

GOD'S COUNTDOWN

by Ray C. Stedman

The ninth chapter of Daniel centers clearly upon the person of Jesus Christ and is one of the few places in Scripture where God ties himself to a definite timetable of events. This passage is therefore one of the strongest evidences to prove the divine inspiration of the Bible.

Many of you are frequently asked why you believe the Bible to be the Word of God, and it is helpful to know certain passages which clearly set forth predictive elements that are unmistakable and which do indicate the ability of the Bible to predict events far in the distant future. This could only be by divine power.

The passage we are looking at is that kind of passage. It pinpoints the exact moment in history when the Jewish Messiah would present himself to the Jewish people, and it does so over five hundred years before the event took place. It is so plain and detailed that it has always been an acute embarrassment to Jewish commentators.

In the seventeenth century a very learned Jew published a book in which he set forth the claims of Jesus Christ to be the Jewish Messiah. In the preface to the book he told how he himself had been converted by listening to a debate between a knowledgeable Jew and a Christian convert from Judaism over the meaning of this passage in Daniel 9. The moderator of the debate was a learned rabbi, and as the Christian pressed the claims of this passage home it became so clear that the passage was pointing to Jesus Christ that the rabbi closed the debate with these words: "Let us shut up our books, for if we go on examining the prophecy we shall all become Christians."

This prophecy is not a vision nor a dream. It was not given to Daniel through means that we have seen already in the book, but it is a direct message to the prophet from the angel Gabriel. This is the same angel that appeared to Joseph and to Mary, as recorded in the opening chapters of the New Testament. The angel Gabriel was sent to the prophet Daniel to give him a clear and undisguised look into the future in answer to a prayer of the prophet. The first part of the chapter is taken up with that prayer, which we shall not repeat here, for we want to focus on the prophetic elements of the chapter, but do read the prayer through.

It occurred, Daniel tells us, "in the first year of Darius the king, the son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede." Therefore, at this time the Medes and the Persians had taken over the former empire of Babylon.

Daniel was himself an old man, almost ninety years of age. He had been reading, as he tells us, the prophet Jeremiah. It is interesting to note that Daniel also studied the Scriptures. Though he was a prophet and God spoke to him directly, yet he learned many things from the Scriptures. Where God has spoken in writing, he does not add a vision. From his study of Jeremiah, Daniel realized that he was nearing the time of the end for the predicted seventy years of Babylonian captivity. Daniel himself had lived through this whole period for he was but a teenager when he was captured and taken to Babylon. Now, almost seventy years later, he realizes that the time of predicted deliverance was near, and so he begins to pray on the basis of the promise of God.

That is very revealing, and it tells us an awful lot about prayer. Prayer is not merely an exercise in asking God for things; prayer is primarily a means by which we get involved in God's program. When Daniel learned what God's program was he prayed that he might be involved in it, that he might have a part in it and thus to cooperate with what God was doing. This desire is reflected throughout this beautiful prayer. He did not simply say, "Well, it is all going to happen anyway so there's no use in worrying about it or praying about it." Had he said that the predicted events would have happened, but Daniel would have had no part in them. Thus this is a means by which the prophet gets involved in God's work.

This prayer is one of the most impressive in the Bible. It is a model prayer for any who are concerned over national decay. If you are concerned about the state of our country today, I suggest that you read Daniel's

prayer through and see how beautifully and wonderfully he gathers up the whole situation, realistically appraises it, and lays it before God. He did not pray, as some of us do, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." This is a searching, penetrating prayer of confession, of praise, and of earnest petition to God. To read it is a moving and powerful experience.

But Daniel was interrupted as he prayed and never finished. His report of that interruption is in Verses 20-23:

While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication 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 came and he said to me, "O Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. At the beginning of your supplications a word went forth, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the word and understand the vision." {Dan 9:20-23 RSV}

Notice especially the exhortation of the angel to understand the vision. "Consider he," he says, "think it through and understand it." This is especially significant in view of the reference Jesus himself makes in his famous prophetic message delivered on the Mount of Olives just before his crucifixion and recorded in Matthew 24. There he refers to this prophecy of Daniel and says, "So when you see the desolating sacrifice spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place" {Matt 24:15a RSV}, thus indicating how they would know that the time of the end had arrived. Matthew adds in parenthesis these words "(let the reader understand)" {Matt 24:15b RSV}. There is thus a clear exhortation on the part of both the angel Gabriel and the Lord Jesus Christ that readers should carefully consider and understand this passage. Someone has properly called it "the backbone of prophecy." Everything else must fit into the outline of this great prophetic revelation in Chapter 9.

There are two general parts to the prophecy. It occupies but a few verses (24 to 27), and is divided into two sections. There is first a listing of the objectives that are to be accomplished during the course of the prophecy; and, second, there is a three-fold division of the time set forth. We have the first section in verse 24:

"Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning 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." {Dan 9:24 RSV}

There are three wonderful things to note about that first section:

First, there is a specific time period decreed. "Seventy weeks of years," says the angel Gabriel. As we know, a week of days is seven days, and a week of years would be seven years, thus there would be seventy periods of seven years. If we multiply seventy times seven we have a total period of four hundred and ninety years which are decreed (literally, cut off or apportioned), unto a certain specified people; "your people," said the angel to the prophet. Daniel's people would clearly be the nation Israel. Furthermore, the prophecy would concern Daniel's holy city. There is only one holy city that Daniel was interested in and that was the city of Jerusalem.

So, as the second point of interest, we have a clear limitation of this prophecy to a time period involving only the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. In other words, this timetable has no effect if the Jews are not in Jerusalem. It is operative only when the Jewish people are in Jerusalem.

Third, there are six goals which are detailed to be accomplished during this stretch of four hundred and ninety years. They divide into two halves. The first three deal with the work of redemption: "to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity." Notice that they all have to do with solving the problem of sin. The next three deal with the final realization of the hopes and dreams of men. They are, specifically, "to bring in everlasting righteousness," i.e., to establish the kingdom of God, the kingdom for which we pray in the Lord's prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." {cf, Matt 5:10}. That is what it means to bring in everlasting righteousness. Then, "to seal both

vision and prophet. " Now the Hebrew phrase, "to seal" means to complete, to bring to an end. It means that all predictions are to be completed, fulfilled, and there is no longer any need to predict a future event. Finally, "to anoint a most holy place" can only refer to the temple in Jerusalem. It is clear from this that there must be a temple in Jerusalem in order for these four hundred and ninety years to be fulfilled.

That gives us an overall view of the prophecy. The full course of it would cover four hundred and ninety years, and at the end of that period the problem of human sin would be solved, and the problem of human suffering would have ended. All this is to take place within the predicted time period.

The second section marks out for us a three-fold division of the four hundred and ninety years. The first two divisions are described in Verse 25:

"Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks..." {Dan 9:25a RSV}

The RSV is in error here. The King James version is right in that it does not make a period after "seven weeks." It should go right on to read:

"... there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. It shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time." {Dan 9:25b RSV Modified}

What is Gabriel talking about here? He says there is a definite starting point when the four hundred and ninety years would begin. It is a clear-cut, precise act, recorded in history. It is the time when a decree should go forth to build the city and walls of Jerusalem.

In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are recorded several decrees by Persian kings concerning Israel, but two of them clearly relate to the building of the temple. The temple was built before the city walls were restored. There is only one decree (recorded in Nehemiah, Chapter 2), that gave permission to the Jews to rebuild the walls and city of Jerusalem, and that decree is precisely dated. It reveals one of those remarkable "coincidences" which are really not coincidences at all, to learn that the historian Herodotus (who is called the father of history), was a contemporary of the king, Artaxerxes, who issued that decree. Both Herodotus and the other famous historian of those ancient days, Thucydides, record the career and dates of this king, thus he is one ancient king whose dates are clearly and unmistakably recorded for us.

According to Nehemiah 2, the decree was issued in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes. We can pinpoint that precisely as occurring in the year 445 B.C. If you read some of the commentators you will find that they pick a different starting point. They recognize the same event, the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, but they date it at 454 B.C. That is because they are following Bishop Ussher, the seventeenth-century Irish bishop who took it upon himself to insert dates into our Bible. But, like a young teenager, he had a great deal of trouble with his dates. It was he who dated creation at 4004 B.C. Bishop Ussher has been proved wrong in a number of cases, and the interesting thing is that no secular historian has ever accepted the date 454 B.C. for Artaxerxes' 20th year. The secular historians all give the date 445 B.C. That is the correct starting point of the four hundred and ninety year period. Those who use 454 B.C. as the starting point find the termination for the first 69 weeks at 29 or 30 A. D., which is sometimes regarded as the date of the crucifixion.

The angel also indicated that this 490 year period would be divided, first into two divisions, one of seven weeks, and then sixty-two weeks. Seven weeks of seven years each is forty-nine years. During that forty-nine year period the city was to be built again, "with squares and moat, but in a troubled time." History has clearly fulfilled that. The city of Jerusalem was built again. The walls were repaired and the entire city was restored once more. That carries us down to the close of the Old Testament period. Then would follow sixty-two weeks of years, which would be a period of four hundred and thirty-four years. Add this to the forty-nine years and there is a total of four hundred and eighty-three years unto the coming of one here called "an anointed one, a Prince." Now *anointed one* is the Hebrew word for *Messiah*. There are no articles in the Hebrew at all. It is not "an anointed one, a Prince," but it is simply, "Messiah, prince." So what the angel says is, from the going forth of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem unto the coming of Messiah Prince would be seven weeks and

sixty-two weeks, or a total of four hundred and eighty-three years.

Now that is very precise, is it not? You do not find a more precise timetable of events anywhere in the Bible. If it began in 445 B.C., and you add to that four hundred and eighty-three years, to the exact month (because we know that the month in which the edict to rebuild Jerusalem was issued was the Hebrew month Nisan, which corresponds about to our April), then it brings us down to April, 32 A.D. It is necessary to allow for a four-year error in dating the birth of Christ (4 B.C. rather than 1 A.D.), and to use, as the ancients did, a year of 360 days rather than 365. If we work this out carefully, as certain chronologers have done, we find that the four hundred and eighty-three years (seven years short of the full four hundred and ninety), was fulfilled on the very day the Lord Jesus entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, with the multitude of disciples bearing palm branches in their hands going before him crying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" Thus he fulfilled Zechariah's prophecy,

"Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." {Zech 9:9b RSV}

Luke tells us that on that occasion the Lord said a most significant thing. Luke says,

And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!" {Luke 19:41a RSV}

What kind of a triumphal entry is this? "He wept over it!" And what does it mean, "Would that even today..."? Why "today"? Because that very day was the fulfillment of the four hundred and eighty-three years. Jesus went on to say,

"But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you." Luke 19:41b-44a RSV}

Here is our Lord's prediction of the destruction of the city, fulfilled by Titus, the Roman general, forty years later. Then he said these very significant words. All this will happen, he said,

"... because you did not know the time of your visitation." {Luke 19:44b RSV}

They should have known. Daniel had indicated very plainly, exactly to the day, when Messiah would come, but they "did not know the time of their visitation." They prided themselves on being students of Scripture. Jesus had said to them, "You search the Scriptures and think in them to find eternal life, but you don't seem to understand that they testify of me," {cf, John 5:39}. Thus they missed the time of their visitation.

That brings us then to the remarkable events that follow, for, in the next section of Daniel 9, we read of what occurs *after* the four hundred and eighty-three years, but *before* the seven-year period begins. It is a very strange interlude.

"And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one [the Messiah] 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." {Dan 9: 26 RSV}

"After the sixty-two weeks (i.e.. after the four hundred and eighty-three years), Messiah shall be cut off, and shall have nothing." The gospel accounts record that it was one literal week of seven days after the triumphal entry that the Lord Jesus was crucified on the little hill that stands outside the Damascus gate, north of the city of Jerusalem, and literally "had nothing." As John tells us in the opening words of his gospel, "He came unto his own, but his own received him not," {John 1:11 KJV}. He came to offer himself as king to the nation that had learned of his coming for many centuries from the prophets, but instead of a crown he received a wreath of thorns; instead of a scepter, a broken reed was put into his hands; instead of a throne, he hung upon a bloody cross. He "had nothing" for which he came. But in that crucifixion the redemption of the nation Israel and of

the whole world was accomplished. There he made an end of sin, he finished transgression and atoned for iniquity. That first part of the predicted accomplishments was fulfilled when our Lord was "cut off" on the cross, after the sixty-two weeks.

Then, Daniel was told, "the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city." That occurred in 70 A.D., forty years after our Lord's crucifixion. If the seventieth week, the final period of seven years, had followed the sixty-ninth week without a break then the whole period of four hundred and ninety years would have ended sometime in the period of the book of Acts. But there is no account in Acts to indicate when this period ended. It is very clear that there is some kind of gap between the sixty-ninth week and the seventieth week, a gap of indeterminate length. There is a long period during which the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Roman people. As we shall see, "the prince to come" is a reference to the Antichrist who, as we saw in Chapter 7, is a Roman, the last Caesar of the Roman world. But the city was not to be destroyed by him, but by "the people of the prince who is to come." That the Romans would destroy the city, but not the final Roman head, is very clear from this prophecy.

This, of course, is exactly what happened. Roman armies under Titus came in and surrounded the city and its end came with a flood. One of the most horrible sieges of all history is recorded for us by Josephus, the historian who was present and saw it as an eyewitness. He describes the terrible days in which Jerusalem was under siege by the Roman armies, and how starvation and famine stalked the streets of the city; people died by the hundreds and bodies were stacked up in the streets like cord wood. Mothers ate their own children in order to survive. But finally the city was overthrown. The walls were breached and the Romans entering in were so angered by the stubborn resistance of the Jews that they disobeyed the orders of their general and burned the temple, melting the gold and silver so that it ran down between the cracks of the stones. In order to get at the metal they pried the stones apart with bars and thus fulfilled our Lord's prediction that not one stone would be left standing upon another.

All this is history and it all happened during a time gap in the seventy weeks. The seventieth week has not even yet come. The gap has covered over 1900 years.

This is not new teaching. There are some who would say that Dr. Scofield originated this and put it in his reference Bible and all of us have been following him ever since. But Dr. Scofield did not originate this teaching. It was held by some of the earliest church fathers. For instance, at about the beginning of the third century Hippolytus, speaking of this very prophecy said, "By 'one week' he meant the last week which is to be at the end of the whole world." So it is very clear that there is to be a gap in time of indeterminate length.

That brings us to the last week.

**"And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week; and for half of the week he shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease; and upon the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator."
{Dan 9:27 RSV}**

Who is this strange individual referred to as he? "He shall make a strong covenant with many for one week." He must have already been referred to in this prophecy or the angel would not have simply used a pronoun to identify him. The nearest antecedent and the only one which matches grammatically, is the reference to "the prince that shall come." "He shall make a strong covenant with many [this refers to the nation Israel, the mass of the Jews] for one week", i.e., for seven years. In the midst of that seven-year period, after three and a half years have run its course, "he shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease", and set up what is called here "the abomination which makes desolate." That is what Jesus meant when he said, "When you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place...[then don't wait; get out of Jerusalem as fast as you can] for there will be a time of trouble such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never shall be." {cf, Matt 24:15-21}

This clearly indicates that this last week of Daniel's prophecy lies yet unfulfilled. We can expect to see the rise of a Western confederacy of nations, which may even be taking shape today, and which will ultimately be dominated by this strange individual who has appeared in these prophetic sections. He will make an agreement

with the Jews as a nation, possibly to allow the construction of a temple once again. This is why the whole Christian world is watching Israel constantly and hanging on every rumor concerning the building of a temple again on the ancient site. There must be a temple in the days when these final events occur.

"He shall make a covenant with many," evidently refers to an agreement to allow the restoration of Jewish worship in Jerusalem. In the midst of the week, after three and a half years, "he shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease," and, as we have learned from previous prophecies, shall set up an image in the temple, an image of himself, the Roman ruler, to be worshipped as God. This is what Jesus called "the abomination of desolation." This shall go on "until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator." We know what that end is. Both John, in Revelation, and Paul, in Second Thessalonians, have told us his end will be at the appearance again of Jesus Christ. Zechariah says, "On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives" {Zech 14:4 RSV}, the very Mount from which He left the earth. He will wreak vengeance upon the nations assembled against Jerusalem and especially against this blasphemous individual who has come into control of the world.

This all fits in very closely with other prophetic portions. We do not have any doubts about its general thrust. The passage is so tremendously significant because it already has been partly fulfilled in precise accuracy concerning the first coming of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, we can rest assured that the rest of it will be as fully and accurately fulfilled as the first part was. This is a helpful passage to use with those who deny the supernatural element in the Scriptures.

But, someone may ask, how do you explain this long gap? Why does this great parenthesis of time come between the sixty-ninth week and the seventieth week? The only explanation seems to be that there is a note of contingency about God's predicted events. God says that something is going to happen, and the ultimate fulfillment of it is sure, but the time of its fulfillment relates to the behavior of those concerned and their reaction to the prophecy.

You have this clearly set forth in the book of Jonah. Jonah went to Nineveh and prophesied, "Yet forty days and the city will be overthrown," {cf, Jonah 3:4}. But the people of Nineveh repented. They stopped dead in their tracks, and from the king down to the humblest citizen they put on sackcloth and ashes, stopped all the business of the city, and repented before God of their wickedness. The result was, forty days went by and nothing happened. God delayed, postponed, the fulfillment. As you know, Jonah was unhappy about that. He did not like God's postponement, but God showed him that his own heart was hard and callous.

All this confirms what we have here. There is a strange element of contingency in prophecy. Perhaps a word of Peter's from the third chapter of Acts will help us here. Remember that after the day of Pentecost, Peter was preaching to the people in connection with the healing of a lame man at the temple gate. He said a very unusual and strange thing to them, as recorded in Acts 3:17:

"And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and then he may send the Christ [Messiah] appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." {Acts 3:17-21 RSV}

This is the reason why the gospel historically was preached to the Jew first and then to the Greek, as recorded in several places in the epistles of Paul. It had to go to the Jew first, after the day of Pentecost, in order that these people be given an opportunity to repent. Had they done so, this whole prophetic scheme of the full seventy weeks would have been fulfilled in that day, and long, long ago earth would have moved into the millennium. We would be beyond it now for a thousand years would have been over by now. But God's program in time hangs upon human reaction.

This is very important to see, for once again we are facing the likely fulfillment of these things. What will happen? Is it all going to be fulfilled in our day? Who can say for sure? We can never say, "Yes, this is the final fulfillment; these events are moving surely and unmistakably to the end." Perhaps not. Enough people

may take this seriously and change their lives to set themselves in tune with God's program and stop living for themselves to such a degree that God will change his schedule, hold off the end for awhile, and let us go on. Sometime, of course, the end will come. It will be marked, as Jesus indicated, by a failure of people to take warnings seriously. He said once to his disciples, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" {Luke 18:8 RSV}. Will he find people who believe God, and act accordingly? Who can say what these days are going to bring. It may be that the present turning away, the present refusal to take these warning events seriously is of sufficient intensity to precipitate the final end. Who knows? Only God!

When Israel turned away from God and refused the offer of the Savior, God's countdown stopped. It is like the launching of rockets today, with which we are so familiar. There is a final countdown, but at any moment something can go wrong and delay the countdown and it is not resumed till the trouble is corrected. God has been counting ever since the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, counting away year after year. Four hundred and eighty-three years ran their course, and then the Savior came. It was almost the end. Seven more years were to follow, but something happened and the countdown has been delayed. It will be resumed again when there is a temple in Jerusalem and an agreement between Israel and the Western ruler.

What does this do to you?

It says to me that it is time to take seriously the days in which we live. It does not make any difference whether we are in the last days or not, we are responsible to act according to the Word of God, and to understand that God's program is going to run its course exactly as predicted. Our relationship to it will be determined by how seriously we identify ourselves with what God is doing in our day and give ourselves to the advancement of his work, not ours.

Prayer:

Our Father, it is sobering to look at this ancient prophecy and see how clearly and unmistakably it has been confirmed to us by the onrush of human events. What fools we are to dabble and to hope that perhaps something will change, even to ignore these words of Scripture and pretend they are not even in the Bible. Lord, you who love us so earnestly and tenderly, help us to see that we cannot play, we cannot dabble. We are called to face serious events, to live serious lives, yet lives filled with the joy and peace which you make so abundantly available to us. But our lives must not be frittered away and wasted in living only for our own interests. Lord, grant that we may present ourselves anew to you as people who are privileged above many others, to live in last days. We thank you and ask you for grace in Jesus' name, Amen.

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