The Greatest Prophecy in the Old Testament

Daniel 9:20-26 ²⁰ Now while I was speaking, praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God for the holy mountain of my God, ²¹ yes, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, reached me about the time of the evening offering. ²² And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. ²³ "At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision: ²⁴ " Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, And to anoint the Most Holy. ²⁵ "Know therefore and understand, That from the going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem Until Messiah the Prince, There shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; The street shall be built again, and the wall, Even in troublesome times. ²⁶ "And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; And the people of the prince who is to come Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, And till the end of the war desolations are determined.

A little over two weeks ago, Jesus was supposed to come back. That was according to Harold Camping, the 89-year old founder and main speaker on Family Radio. Family Radio is a supposedly Christian radio station, which broadcasts all over the world. Camping had come to the conclusion that Jesus would be returning on May 21st, 2011, and that all believers would be raptured on that date. Following that would be four months of incredible suffering, with the final end of the world on October 21st. Family Radio spent millions of dollars on billboards, websites and other publicity tools to get their message across. Thousands of Camping followers believed his calculations, ignoring Christ's explicit words, "No man knows the day or hour." Big media outlets like CNN picked up on the story and began running stories on those followers, including filming a man in Times Square, New York, who was expecting to be raptured. As everyone knows, the day came and went, Harold Camping and his followers were humiliated, and the world laughed merrily. Camping provided the unbelieving world with a fresh round of ammunition against Christians, and more reason not to take the claims of Christ seriously.

It's unfortunate that the media outlets would never give attention to genuine biblical prophets like Daniel. Because to listen to Daniel's prophecies is to watch them unfold to the day and hour. Probably the most amazing of the all the prophecies in the book of Daniel is the one in Daniel 9:24-27. Some have called it the most important prophecy in the entire Old Testament. Because contained in this prophecy is nothing less than the kind of date setting Harold Camping attempted. However, the setting of this date does not have to do with the timing of Christ's second coming, but with His first. It predicts remarkable things regarding Jerusalem, the Messiah, His ministry, and even beyond that.

And so we need to pay very close attention to this prophecy. Because if Daniel got it wrong, he is another Harold Camping. And if Daniel got it wrong about the first coming of Messiah, then we Christians have it all wrong. We had better pack up, go home, and start searching for a better alternative. Once again, the truth of the Bible and the identity of Messiah is on the line. The Bible has once again risked its whole reputation with a daring prophecy of the future.

When dealing with a prophecy as detailed as this, we need the attention for detail of a detective. Every word counts. We need to put the vision in verses 24-27 under a microscope. And it requires a kind of extra concentration, really giving yourself, to look at the details here, and working through it all. It is the kind of vision which will repay re-reading, and re-visiting, so you might want to jot down key notes, and come back and review.

To set the stage, let's consider the reason for the vision. Why was this vision given at all?

I. The Reason and Theme for the Vision

²⁰ Now while I was speaking, praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God for the holy mountain of my God, ²¹ yes, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, reached me about the time of the evening offering. ²² And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. ²³ "At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision:

You might remember what Daniel was doing in verses 1-19. Daniel had understood that the time of Israel's captivity was coming to an end. In light of that, he prayed a prayer of corporate repentance, asking God for forgiveness for Israel's sin, and for the restoration of Israel to the land; the rebuilding of the Temple, the removal of shame from Israel. Daniel was asking God to be faithful to His promises and bring Israel back to their land and restore the city and its temple.

When Gabriel comes, he comes as an answer to Daniel's prayer of repentance. This vision is a response to Daniel's prayer. That helps us to understand what this vision is going to be about. Is it about world empires? Is it about Gentile kingdoms? Is that what Daniel has been praying about? No, look at the beginning of verse 24:

Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city,

Verse 24 tells us that this vision is about Daniel's people and Daniel's city. It's primarily about Israel, and Jerusalem, and the events which will take place in or to Jerusalem. This is about Israel and Jerusalem and Messiah. This vision is God's reply to Daniel, of what He will do for Israel, for Jerusalem, and for the Temple. And as it turns out, the vision goes far beyond what Daniel was praying about. God gives Daniel exceedingly abundantly above all he can ask or think. This vision includes the coming of Messiah, His work, and beyond that.

In response to Daniel's prayer regarding Israel's being restored after seventy years, he receives a prophecy stretching into seventy weeks of years, that deals not only with the physical restoration of Israel, but their spiritual restoration – the putting away of sin.

With that in mind, let's take a look at this vision.

To help us with this prophecy, I want you to compare it to a track race at an athletics meeting. When we have a race, there are several things: there is the gun which starts the race, there are a certain amount of laps which the runners must complete, there is a timer which times how long it takes the runners to do each lap, and how long it takes them to finish the race. Now to help us put the elements together, let's see the elements in verses 24-26 and compare them to a race. Let's begin with

I. How Long Does The Race/Vision Last?

Firstly, according to verse 24, how long is this race? Seventy weeks. The word for *weeks* is the Hebrew word *shavua* which just means sevens. In other words, this is seventy sets of seven. A week is a set of seven, but we haven't yet determined if it is seventy sets of seven days, or seventy sets of seven months, or seventy sets of seven years. Let's leave that for now. What we know is that this prophecy, if compared to a race, lasts seventy laps. We don't yet know how long each of those laps

will last, but we know there are seventy laps.

II. How Does the Race/Vision Finish?

What happens at the finish line? What happens at the end of these seventy laps, when the race is completed?

Verse 24 gives us six things that happen when the seventy laps are over:

- 1) To finish the transgression: to bring Israel's apostasy to a climax and judge it once and for all.
- 2) To make an end of sins: with a final conclusionary judgement
- 3) To make reconciliation for iniquity: to make atonement and apply it to the nation of Israel
- 4) To bring in everlasting righteousness: to bring in the righteousness of the kingdom described by the prophets.
 - Isaiah 11:4-6 But with righteousness He shall judge the poor, And decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, And faithfulness the belt of His waist. ⁶ " The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them.
- 5) To seal up vision and prophecy to bring finality and fulfilment to all prior prophecy and revelation
- 6) To anoint the Most Holy to consecrate the great Temple described in Ezekiel 40-48.

So, we know this prophecy has been fulfilled when transgression and sin have been dealt with, atoned for; righteousness brought in, prophecy and visions come to an end, and what appears to be the Temple consecrated. When the race is over, when seventy laps are completed, this is what we will expect.

The next thing we want to ask is: what starts the race? What is the gun which sets this prophecy in motion?

III. What Begins the Race/Vision?

"Know therefore and understand, That from the going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem

Gabriel tells you what sets the timer going. The race begins when a command is given to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. Remember, after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, and then after that under Persian rule. Now we need to look back in history and ask, when was a command given to restore and rebuild Jerusalem?

There were a few decrees, but only one really fits the prophecy. The first decree came in 538 B.C, recorded in Ezra 1:1-4., when king Cyrus allowed the Jews to go back to rebuild the Temple. Now, according to the prophecy, is the decree about restoring the Temple, or about restoring Jerusalem? Gabriel is very clear that when a decree comes to restore the city, the clock starts. So it cannot be this first decree. It also rules out the decree of Darius in 519 B.C. recorded in Ezra 6, which was just a re-affirmation of the first one, to rebuild the temple.

A good sixty years later in 457, Ezra 7:11-26 records king Artaxerxes giving a decree for the Jews to return and service the temple. Again, there is no mention of building the city.

So finally, we come to the story of Nehemiah, who heard that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down. He looks sad in the presence of king Artaxerxes, who asks him why he is sad. Nehemiah tells

the king, and the king gives Nehemiah permission to go and restore and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The exact day of the month and year is given in Nehemiah 2:1, and corresponds to March 14th, 445 B.C.

Here, I believe, we have the moment that the clock starts ticking. In 445 B.C., Artaxerxes says, go and rebuild the city, and the gun goes off, and the timer begins.

IV. What Happens During the Race?

And now, something interesting happens. The prophecy starts to give us things to expect at different laps. After seven laps, expect something. After another 62 laps, bringing you to 69, expect something. What do they say? Well, after seven laps, The street shall be built again, and the wall, Even in troublesome times.

Then after another 62 laps, we have this incredible statement that Messiah will be cut off.

And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself:

Earlier, we saw it put another way:

Know therefore and understand, That from the going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem Until Messiah the Prince, There shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks;

So, to recap: the race lasts seventy laps. It starts with a decree to rebuild the city, given in 445 B.C. Once that clock is ticking, after seven laps, seven *shavuas*, the walls and streets of Jerusalem are rebuilt. After 69 *shavuas*, Messiah is present and is cut off, but not for himself.

There is no prophecy in the Old Testament as explicit and direct as this one. Messiah is often called other titles, like Branch, or governor. But here, He is called Moshiach – the Anointed One. The one chosen by God to be Prophet, Priest and King over Israel. Messiah is the ultimate Priphet, the ultimate priest and the ultimate king. All of Israel's prophets, priests and kings pointed to and looked forward to Messiah. He is called מְשֵׁיַחְ נְּבִּיר which is Messiah the Ruler, Messiah the Prince. The prophecy is saying, when Messiah comes, He will come as Prince.

It then tells us that after the 69 weeks, Messiah will be cut off, but not for Himself. The Hebrew is difficult here and some translate it as "Messiah will be cut off and have nothing". Either way, after 69 shavuas, Messiah will be killed.

So the million dollar question is: how long do each of these laps take? Remember, the word for weeks is *shavua*, which just means seven. It refers to a set of seven, but it doesn't tell you how long that set takes. How long is each of these seventy 'sevens'?

V. How Long is Each Lap/Week?

We don't have many choices. If it means seventy sets of seven days, then the prophecy must be completed just 490 days after the clock gets ticking. We know that Messiah had not come just a year and a half after Artaxerxes decree, so we can rule that out.

What about seventy sets of seven months? Maybe the *shavua* is a set of seven months? Well, again that gives you 490 months, which is a little over 40 years. Messiah certainly didn't come 40 years after Artaxerxes' decree.

So that leaves us with the choice that this means a week of years. A set of seven years. Each *shavua* is a set of seven years. Therefore, the whole prophecy lasts 490 years to run its course.

There's quite a bit of evidence that this is what Gabriel means and how Daniel understands it. Remember that the Jews not only had a week of days, they also had a week of years. They were used to thinking of years in sets of seven.

Leviticus 25:3-4 'Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather its fruit; ⁴ 'but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the LORD. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard.

In other words, in a week of years, you must have a Sabbath year. And after seven weeks of years, you have a Jubilee year.

Leviticus 25:8-9 8' And you shall count seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years; and the time of the seven sabbaths of years shall be to you forty-nine years. 9 'Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land

How often had Israel kept these sabbaths of years, and held the Jubilee year? They never did.

2 Chronicles 36:20-21 ²⁰ And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

Remember he had been contemplating Israel's captivity. Jeremiah said that Israel would be in captivity for seventy years. One year for every sabbath year violated. Sabbath years not kept for 490 years. This leads us to strongly think that the seventy *shavuas* is seventy weeks of years, or a total time period of 490 years - 490 Jewish years, we might add, since this was a prophecy for and to the Jews. The Jewish year is 360 days long.

So each lap of the track takes seven years. So the prophecy says, after seven of those laps, look for one fulfilment. After 69 of those laps, look for another fulfillment. And after seventy of those laps, look for it all to be fulfilled.

Well, let's do that. If we take seven sets of Jewish years, 49 years, and add them to 445 B.C., what do we come to? We can't be completely dogmatic here, but it may be the time by which Nehemiah and the generation after him had completed the full restoration of the city: its walls, streets and buildings.

But even more fascinating is to calculate the 69 laps. If we says each lap is seven Jewish years, and we multiply that by 69, we come to exactly 483 Jewish years, 173 883 days, or 476 years by our reckoning. If you start the clock on March 14-15, 445 B.C., and add those 69 laps of seven Jewish years, do you know what date you come to? April 9-10, 32. A.D. That corresponds to Palm Sunday. What happened on that day? On that day, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling Zechariah.

Zechariah 9:9 " Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.

On that day, Jesus came to Jerusalem as Messiah the Prince. It was unmistakable what Jesus was

saying to the nation by that act. He was saying – I am your King. I am Messiah the Prince. What city does this prophecy focus on? Jerusalem. This was the day that Jesus offered Himself publicly to Israel at the centre of their worship.

And what happened just five days later? Messiah the Prince was cut off. He was crucified in this city. He was cut off, just as the prophecy said. Who would He be cut off for? For the world – for the people He was dying for. As the prophecy said, He would be cut off, but not for Himself.

Now step back and consider two monumental truths:

First: the inspiration of Scripture. How can you explain a book that predicts to the day the presentation of Messiah the prince, centuries in advance? The book of Daniel has given us a precise timeline from one event to another, and it is correct, to the day. In fact, before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1948, critics of the book of Daniel claimed it was written after the time of Christ to make the prophecies fit: an after-the-event fraud. However, the Dead Sea Scroll belonged to a community that existed before the time of Christ, and among them was the book of Daniel. It's been reliably dated to 125 B.C., meaning that even if you want to say Daniel was written in about 165 B.C., you still have to explain how this book could predict the coming of Christ to the year, and to the day. There is no other book in the world that has that kind of prophecy in it, with that kind of detail. This prophecy has the fingerprints of the Creator of the world all over it. You are looking at something that cannot be explained by natural causes.

Second: the identity of Messiah. If you start the clock at the other decrees, the clock runs out, and no one has arrived who looks like Messiah. If you start the clock in either 457 or 445 B.C, the only person around that time claiming to be the Messiah was Jesus Christ. Therefore, those who deny the Messiahship of Jesus Christ must either accept that Daniel made a mistake, and that the Bible has errors in it, or face the fact that the only candidate for the fulfilment of this prophecy was Jesus Christ. With all the doubts and accusations cast at Jesus, this prophecy alone exonerates Him as the true Prince of Israel

Now there is some evidence that when Messiah is cut off, the timer is paused. The timer is not going to run normally for another seven years. Why do I say that? Because verse 26 tells you that something will happen which did not occur within seven years of Messiah's death:

And the people of the prince who is to come Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, And till the end of the war desolations are determined.

The people of the prince to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. Which people destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple? The Romans. When did they do that? In the year 70 A.D. It didn't happen within seven years of Messiah being cut off. It seems the clock is paused here, and it starts again in verse 27. I'll give you more reasons for seeing a pause between Messiah's death and the events of verse 27 next week.

But picture poor Daniel, who has been praying about the full restoration of Israel and Jerusalem. Here he gets a vision which goes far beyond what he asked for: a vision of the coming of Messiah, his death, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its second Temple! Daniel must be absolutely floored! How could God allow a rebuilt Temple and a restored Jerusalem to be destroyed again?

But that's exactly how it happened. The restored Temple was destroyed not by the Persians or the Greeks, but by the empire which was ruling in the time when Messiah came – the Romans.

And now I ask you to compare Daniel to Harold Camping. Compare Daniel to Nostradamus.

Compare Daniel to every self-proclaimed prophet, crystal ball reader, Tarot-card reader, and it reminds you again of the lion's den, of the fiery furnace, of Daniel's abilities to interpret Belshazzar's writing on the wall or Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel is head and shoulders above all his competitors. And Daniel says loud and clear: Jesus Christ is the Messiah. Jesus Christ is the Prince of Israel. Jesus Christ was cut off for His people. Jesus Christ brings in everlasting righteousness, makes atonement for sin, makes reconciliation. If people are looking for signs and verifications of the identity of Jesus, it's going to hard to top Daniel's vision.

God doesn't include these visions for our intellectual curiosity, or for our amusement. He includes them because He keeps pointing to the true Messiah, and saying like he said to Peter on the Mount: This is my beloved Son, listen to Him! Have you done that? Jesus is not a historical figure you study like Caesar or Genghis Khan. Jesus is a figure you must respond to. Have you looked to Him to make atonement for your sins? To make reconciliation for you?