

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 14th November 2010

Daniel 9:20-27 – “Heaven’s answer”

Last week we listened in on Daniel at prayer. “Hush, hush, whisper who dares the prophet Daniel is saying his prayers.” You may remember how his prayer had been prompted by his reading of Scripture. He’d read in Jeremiah how God would end the exile after 70 years and so armed with this promise of God he urges God to be true to his word. He has this cheque from heaven and he’s determined to cash it and he longs for this not so much for his and his fellow Israelites’ comfort and enjoyment but for God’s glory, God’s reputation. It was a wonderful prayer that teaches us much about how to pray.

I did mention last week though that this wasn’t any old Israelite at prayer and it was a prayer very much spoken at a particular time in salvation history. In other words though we rightly learn from it we also see that we’re not Daniel and we’re not in that particular context.

This is all the more important as we see this week the remarkable way in which Daniel’s prayer is answered. That’s what our passage is all about God’s answer to Daniel’s prayer.

Got two main headings; the remarkable means by which God answered Daniel’s prayer and then we’ll focus on the content of that answer. So first then...

The Remarkable means by which God answered Daniel’s prayer v20-23

Do look down at v20: “While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the Lord my God for his holy hill – while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision.”

We notice first that the answer to his prayer came immediately. In fact we see at the start of v20 and v21 that the answer came before he had even finished praying.

This is not a blueprint for answered prayer. There’s no promise here that we can expect immediate answers to our prayers – in fact other Bible passages on prayer like the parable of the persistent widow teach us to persevere in prayer. But sometimes God does give immediate answers to prayer and Christians here could all probably share occasions when this has been the case for us.

As today is Remembrance Sunday let me give such an example from the trenches. Last summer I read the biography of Lt-General William Dobbie. His greatest fame was as the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Malta during WW2 but as a more junior ranked officer in WW1 he wrote to his wife on 1 March 1918: “*I had a great answer to prayer yesterday. I felt that one of the Armies ought to dispose of its troops in a certain way. I could not suggest it, as I am not commanding the*

Army. So I prayed about it and in about half an hour I got a message to say they were doing what I wanted in every detail."

Sometimes God will answer prayer immediately and in a way that leaves you amazed and quite frankly with a big smile on your face. So whilst crossing the Atlantic on a liner about 100 years ago, F.B. Meyer, a famous Baptist minister, was asked to address the first class passengers. At the captain's request he spoke on the topic "Answered Prayer."

An agnostic who was present at the service was asked by his friends, "What did you think of Dr. Meyer's sermon?" He answered, "I didn't believe a word of it." That afternoon Meyer went to speak to the passengers in the cheapest quarters below decks. Many of the listeners at his morning address went along, including the agnostic, who claimed he just wanted to hear "what the babblers had to say."

Before heading off for the service, this agnostic put two oranges in his pocket. On his way he passed an elderly woman sitting in her deck chair fast asleep. Her hands were open. In the spirit of fun, the agnostic put the two oranges in her outstretched palms.

After the meeting, he saw the old lady awake now and happily eating one of the pieces of fruit. "You seem to be enjoying that orange," he remarked with a smile. "Yes, sir," she replied, "My Father is very good to me." "Your father? Surely your father can't be still alive!"

"Praise God," she replied, "He is very much alive." "What do you mean?" pressed the agnostic. She explained, "I'll tell you, sir. I have been seasick for days. I was asking God somehow to send me an orange. I suppose I fell asleep while I was praying. When I awoke, I found He had not only sent me one orange but two!" The agnostic was speechless and later he was wonderfully converted.

God answered Daniel's prayer immediately - this isn't a blueprint for what we can expect of God although sometimes as we'll have experienced from time to time, He does give immediate and remarkable answers to prayer.

But whilst the speed of God's answer is not beyond our expectation and experience – the means by which the answer comes surely is. God could send the angel Gabriel to us with a message – he did to Daniel, he did to Mary, the mother of Jesus but there's certainly no indication here that we can expect this sort of an answer to our prayers.

So the means by which God answers Daniel's prayer is remarkable and certainly in the detail of an angel coming straight from God's presence with a response hot off the press of heaven, we would be wrong to expect to expect the same. We're not God's special prophet.

Let's turn to look secondly at **The content of the answer v24-27**

And I should say at the outset that about a reservoir of ink has been spilt on these verses and in particular on the numbers and doing the maths but the most important thing is the type of literature - this is apocalyptic language, the numbers are symbolic.

So Gabriel comes and v24 here's the answer: "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."

There are 70 '7s'. What's going on? Well the number 7 in the Bible is a symbol of completeness and perfection. So 70 '7s' is perfection multiplied – it is ultimate perfection.

It's also likely that this is playing on the 70 years that we saw last week back in v2. Daniel understands as he reads Jeremiah that the exile is going to be 70 years long. It's getting close and like we saw he prays for it to happen. And of course they do come out of exile after 70 years just as God had said.

So v24 when God says 70 '7s' are decreed for all these things in the rest of the verse it's as if he's basically saying, "Daniel, my plans are even bigger than you think – don't just think end of exile after 70 years, think way beyond that, think 70 7s, ie Daniel think total ultimate completeness and perfection – when all my plans reach their absolute fullness, way beyond the return of the exile, this is what's going to happen."

With the end of the exile after 70 years, in one sense the punishment for sin was over, in one sense you could say that sin had been dealt with, justice had been done. But here in v24 God is saying that it is way longer before his plans for dealing with sin are fulfilled.

So what will happen after the 70 7s – at the end of this fullness of punishment? Well v24, it'll take that long to finish transgression, to put an end to sin and to atone for wickedness.

Now their sin, their transgression, their wickedness that Daniel has been praying about was the very thing that had caused the exile. But now God is talking not simply about ending punishment but about ending sin – atoning for wickedness so that it is covered over and gone – fully dealt with.

And then there's the 2nd 3 things of v24 – it'll take 70 '7s' to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up, which I think means to fulfil, vision and prophecy and then lastly to anoint the most holy, or as it says in the footnote, the most holy place, which is the temple. The temple standing as a picture of God dwelling with his people so it's a picture of re-building the temple but more than that, beyond that, it's a picture of God himself dwelling with his people as he promised he would.

So what God is saying in v24 is: "My plans of salvation will come – this is my game plan Daniel, my end game – wickedness atoned for and the arrival of righteousness." And without getting too bogged down in the different mathematical theories the point is that these things will happen after not just the 70 years of the exile is over but after 70 lots of 7.

We're given more detail on the timing in v25 and following where the 70 7s are broken down into stages. The first stage is 7 '7s' followed by a period of 62 '7s', v25: "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler comes, there will be 7 '7s', and 62 '7s'.

So the first time period is designated by 7 '7s' and it seems to run to the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This starts with the issuing of the decree to go and rebuild Jerusalem. This wasn't the decree of Cyrus to go back to the land but the decree from Artaxerxes several decades later for them to start rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. This happened in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the difficulty of that rebuilding is expressed in v25, can you see that: "It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble."

So that's the first time period the 7 '7s' and then we have the 62 '7s'. V26: "After the 62 '7s', the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing."

Then there's this final period of 1 '7', which has reference in v26 & 27 to a ruler coming to destroy the city and sanctuary and who puts an end to sacrifice and offering and sets up an abomination that causes desolation.

I'm not going to go into detail on the precise timings. The key thing to note is how these 3 different blocks of time fit with what happens after the 70 years of exile are over. So eventually or after 7 '7s' the temple and the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt and then after a much longer time, 62 '7s' Jesus Christ God's, Anointed One is cut off and then after a few decades or after one '7' we see in the events of AD 70, the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple under the Roman General Titus, we see v26-27 being fulfilled.

Jesus himself in Mark 13 uses the phrase in v27, the 'abomination that causes desolation' to talk about what would happen in AD 70.

And this is exactly what happened in history. The Jewish historian Josephus records in AD 70 how: "Caesar therefore led his staff inside the building and viewed the Holy Place of the Sanctuary with its furnishings. Later the same day, as the Jewish partisans had fled into the City, and flames were consuming the sanctuary itself and all its surroundings, the Romans brought their standards into the temple area, and erecting them opposite the east Gate, sacrificed to them there, and with thunderous acclamation hailed Titus as Emperor."

So this fits history, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the coming of the Christ and then the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 after which v27 the sacrificial system was ended, "he will put an end to sacrifice and offering."

So what does this mean for us? Well it should firstly give us a great confidence in Scripture and that what God says happens! It should encourage us that God is in control – Christ is Lord over all of history and if everything said about his first coming has been fulfilled then what confidence we can have about all that is promised about his second coming - the certainty of it and how the new heaven and the new earth will be ushered in by it!

Above all perhaps this passage lifts our eyes to our glorious Saviour - Jesus the one who brings in the blessings of v24 – it's Jesus who atones for wickedness and brings in righteousness and so on.

How does this happen? V26 because he, the Anointed One was cut off that we might be brought near – he had nothing that we might have every blessing.

Today we remember the sacrifice of so many who laid down their lives for their country. In this church building alone are the names of brave men who laid down their lives.

Of all the reports I've read of the casualties in Afghanistan, one from about a year ago particularly moved me. Last November, Staff Sgt Olaff Schmidt a British army explosives expert was killed as he tried to defuse his 65th Improvised Explosive Device.

Tim Gould his Major said this of him: "In all my time in the Army I never met nor am I ever likely to meet a man like Olaf again. He was truly a once in a generation phenomenon."

This was a man who went around in Afghanistan de-fusing incendiary bombs and IEDs. For the sake of others he put his life at risk and finally he lost it.

His Commanding Officer said how: “many soldiers and civilian Afghans owe their lives to Staff Sgt Schmid’s gallant actions and his sacrifice will never be forgotten.”

The Colonel of 2 Rifles Battle Group said: “he was simply the bravest and most courageous man I have ever met. He saved lives in 2 Rifles time and time again and for that he will retain a very special place in every heart of every Rifleman in our Battle Group.”

Everyone who knew him adored him and that love is all the more strengthened by the fact that he paid the ultimate sacrifice. They owed him so much and that illustrates something of how Christians feel about Jesus who v26 was cut off as he suffered on Calvary’s hill in our place – taking all our guilt and shame and punishment upon himself as he laid down his life for us.

We love him, we adore him, we seek to honour him day-by-day because of what he has done for us, v24 atoning for our wickedness and bringing righteousness. For the Christian every day is Remembrance Day as we remember the one who bought our freedom at great price. Daniel confesses his sin in the first part of chapter 9 and the ultimate perfect God-given solution to Daniel’s sin and to the sin of all of us is to take our sin to the foot of the Cross and to have it dealt with and finished there.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)