

# War of the Gods

## Messages from the Book of Daniel

### Message 12

#### *Prophecy of the End*

Daniel 9:20-27; 11:2-12:13

#### *Interpreting Prophecy*

What good is a prophet if he never predicts anything? And why study Daniel if we never get to the good stuff about the future? I know some of you have been itching to discuss the predictions in Daniel, so tonight is your night! But I trust you have seen throughout this semester that this book contains extraordinarily valuable lessons for us Christians as we seek to follow Christ. And even in this section on the future the most important lessons for us are how we should live in a sinful world.

I have the most extraordinary news tonight. Prophecies can be difficult to understand, and Daniel's prophecies have presented particular problems. But all commentators, from all branches of the church and various theological perspectives, agree about the passages we will study tonight – that no one knows for sure how to interpret them! You might think that the more detailed and specific the prophecy, the easier it would be to interpret it. But the opposite seems to be the case. The main problem in these two passages of Daniel is that the details in the text do not exactly match the details of history. They are so close to be eerie. No one ever could have guessed the future with this level of precision. These texts obviously have a supernatural origin. But if they *are* from God, you would expect God to get the details *exactly* right!

I will not go through line by line and discuss the interpretive issues in these passages. We would literally be here all night! But I do want to mention six problems we encounter as we interpret biblical prophecy. First, there are unique, obscure words. Some Hebrew words were still in use in Jesus' day, but others had fallen out of circulation. By then the Jews spoke Aramaic. So over the centuries the meaning of some words was lost. Similarly, there are rare and ancient idioms. Sometimes it is hard to tell when a phrase is a literal statement or an idiom. One little-known idiom is the use of "feet" as a euphemism for sexual organs. But sometimes the word "feet" simply means equipment for walking! In the original culture you would know, but now it can be hard. Many people are unaware that phrases such as "the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light" (Isaiah 13:10) are idioms for the fall of a government. A third problem is ambiguous texts. I am not a Hebrew scholar, but occasionally I encounter commentaries which say the Hebrew text is hard to decipher. This is a particular problem with Hebrew, since the original text did not have any vowels. Fourth, there were various dating systems in the ancient world. For example, some nations dated a king by the year he began ruling, but others did not count until the next new year had passed. This is related to the next problem, an inadequate knowledge of the past. In Daniel 9 we are led to believe that something significant happened 49 years after Nehemiah began rebuilding Jerusalem. But no one knows of anything that would qualify. If only we had the ancient newspapers in our library! Last, and most important, we have trouble remembering the context of the prophecy. The items we have just mentioned contribute to the cultural context, but there is also the temporal context. These messages were given to people thousands of years ago. When we read about the future, it is not our future – it is their future. A comment about a long time will be a time that is long to them – not to us. And references to the end must mean the end as they would see it. That leads to considering the redemptive context. The Old Testament prophets wrote as people and to a people under the Mosaic Covenant. For them, any relationship to God involved participation in that covenant. So we cannot import a New Covenant understanding into an Old Covenant text.

And now just two principles of interpretation to keep in mind. (There are many principles of interpretation, but these will suffice for now.) First, Occam's Razor. Medieval scholastic William of Occam

stated that when there are several possible solutions to a problem, the simplest will usually be correct. This principle tends to hold true in understanding scripture. So we will look for explanations which fit the text without contortions. Second, scripture does not include gaps in sequential enumerated events. Let me explain that. You will find in many narrative passages in the Bible a series of statements: A happened, B happened, and C happened. Sometimes these can be out of order, and they can be separated by a span of time. The gospels are famous for such jumbling of the chronology of events. But when you see first A, second B, third C, these events happen in that order and without gaps in them.

Enough of that! Now let's put these principles to work and look at Daniel chapter 9.

### ***The Messiah Prince***

The four verses at the end of this chapter are concerned with 70 weeks. But the Hebrew text does not say "weeks" – it says "sevens". So here is one of those rare instances where the NIV actually translates the text better than other versions. In light of the subject matter, it seems obvious that this passage is not talking about 70 literal 7-day weeks. Here all scholars agree it is about 70 sevens of years. In other words, 490 years. That is about the last thing scholars agree on. I do not claim to be superior to others who have studied this passage. But if I tried to give equal time to all opinions, we would be here until next week! In our limited time I am going to give my best explanation. If you end up confused, or if you disagree, please come up afterward and discuss it with me.

"Seventy sevens are determined for your people and for your holy city..." But for what purpose? This verse lists six definite goals that will be accomplished by the end of the 70 sevens. All of these terms are a little strange to us. We do not customarily talk about finishing transgression, or ending sin, or sealing up vision. On balance, the best explanation is that these point to the work of Jesus. Of course there is still sin in the world, but Jesus broke the power of sin, and enabled His followers to progressively rid themselves of sin. The word translated "seal" can also mean "confirm", and I think that is its sense here. Jesus confirmed, or validated the prophecies by his life and ministry. At the end of His life Jesus said that He was the true subject of the Old Testament. "Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.'" (Luke 24:44) The book of Hebrews is key to understanding how the Old Testament was fulfilled in Jesus. For example, Hebrews 9:11-12 explains how Jesus anointed the most holy.

Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. <sup>12</sup> Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11-12)

So the end point of the seventy sevens is the ministry of Jesus. The beginning point is the command "to restore and build Jerusalem". Many people assume this is the decree by Cyrus the Great in 539 B.C. that the Jews should return to Jerusalem and build a temple for God. But that is not what this verse says. It is the city that will be rebuilt. This point is clarified and emphasized by the line which says that the street and the wall shall be built. If this is about the city, the work of Nehemiah is most likely in view. Nehemiah began rebuilding Jerusalem in 445 B.C. The next line tells us that from the time they begin to rebuild the city until the Anointed One, the Prince, is 7 sevens and 62 sevens. This indicates one person who is both an anointed one and a prince. In the law anointing was the method of appointing a priest. This phrase seems to indicate someone who is both a priest and a king. This also points to Jesus, who is both a priest and a king. So apparently there are 69 sevens from the command to rebuild the wall until the anointing of Jesus. And there seems to be something significant about the first 49 years of this period.

Now if we add 445 B.C. the date of rebuilding the temple, and A.D. 30, the date of Jesus baptism, and add one year for the passage from B.C. to A.D., we get 476 years. And if we multiply 69 x 7 we get 483. We are exactly 7 years short! This is definitely disconcerting, and there are numerous ways of explaining it. In my opinion, none of them are convincing. I think that, allowing for the uncertainties in dating these ancient events, we are close enough to be reasonably confident that we grasp the main idea. I think it is likely that our numbers do not add up because some of our dates are wrong. As for the first 49 years, no one knows what might have happened then. My guess is that it is when the city was fully finished, secure, and inhabited. If so, the people then would have known it and been comforted by this scripture.

After the 62 sevens are over (69 in all), the Messiah will be cut off. This term always refers to death, and must point to the crucifixion of Jesus. The rest of this verse is confusing. It bedevils everyone! So far this passage seems very clear, but there was no occasion of Jerusalem's having been destroyed when the Messiah died. It is important to note, however, that it does *not* say the destruction of the city happened at the same time. I think the last part of verse 26 is a parenthetical comment. The idea that the Messiah would be killed is so revolting, God immediately calms us with the promise that the city which does such an evil thing will be destroyed. As we know, however, that destruction came later. The prince to come is not the Messiah Prince. It is Titus, the Roman general who destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Verse 27 returns us to the narrative, and we learn that he, that is the Messiah, will confirm a covenant. He did not make a covenant. There is a very specific way of indicating the making of a covenant in the Old Testament. This verse uses a different word to indicate a different thing. The Messiah is taking an existing covenant and making it firm, or fully establishing it. This is consistent with the perfect life of Jesus and His ministry of calling the Jews back to their covenant with God. If this lasts one seven, then half way through "He shall bring an end to sacrifice". That is three and a half years. Jesus indeed brought an end to sacrifice by His death. The sacrifice of His blood was the perfect and eternal sacrifice which made all other sacrifices obsolete. Hebrews 9:28 tells us, "Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation." The end of this verse reassures us that the sacrifice will cease. The temple will be destroyed. "The wing of abominations" refers to the pinnacle of the temple. The temple became an abomination because they continued to offer sacrifices there, rejecting the sacrifice of Jesus. God finally put a stop to these idolatrous sacrifices by destroying the temple altogether. The center of opposition to the Messiah will be eradicated.

These four verses are vital, for they connect the end of Old Testament revelation with the coming of the Messiah and the New Covenant. Notice that there is no mention of a new covenant here. This is not something which concerned Daniel. Daniel spent his life in the corridors of power, and this message assured him that God would keep His promise to send a Messiah. Kings will continue to come and go, conquer and be conquered, but God's promise stands. Although it was still a long way off, the coming of the Messiah was sure, and then the Son of David would again rule.

### ***The Abominable Prince***

The prophecy in chapter nine encompasses almost half a millennium. In contrast, the prophecy in chapter 11 covers the middle portion of that time – roughly 160 years. If chapter nine was about the coming of the Messiah Prince, this chapter is about an abominable prince and the persecution he will bring to God's people. Verses two to four set the stage. After Cyrus the next three rulers of Persia were Cambyses, Darius I, and Xerxes I. (This is king Ahasuerus mentioned in the book of Esther, who became Esther's husband.) Xerxes stirred up enduring hostility among the Greeks in his invasion of the Greek mainland. The turning point in the war was his decisive defeat at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C. The Greeks never forgot the Persians and looked for a way to exact vengeance upon them. This privilege belonged to Alexander the Great, who conquered Persia in 331 B.C. Thirteen years later Alexander died, and his four generals divided his empire among themselves.

The rest of this chapter is about two of the resulting kingdoms. If you are unacquainted with Hellenistic history, this chapter can seem like a blur of names and events. The solution is to read a bit of that history when you can. Meanwhile, we will outline the main features of this passage.

When Alexander died, Seleucus took the kingdom of Syria and Ptolemy took Egypt. These are the kingdoms indicated here as the king of the north and the king of the south. Verses five to nine describe the interaction between these kings in the first part of this period. At that time the Ptolemies in Egypt were stronger, and they tried to influence Syrian politics. They controlled Judea. They were generally tolerant and allowed the Jews to pursue their own religion relatively unhindered. Verses 10 to 20 describe the ascendancy of the Seleucids and their eventual supremacy over the Ptolemies. Verse 21 introduces the “vile person” who shall “seize the kingdom by intrigue”. We were first introduced to Antiochus Epiphanes in chapter 8 where we saw that his chief virtues were cunning and deceit, his chief accomplishment was destruction. He successfully attacked Ptolemy VI in Egypt, who was no angel himself. Verse 27 paints a vivid picture of the twisted nature of these kings. “Both these kings’ hearts shall be bent on evil, and they shall speak lies at the same table; but it shall not prosper, for the end will still be at the appointed time.” (Daniel 11:27).

Suddenly things take a drastic turn. Verse 29 says,

At the appointed time he shall return and go toward the south; but it shall not be like the former or the latter.<sup>30</sup> For ships from Cyprus shall come against him; therefore he shall be grieved, and return in rage against the holy covenant, and do damage. So he shall return and show regard for those who forsake the holy covenant. (Daniel 11:29-30)

The first foray into Egypt was a success. Later expeditions would succeed. But this time he met “ships from Cyprus”. This cryptic phrase designates a Roman delegation sent out to check the power of this Syrian king. The Roman consul demanded that Antiochus return to Syria. Antiochus asked for time to consult with his generals, but consul Laenas recognized this as a ploy for Antiochus to gather his forces. Laenas drew a circle in the sand around Antiochus’ feet and threatened to attack if he stepped out of the circle without giving an answer. Antiochus was no match for Rome’s army. Humiliated and enraged, he headed north where he found a people on whom he could vent his frustration. The following verses describe Antiochus’ atrocities against the Jews. He recruited Jewish apostates, “those who forsake the holy covenant”, and wreaked havoc on the nation. He entered the temple, stopped the daily sacrifice, and placed the “abomination of desolation”, which we take to be an altar to Zeus erected in 167 B.C. The supreme sacrilege was the sacrifice of a pig in the temple. Temples were built to pagan gods, Greek customs were introduced and enforced, and the Jews were forced to worship the pagan gods. Any who refused were executed. In the several years he terrorized Judea thousands of Jews died for their faith.

Most commentators take verses 40 to 45 to refer to the return of Christ and the final judgment. They think the events described there are too extreme to describe what actually transpired in the second century B.C. I think this is mistaken. It is easy for us at a comfortable distance of 2,000 years to think these verses are too expansive to refer to Antiochus IV. But this prophecy was given to people who would actually experience the terror of this man. I think these verses do describe what happened under this maniac’s rule. “The time of the end” (verse 40) refers to the climax of the persecution. Finally in 164 B.C. Antiochus Epiphanes met his end.

Chapter 12 seems to move in a different direction. The first three verses remind the Jews that even in the worst persecution, God is still in charge and has sent His angels to fight for His people. Someday there will be a final judgment. All those who died in the holocaust will receive eternal life, but those apostates and traitors will receive “everlasting shame and contempt”.

Now if your head is spinning, and you feel as though you do not quite grasp everything, you are in good company! Daniel was much wiser than we, and he did not understand everything either, as you can see in verse eight! The last three verses seem to be a final encouragement to persevere. From setting up the abomination of desolation there would be 1290 days ... until what? Until the cleansing and rededication of the temple. And if you keep counting until 1335 days, you reach the death of the tyrant. God reassured His people that, no matter how terrible their suffering, it would end. There is a definite limit, decided and enforced by God Himself. His people will not suffer forever.

### ***Faithfulness in Hardship***

This prophecy was vitally important to the Jews between the Testaments. As they saw terrible persecution come, and as Antiochus began destroying the nation, it encouraged them to remain faithful. But what value is it to us, today? I think the heart of this passage for us is chapter 11, verse 32. Although it is not the best translation, I like the vividness of the New King James rendering. “Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.” The English Standard Version is more accurate. “He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.”

This is the key to surviving persecution, whenever and wherever it occurs. If you would resist seduction and remain true to the covenant, you must know your God. If you know your God, you will stand firm and take action. Knowing God is the foundation to life. Knowing facts about God is not enough. Knowing theology and doctrine is insufficient. Being baptized and attending church or RUF meetings cannot by themselves carry you through hard times. Even prayer and Bible study are no guarantee that you will survive unless you know God. Knowing God means being on a conversational basis with Him. When you know God, your prayers and Bible reading are a living encounter with a living God. God is your companion in life, the person who constantly encourages you in hardship. The eternal life mentioned is chapter 12 is possible only to those who know God. Just before He died Jesus said, “And this is eternal life, that they know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (John 17:3)

If you know God, you will stand firm and take action. This is what Dr. Sinclair Ferguson called muscular Christianity. You will not be deceived by the flattery of nice-sounding evil men. You will not be frightened when wicked rulers oppress the innocent. You will not flee, or compromise your convictions, or surrender to wickedness. But you will take action. You will be active in doing good, and active in opposing evil. St. Paul has this in mind when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Ephesians 6:10-13)

This is Paul’s last exhortation to the Christians at Ephesus. He urges them to be strong. Practice muscular Christianity. This means, first, to stand. Stand up to evil. Do not flee. Do not surrender. Do not compromise – but stand firm. Then you must act. Those evil powers will not go away on their own. Individuals and societies will be harmed by them unless Christians get involved. So get off your bottom and get out there. Wrestle with evil. Stop wasting so much time on silliness, but ask God where He can use you in the struggle against evil. Then take action. Paul concludes by repeating the command to stand. Do not let evil keep you down. Call upon God for supernatural power to fight to the end.

Millions of faithful through the ages have served God this way. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and

Abednego are some. St. Patrick is another. He was an Englishman who was captured as a boy and enslaved by an Irish chief. Years later he received a vision of a ship coming to rescue him. Not long after, he escaped Ireland and returned to England where he lived comfortably. But God began to work on him, and he felt the call to return to the land of his captors. He spent the rest of his life in Ireland, converting thousands. That land was permanently shaped by St. Patrick's firm obedience to God's call. William Wilberforce became a believer in Jesus Christ and came to the conviction that the slave trade was an abomination. He worked all his life in Parliament to abolish it, earning the opposition and hatred of many in the process. One of his antagonists sputtered, "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is dragged into politics." Opposed by most, Wilberforce never gave up, until finally England abolished the slave trade.

If you are thinking that you are not a bishop or a politician, there is still an important role for you to play in God's Kingdom. Corrie ten Boom was nothing greater than a Dutch woman who loved Jesus. When Hitler began killing the Jews, she hid a Jewish family in her house. Eventually they were discovered, and Corrie, her father, and her sister were imprisoned. After the war she published a book describing God's faithfulness to her during the war years. It has also been made into a movie, *The Hiding Place*. Corrie was a simple Dutch woman, but her firm courage in the face of evil and decisive action to do good have been an example and inspiration to millions.

But you must know your God. If you do not know God, now is the time to ask Him to take you as His child. Jesus said, "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out," (John 6:37) and "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) Do not go through life without God and then enter an eternity of shame. Place your trust in Him tonight. If you do know God, ask Him to make you stand firm and take action. Ask God how you may serve Him, and do so energetically. Then you also shall shine like the stars forever and ever.

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