

“A Strong Covenant”

The Eighteenth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 9:24-27; Matthew 24:3-22

As famed philosopher-catcher Yogi Berra once quipped, “when you come to a fork in the road, take it!” When we come to Daniel 9:27 and read of one who makes a strong covenant with the many for one week, we have come to such an interpretive fork in the road. Is Daniel speaking about a future Antichrist making a seven-year peace treaty with Israel which marks the beginning of the tribulation? Or is Daniel instead speaking of the coming of the Messiah, who makes a strong covenant on behalf of those whom he is about to redeem at the climax of his messianic mission? The choice is fundamental as to how we understand this prophecy. Christ or the Antichrist?

We have spent the last several sermons working our way through Daniel 9, a passage which includes the famous prophecy of the “seventy weeks” (vv. 24-27). As we noted throughout our time in this chapter, this is one of the most disputed and difficult prophecies in all the Old Testament. But everyone does agree that it is also one of the most important of Old Testament prophecies. Although those influenced by dispensationalism see this prophecy as predicting a future seven-year tribulation period and a peace treaty between Antichrist and Israel, the prophecy makes much better sense when seen as a messianic prophecy, predicting the coming of Jesus (Israel’s Messiah) with great accuracy and specificity—the so-called “messianic interpretation.”

Based upon our time spent in this chapter previously, it should be clear that understanding the context and keeping the Old Testament background in mind are absolutely essential, *if* we are to interpret the “seventy weeks” correctly. We begin by reminding ourselves that the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27 is a direct answer from YHWH to the prophet Daniel’s petitions offered in his prayer for the exiles in Babylon (the first 19 verses of chapter 9). Daniel is well aware that the prophet Jeremiah foretold of seventy years of exile for the Jews now living in Babylon—Daniel among them. Daniel is also aware that the seventy years are about up. He knows that Jeremiah prophesied that YHWH promised that his people will be allowed to return to Judah to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple. Knowing the day of release from exile is at hand, Daniel is greatly worried about his people. Will they remember YHWH’s covenant promises? Will they repent of their sin and unbelief?

In his prayer, Daniel is deeply moved to repent of his own sins, as well as pray on behalf of his struggling people—Judah. It is as a direct answer to Daniel’s fervent prayer for Israel on the eve of their possible return to Judah, that YHWH sends Gabriel to reveal to Daniel what the future holds for Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple—the purpose for the “seventy weeks” prophecy of verses 24-27. The good news Gabriel reveals to Daniel is that the exiles will return to Judah, and they will rebuild the city, and the temple. The bad news is that at some point in the future, Jerusalem will be left desolate once again. But this is not a prophecy of despair. Rather, it is a prophecy which foretells of the coming of Israel’s Messiah who will usher in the ultimate jubilee year, as well as the eternal Sabbath for the people of God. The exiles will return home and rebuild. But Jerusalem and the temple will experience desolation yet again, because a greater exile remains—separation from God’s presence due to human sin. Desolation is not the final word, however, YHWH will send someone (a Messiah) to deal with the root of our exile from YHWH—the guilt of our sin. This will be accomplished as the seventy weeks run their course.

As Daniel is about discover from Gabriel, God has decreed a time of “seventy weeks” for his people and

for his holy city (Jerusalem), during which time six things must come to pass. These six things are spelled out in verse 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 terminus (end) of the seventy weeks is reached when these things have been accomplished. These required elements will be our focus, along with the mention in verse 27, of one who makes a strong covenant with the many for one week (the “seventieth week”). Some say this covenant maker is the Antichrist making a treaty with Israel at the time of the end, while still others correctly contend this is Jesus, fulfilling his redemptive mission as mediator of the new covenant.

So, knowing when the seventy weeks will be complete, in verse 25, Gabriel also reveals the precise time when the seventy weeks will begin. *“Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks.”* This was our focus last time, when we made the case that this decree (“the going out of a word”) is that made by the Persian king Cyrus in 538 BC, who, after capturing Babylon, determined to let the exiled Jews return home and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

With the start date set as (538 BC) and in light of the six requirements to be accomplished during this seventy weeks we have both the beginning of the prophecy and its end. But a number of questions about nature of the “weeks” themselves remain. Are they to be understood as literal “sevens” of years, or are they symbolic periods of time tied into the visions we’ve already discussed in Daniel 2 and 7? Why are these weeks broken up into periods of seven years, sixty-years and then one year—the so-called “seventieth week” of Daniel?

Keeping the start date and things to be completed in mind, it becomes clear that the seventy weeks are a not literal period of time (490 years), but are symbolic, and reflect important biblical theological elements of Israel’s prior history—covenant (mentioned repeatedly in Daniel’s prayer in verses 1-19), exile (as a covenant curse), the jubilee year (as spelled out in Leviticus 25, where we read of seven sevens of years followed by a fiftieth year of jubilee when all debts are paid and all slaves are set free), and Sabbath (six days of work, followed by rest on the seventh day). In light of these redemptive historical themes and the Old Testament texts from which they arise, it is obvious that the numbers “seven” and “seventy” as used by Gabriel are hardly random. They reflect the jubilee year pattern (490 years reflects 10 cycles of jubilee), and in light of Daniel’s focus upon the time of exile coming to an end, point ahead to an eternal Sabbath rest for the people of God.

A problem arises if we take the years literally. *If* the seventy weeks are fulfilled by Jesus’ messianic mission in about 30 AD, and *if* we subtract 490 years (seventy sevens) we get a date of 460 BC, which puts us close in proximity to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the rebuilding of the temple, and the city of Jerusalem and its walls after the exiles returned. But this does not take us all the way back to 538 BC and the decree of Cyrus to release the Jews held as exiles in Babylon. This is why the seventy sevens are likely not literal “weeks” of years, but are best understood within the context given us by Daniel, which we established last time, and which we can but summarize now.

The first seven weeks of the prophecy then takes us from 538 to the ministry of Ezra (about 450 BC). The second group of weeks and what transpires during them is set forth in verse 25b-26. *“Then for sixty-two weeks it [Jerusalem] shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end*

there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.” This second block of weeks (sixty-two), covers the time from the rebuilding of the temple and the re-institution of the temple sacrifices (the time of Ezra 445 BC) up to the coming of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah (AD 30). Jesus is the anointed one who was “cut-off” (i.e., killed by crucifixion) after the sixty-two weeks come to an end—i.e., in the seventieth week.

Gabriel also foretells that end of the sixty-two weeks leads to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in AD 70 (“*desolations are decreed*”). This matter is historically verified, and has been foretold elsewhere in the visions of the fourth great and terrifying empire (Rome) which seeks to destroy the people of God and boastfully challenge YHWH’s kingdom (as recounted in the visions in chapter 2 and 7). When the seven weeks are over, Jerusalem and the temple are rebuilt. When the sixty-two weeks are over, Jesus the Messiah will come to fulfill the requirements the prophecy during its seventieth and final week. Yet, as the prophecy obviously foretells of a Messiah, it also foretells of a terrible future desolation of Jerusalem by the Romans, who will destroy the city and the temple, an event which casts the Jews into the four corners of the earth (the great diaspora).

This brings us to the final week of Daniel’s prophecy—the so-called “seventieth week” which is described in verse 27. “*And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.*” Admittedly, this is a difficult verse to translate and it raises a number of questions. Who is this covenant maker? And what is this strong covenant? How does he put an end to sacrifices and offering? What is the “wing of abomination?” And what does it mean that the end decreed is poured out on the desolator?

The debate over the proper interpretation of this prophecy largely turns on the identity of the “he” in verse 27, i.e., the one who makes a strong covenant with the many.¹ Critical scholars contend that this was written after the fact, and claim it is a reference to Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Others (including dispensationalists) see this figure as Antichrist, connecting the “he” of verse 27 with “the people of the prince who is to come” (the Romans), reigning terror upon Jerusalem and the temple in the previous verse (v. 26). Still others, me included, see this as a reference to the coming Messiah, who, in making a strong covenant with the many, brings to pass the six conditions required for the prophecy to be fulfilled.

Thankfully, we are given some help in this regard in the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24 when Jesus instructs his disciples about future events in verses 15-22 (our New Testament lesson)...

“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.

The abomination of desolation spoken of by Jesus, quoting from Daniel 9:27, is clearly that brought about by the Roman armies of Titus in AD 70. Jesus warns all those present in Jerusalem that this will

¹ See the helpful Survey in; Baldwin, Daniel, 191-197.

be the worst event Jerusalem will ever experience, and includes both the final destruction of the temple and a new exile of the Jews from Judah, this time into the ends of the earth. This desolation will be so terrible, Jesus warns, that when it begins, God's people should drop everything and flee. But the prince who brings about destruction cannot be an end-times Antichrist, because, as Jesus says, this was fulfilled by the events of AD 70. Titus may serve as an illustration of an end-times Antichrist (as a type of the final Antichrist to come), but as Jesus says, this portion of the prophecy (the desolation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple) is clearly fulfilled by the events of AD 70.

There is another reason why the "he" of verse 27 cannot be "the prince who is to come" (either Titus or a future Antichrist). For one thing, although Titus accomplished one of the two things predicted (he put an end to sacrifices by destroying the temple), he did not make a covenant with "the many." On the other hand, the subject of the clause in v. 26 is "the people" of the prince to come, not the prince himself.² The people cannot make a covenant! The covenant maker does. The desolation of Jerusalem is therefore tied to the messianic age and the Roman desolation of Jerusalem, not to the time of the end.

What does Daniel mean when he speaks of a coming one who will *make a strong covenant with many for one week*? As Meredith Kline has pointed out, the verb used by Daniel (*higbîr*) is not a verb associated with making a new covenant, but instead with "confirming" a covenant which is already in place³—i.e., the covenant of grace first promised in Genesis 3:15, immediately after Adam fell into sin. This rules out an Antichrist figure in verse 27—because the Antichrist does not confirm a covenant with Israel which already exists, but supposedly makes an altogether new agreement with the Jews at the time of the end. Instead, the covenant "maker," re-affirms a covenant which is already in place with the many—a similar expression to that found in the famous messianic prophecy of a suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 between the servant ("he") as the "sufferer", and those on whose behalf he performs his redemptive work ("the many"), the people of God.⁴

When the "he" of verse 27 (the one who makes a strong covenant) is connected to the "*anointed one* [who] *shall be cut off and shall have nothing*," in verse 26, i.e., the Messiah in his death and crucifixion, the focus of the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy is now clear—it treats that period of time immediately after the sixty-two weeks when Jesus begins his messianic mission. The seventieth week of Daniel centers around the redemptive work the Messiah will accomplish—"making a strong [i.e., in the sense of confirming] a covenant" with the many. This means the seventieth week (at least the first half of it) is fulfilled by Jesus and is not a future event as dispensationalists insist.

In fact, verse 27 is a direct answer to Daniel's prayer back in verses 4-6 of this same chapter. "*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 answer to Daniel's prayer, Gabriel reveals that a Messiah will come and make a strong covenant, i.e., make strong, renew YHWH's covenant already established with his people. YHWH keeps his covenants. He even renews them, making them strong.

² Gredianus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 306.

³ Kline, "The Covenant of the Seventieth Week," 464-465.

⁴ Young, Daniel, 213.

This also fits nicely with a number of parallel passages, and is clearly tied to the six requirements for the prophecy to be fulfilled spelled out in verse 24. Jeremiah speaks of seventy years of exile for Israel, but he also foretold a new covenant which supercedes a covenant already in place. In Jeremiah 31:31-34, the prophet proclaims YHWH's promise.

“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, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 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. 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.”

It is important to notice that Jeremiah's prophecy is, according to the author Hebrews, fulfilled by Jesus (Heb. 8, 10). The contents of the prophecy of the new covenant also bears a striking similarity to those six things Gabriel tells Daniel that must be fulfilled before the seventy weeks run their course—*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*. That Daniel 9:24-27 has strong parallels to Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant comes as no surprise, given Daniel's prayer and his plea that YHWH remember his covenant with his people. YHWH will make a strong, new and better covenant, grounded in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

We are now in a position to see that the work of the anointed one who was “cut off” (v. 26) is also that of making a strong covenant with many for one week—i.e., in the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy (v. 27). This means that the prophecy of the “seventy weeks” is fulfilled by none other than Jesus Christ, who in being cut-off and making a strong covenant fulfills the conditions required in verse 24. In his messianic mission, did Jesus not come to “finish transgression?” This does not in any sense mean that people will stop sinning, but that sin will be put away as a power of rebellion, and that such sin will be hidden from YHWH's face.⁵ Did Jesus not come to “put an end to sin?” by removing it from YHWH's presence by taking it away through the blotting out of guilt by his shed blood? Did Jesus not come to atone for iniquity? Here, one immediately thinks of the words of Isaiah 53:4–6:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Finishing transgression, putting an end to sin, and atoning for iniquity are all acts associated with the so-called “passive obedience” of Jesus, in which he offered up himself (allowing himself to be crucified) to satisfy the Father's wrath and anger toward our sin. These things must be accomplished before the seventy weeks are completed. Yet, Jesus accomplished all of these things, did he not?

⁵ Young, Daniel, 198.

But there are three more elements which must be established (Christ's so-called "active" obedience). Did Jesus not "bring in an everlasting righteousness" by his perfect obedience? Does this not secure a perfect righteousness imputed to all those who believe in Jesus? Did Jesus not come as the final prophet of YHWH (to seal vision and prophet) as Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15? When Jesus came, there was no more need of prophetic revelation such as that being given to Daniel by Gabriel, because in Jesus, YHWH is fully revealed.⁶ Finally, did not Jesus' messianic mission begin when he was baptized and received the Holy Spirit, and the most holy (Jesus—the true temple of Israel) was anointed?

All six of these things are associated with Jesus' messianic mission and are commonly understood in Reformed theology in terms of our Lord's passive obedience, in which he offered himself as the final and once for all sacrifice for sin, and his passive obedience, in which he actively fulfilled all Old Testament prophecy and requirements of the law. As one writer concludes, "When our Lord ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit descended, there remained not one of these six items of Daniel 9:24 that was not *fully accomplished*."⁷

But two items remain before we wrap up. The first is the sentence which closes v. 27—"And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator." This sentence is notoriously difficult to translate but thankfully Jesus helps us here when he quotes it in reference to the Roman sack of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in AD 70. This is a reference to Titus and his legions. The wing of a bird of prey is an image used in the prophets (Isaiah 8:8; Jeremiah 48:40; 49:22; and Ezekiel 17:3, 7) for a swift moving army, while abominations which bring desolation refer to a detested thing (the Roman army) destroying a sacred thing (the Jerusalem temple), rendering it unclean.⁸

The second is the problem raised by the fact that the covenant maker will, "*make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering.*" How is it that the Messiah is cut-off in the middle of the seventieth week, leaving three and a half years unfulfilled yet ending the sacrifices. For one thing, Titus did put an end to the sacrifices when he destroyed the temple. But when Jesus died on Calvary (was "cut-off) and while making a strong covenant with the many, recall that at very moment he died something dramatic happened in the Jerusalem temple. As we read in Matthew 27:50–51, "*and Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.*" In a theological sense, when Jesus died on the cross, any further sacrifices in that temple were an abomination to YHWH. All acceptable sacrifice in the temple ceased the moment Jesus died.

But what about the remaining three and a half years of the seventieth week? The covenant maker's work is said to extend three and a half weeks (or half of the seventieth week—3 and ½ years), but Daniel says nothing else about this. But in the Book of Revelation, the apostle John, whose vision, in many ways, fulfills the prophecies in the Book of Daniel, speaks several times about a period of time which lasts approximately 3 ½ years. In Revelation 11:2-3, John speaks of forty-two months and then of 1260 days. He does the same thing in Revelation 12:6 and 13:5. In Revelation 12:14, John speaks of a "times," "a

⁶ Young, Daniel, 200.

⁷ Cited in Young, Daniel, 198.

⁸ Steinmann, Daniel, 475.

time” and “half a time” (3 ½ years). John applies this time reference to circumstances after the messianic mission of Jesus ends (with his death, resurrection, and ascension), yet before Jesus returns at the end of the age to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. Even though Daniel never explains the remaining three and a half years of verse 27, the Apostle John indicates that this 3 ½ year period is actually the time of exile of God’s people between Jesus’ first and second advents—the age of the church militant. According to John, what remains from Daniel’s seventy weeks is the time Christ’s church remains in its wilderness exile, until Jesus returns to usher in the ultimate jubilee and the everlasting Sabbath. As Meredith Kline tells us,

Since the seventy weeks are ten jubilee eras that issue in the last jubilee, the seventieth week closes with the angelic trumpeting of the earth’s redemption and the glorious liberty of the children of God. The acceptable year of the Lord which came with Christ will then have fully come. Then the new Jerusalem whose temple is the Lord and the Lamb will descend from heaven (Rev. 21:10,22) and the ark of the covenant will be seen (Rev. 11:19), the covenant the Lamb has made to prevail and the Lord has remembered.⁹

This means that the six requirements to complete the seventy weeks decreed by YHWH are met by Jesus in his work as Israel’s Messiah, who is the covenant mediator who establishes a new covenant through his shed blood and perfect obedience. The prophecy of the seventy weeks is not about a future Antichrist or a seven-year tribulation period. Rather, it is about the covenant making Messiah, who is cut-off, thereby “finishing the transgression, putting an end to sin, atoning for iniquity, bringing in everlasting righteousness, sealing both vision and prophet, and anointing a most holy place.”

The “seventy weeks” prophecy is not a map to the end times, although the last three and a half weeks of Daniel’s seventieth week symbolically depict Jesus’ ministry from his ascension until his return. Gabriel reveals this with great accuracy, and in doing so, reminds us in no uncertain terms that there is one gospel in both testaments, and that all of redemptive history centers around the person and work of Jesus—that one who is cut-off so as to save us from the guilt and power of sin, so as to bring us to the ultimate jubilee, and grant us our eternal Sabbath rest. The “seventy weeks” is a messianic prophecy, which Jesus fulfills, by making a strong covenant with the many.

⁹ Kline, “The Covenant of the Seventieth Week,” _____