then, after a time of great distress, will God's people finally enter the ultimate Jubilee, when all slaves are set free (we are all slaves to sin), all debts are paid (the guilt of sin will be forever removed), and God's favor is poured out upon his people when we enter our eternal Sabbath rest. It will take Jesus the Messiah to accomplish these things for us and bring this greater exile to an end.

Daniel earnestly prayed for Jeremiah's prophecy to be fulfilled with the completion of Judah's seventy years of exile in Babylon.<sup>8</sup> As Daniel realized that it was his sin, as well as the sin of his people, which had brought Israel under the covenant curse and into exile in Babylon, he confessed his sin and interceded for his people. And as he was doing so, God in his grace, sent the Angel Gabriel to explain to Daniel that Israel's seventy years of exile was about to come to an end, but there was a greater exile still on-going (the mysterious seventy weeks of vv. 24-27). This exile is banishment from the presence of God because of human sin and requires that God send a covenant mediator. The mercy and forgiveness YHWH has shown to Israel will be apparent to all when YHWH sends his Messiah to make a strong covenant with the many—because, as Daniel puts it, “*to the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness.*”

This promise to remove all guilt of sin and provide a perfect righteousness, reflects the kind of forgiveness and righteousness of which the Apostle later speaks in Romans 4:4-7. “*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness . . . Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.*”

Paul's promise holds true for all who trust in Jesus Christ—God justifies the ungodly through the death and merits of Jesus, received by faith alone. And when the merits of Jesus become ours through faith, only then will our exile end and only then do we experience the ultimate Jubilee on that glorious day when we enter our eternal Sabbath rest, finally at home in the presence of the Ancient of Days and the one like a Son of Man, who makes a strong covenant with his people because mercy and forgiveness belong to him.

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<sup>8</sup> Kline, <http://www.meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/the-covenant-of-the-seventieth-week/>