

Daniel's 70 Weeks of Years:

When did it start? Has it ended, or is there a gap in it?

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Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: I am posting this well-written teaching by Dr. David Reagan because I make reference to it during our teaching on the book of Daniel, which is posted under sermon archives (Daniel 9:24-26)



One of the most remarkable and important prophecies in the Bible is found in Daniel 9:24-27. It is the cornerstone of Messianic prophecy because it establishes the timing of both the First and Second Advents of the Messiah.

The prophecy is usually referred to as “The 70 Weeks of Years.” This name derives from the opening words of most English translations: “Seventy weeks have been decreed” (Daniel 9:24). In the Hebrew, the word translated “weeks” is actually the word “sevens.” So, the text actually says, “Seventy sevens have been decreed . . .”

Just as the English word “dozen” can refer to a dozen of anything, the Hebrew word shavuim, meaning “sevens,” can refer to seven of anything. Its exact meaning is dependent upon the context. In this key passage from Daniel, the context makes it clear that he is speaking of years — seventy sevens of years, which would be a total of 490 years. It is therefore appropriate to refer to the prophecy as “The 70 Weeks of Years” even though those exact words are not found in the passage itself.

The Jewish Context and Goals

Another important thing to keep in mind about the context of the passage is that it is directed to the Jewish people. The opening words of the prophecy make this clear: “Seventy weeks have been declared for your people and your holy city . . .” (Daniel 9:24, emphasis added). The focus of the prophecy is the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

The prophecy begins by stating that six things will be accomplished regarding the Jewish people during a period of 490 years:

- “Finish the transgression”
- “Make an end of sin”
- “Make atonement for iniquity”
- “Bring in everlasting righteousness”
- “Seal up vision and prophecy”
- “Anoint the most holy place”

Let’s take a moment to consider the meaning of these six prophecies. The first, “finish the transgression,” refers to the Jew’s rejection of God. The Hebrew word translated “transgression” connotes the idea of rebellion, and the rebellion of the Jewish people is their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah. Jesus said He would not return until the Jewish people are willing to say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 23:37-39). The Jews will open their hearts to their Messiah before Daniel’s 490 year period ends.

The period will also witness an “end of sin” for the Jews. The word translated “sin” refers to the sins of daily life — sins of dishonesty and immorality. This end of sin will occur at the time the Jews accept their Messiah and His earthly reign of righteousness begins.

An atonement for Israel's sins is the third thing that will happen during Daniel's 70 weeks of years. This atonement occurred, of course, when Jesus shed His blood on the Cross for the sins of the world. But that atonement will not actually be applied to the Jews until they appropriate it by accepting Jesus as their Messiah.

The 490 year period will also 'bring in everlasting righteousness.' This undoubtedly refers to the establishment of the Messiah's earthly reign when the earth will be flooded with peace, righteousness and justice as the waters cover the sea.

The fifth achievement will be the fulfillment of all prophecy concerning the Messiah. The Apostle Peter referred to two types of Messianic prophecy — those related to "the sufferings of Christ" and those concerning "the glories to follow" (1 Peter 1:11). The suffering prophecies were all fulfilled at the Cross. The prophecies concerning "the glories to follow" are yet to be fulfilled. Just as Jesus was humiliated in history, He is going to be glorified in history. This will occur when the Jews accept Him, and He returns to reign over the world from Mt. Zion in Jerusalem.

The final goal to be achieved at the end of the 70 weeks of years is "the anointing of the most holy." Most English translations say "the most holy place." The Hebrew simply says, "the most holy." Commentators therefore differ as to whether this is a reference to the anointing of the Messiah as King of kings or whether it is talking about the anointing of the Millennial Temple described in Ezekiel 40-48. Either way the anointing will not take place until the Lord returns in response to the national repentance of the Jews.

The Starting Point

Daniel says all these spiritual goals will be accomplished within a special period of 490 years. When did that period begin, and when did it end? It is when Daniel addresses these questions that he begins to give clues as to the timing of the First and Second Advents of the Messiah.

The prophecy says that the starting point of the 70 weeks of years will be "the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" (Daniel 9:25). Keep in mind that this prophecy was given to Daniel by the angel Gabriel during the time of Israel's exile in Babylon. The approximate date was 538 B.C., shortly before the first remnant of Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem in 536 B.C. under Zerubbabel. Jerusalem was in ruins at this time, having been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar 70 years earlier in 586 B.C. (The captivity had begun in 605 B.C., before the destruction of Jerusalem, when Nebuchadnezzar took Daniel and other "youths" to Babylon as hostages — Daniel 1:1-4.)

The crucial question relates to when the decree was issued "to restore and rebuild Jerusalem." There are three possible dates:

- 538 B.C. — Cyrus, King of Persia, issued a decree to Zerubbabel to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-3; and Ezra 6:1-5).
- 457 B.C. — Artaxerxes, King of Persia, issued a decree to Ezra authorizing him to reinstitute the Temple services, appoint judges and magistrates, and teach the Law (Ezra 7:11-26).
- 445 B.C. — Artaxerxes issued a decree to Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:1-8).

On the surface, the third decree, the one issued to Nehemiah, seems to be the most obvious candidate for the starting date of the prophecy, for it is the only one that specifically relates to the rebuilding of the city. For that reason, most commentators have selected it as the beginning of the 70 weeks of years.

The Events of the 70 Weeks of Years

Daniel's prophecy next states that the 490 years will be divided into three periods as follows: seven weeks (49 years) plus sixty-two weeks (434 years) plus one week (7 years). He states that at the end of the first two periods (69 weeks or 483 years), the Messiah will be "cut off," a seemingly clear reference to the crucifixion. He then states that both Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed.

The prophecy concludes by focusing on the last week of years. It says that following the death of the Messiah and the destruction of Jerusalem, “the prince who is to come” will make a covenant with the Jewish people that will enable them to reinstitute their sacrificial system. This prince will come from the same people who destroyed the Temple (the Romans).

We know from 2 Thessalonians 2 that this “prince who is to come” is the Antichrist, the “man of lawlessness” who is “the son of destruction.” The same passage makes it clear that his covenant will enable the Jews to rebuild their Temple.

Both passages — Daniel 9 and 2 Thessalonians 2 — establish the fact that in the middle of this 70th week (3½ years into it) this “prince who is to come” will double cross the Jewish people. He will march into the rebuilt Temple and declare himself to be God. He will stop the sacrifices and he will erect “an abomination of desolation,” most likely an idol of himself. The book of Revelation specifies that the Messiah will return to earth 3½ years after this desolation of the Temple takes place.

Now we have the timing of the two advents of the Messiah. He will come the first time at the end of 483 years and will be “cut off” before the Temple is destroyed. He will return the second time at the end of a seven year period that will begin with a treaty that allows the Jews to rebuild their Temple and reinstitute the Mosaic system of sacrifices.

Calculating Dates

Sir Robert Anderson's Calculations		
445 B.C. to 32 A.D. (476 x 365)	=	173,740 days
March 14 to April 6 ¹	=	24 days
Leap years	=	116 days
Total	=	173,880 days
¹ Anderson calculated that the decree was issued on March 14, 445 B.C. and that Jesus died on April 6 in 32 A.D.		

The first person in modern history to calculate the 483 years to the “cutting off” of the Messiah was Sir Robert Anderson in his book, *The Coming Prince* (1894). Using the decree to Nehemiah issued in 445 B.C. as his starting point, and using what he called “the 360 day prophetic year,” Anderson calculated that it was exactly 173,880 days or 483 lunar years from the day the edict was issued to the day Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. His calculations placed the crucifixion in the spring of A.D. 32.

These calculations have remained almost sacred in Christian thinking for the past one hundred years. But they need to be examined carefully because the fact of the matter is that there are two serious problems with Anderson’s calculations.

The Prophetic Year Problem

The first is his assumption that the years in the prophecy are lunar years of 360 days. That assumption is based upon the fact that the book of Revelation defines the 70th week of Daniel as lasting a total of 2,520 days (Revelation 11:3 and 12:6). The only way that can translate into seven years is by using lunar years of 360 days.

Now, on the surface, it seems logical to apply this Revelation principle to Daniel. If the years of the final week of Daniel’s prophecy are lunar years, then surely the first 483 years must also be lunar years.

But there is a flaw in this logic. Daniel’s prophecy was written to the people of his time to give them, among other things, an insight as to when the Messiah would come. And the fact of the matter is that Daniel does not even so much as hint that he is speaking of anything other than regular solar years.

Some would counter by saying that the Jews used a lunar calendar and therefore thought only in lunar terms when calculating time. But that simply is not true. The Jews have never relied on a pure lunar calendar, like the Muslims do. The Jews have always used a lunar/solar calendar. Their months are 30 days long, but they insert what is called an intercalary month every so often to make adjustments for the true solar calendar.

For the Jews this is an absolute necessity because their major festivals (Passover, Harvest and Tabernacles) are all directly related to the agricultural cycle. If they did not make the solar adjustments, their festivals would migrate around the calendar, resulting in harvest festivals falling during seed planting times! This is exactly the case with the Muslim calendar which is a pure lunar calendar. And thus, the sacred festival of Ramadan circulates around the year. One year it will be in August, the next in September, and the next in October.

The point is that the Jews in Daniel's time did not think in terms of 360 day years. Nor did Daniel. If you will look at Daniel 9:1-2 you will see that shortly before he was given the 70 Weeks of Years prophecy by Gabriel, he discovered Jeremiah's prophecy that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years. He realized immediately that he was very near the end of those 70 years.

The indication of this passage is that Daniel interpreted Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years to be 70 regular years as defined by the Jewish lunar/solar calendar. And again, if his subsequent prophecy about the 70 weeks of years was to have any meaning to the Jewish people, it had to be understood in terms of regular years, not "prophetic years" of 360 days each.

Why then would there be a difference between the first 483 years and the last seven? I suspect it may relate to a statement made by Jesus in Matthew 24. He said the 70th week of Daniel will be "cut short" lest all life on earth be destroyed during that terrible period of tribulation (Matthew 24:22).

The Terminus Problem

The second problem with Anderson's calculations is their terminus date of 32 A.D. This just simply is not an acceptable year for the death of Jesus since it would place the crucifixion on either Sunday or Monday. Even Anderson recognized this problem, and as one author has put it, Anderson engaged in some "mathematical gymnastics" to arrive at a Friday crucifixion.

In his book, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Harold Hoehner of Dallas Theological Seminary shifts the date of Nehemiah's decree from 445 to 444 B.C. and then calculates the 173,880 days to the spring of 33 A.D., when the crucifixion would have fallen on a Friday. But this creates more problems than it solves. The 444 B.C. date is suspect and the 33 A.D. date is very late. Luke 3:23 says Jesus was "about 30 years of age" when He began His ministry. His ministry lasted 3½ years. Hoehner's chronology would make Jesus 32 years old at the start of His ministry and 35 at the time of his death.

An Alternative Viewpoint

I believe a better solution is to interpret Daniel's prophecy as speaking of lunar years adjusted periodically and thus amounting to regular years. I also believe that the best starting point for the prophecy is the decree issued to Ezra in 457 B.C.

I have already explained why I believe regular years should be used. Let me now explain why I think the decree issued to Ezra should be used as the starting point for the calculation of the first two periods totaling 483 years.

The decree given to Zerubbabel authorized the rebuilding of the Temple. The decree issued to Nehemiah concerned the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra's decree was more general in nature, covering a variety of subjects. But we know from Scripture that he interpreted it to mean that the Jews were authorized to launch a general rebuilding campaign that included the temple, the city, and the walls. His interpretation is stated in Ezra 9:9 — "God has not forsaken us, but has extended loving kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 9:9).

Now, using Ezra's decree as the starting point (457 B.C.), if we count forward 483 years we will arrive at 27 A.D. (There is only one year between 1 B.C. and 1 A.D.) According to the translator of Josephus, the Jewish new year that began in the fall of 27 A.D. marked the beginning of the last Jubilee Year that the Jews enjoyed in the land

before their worldwide dispersal by the Romans in 70 A.D. This is most likely the year that Jesus began His public ministry. This is hinted at in Luke 4 where it says that when Jesus launched His ministry at the synagogue in Nazareth, He did so by reading a passage from Isaiah 61 about the way in which the Messiah would fulfill the spiritual essence of the Jubilee. After finishing the reading, Jesus proclaimed, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The Relationship of the Resurrection

Further evidence that this date is correct is the fact that it would place the end of Jesus' 3½ year ministry in the spring of 31 A.D. And that happens to be the most likely year of the crucifixion.

Most scholars have tried to place the crucifixion in either 30 or 33 A.D. because these are the only two years in the time frame of Jesus' death when Passover fell on Friday. The belief that Jesus was crucified on a Passover that fell on Friday is based on a statement in Mark 15:22 which says the crucifixion took place on "the day of preparation before the Sabbath."

But this statement does not necessarily mean that the crucifixion took place on a Friday. Such an assumption is rooted in Gentile ignorance about Jewish feast days. What the Gentile church has failed to recognize over the centuries is that the first day after Passover is a feast day, or "High Sabbath," because it is the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is considered to be a Sabbath regardless of what day of the week it falls on (Numbers 28:16-18).

The Gospels make it clear that the crucifixion week had two Sabbaths. Mark 16:1 says a group of women bought spices to anoint the body of Jesus after the Sabbath was over. But in Luke 23:56 it says they bought the spices before the Sabbath and then rested on the Sabbath before proceeding to the tomb.

In the year 31 A.D. Passover fell on Wednesday. Jesus was crucified that morning and buried that evening. The next day, Thursday, was a High Sabbath. On Friday, after the High Sabbath, the women bought the spices and then rested on the regular Sabbath (Saturday) before going to the tomb on Sunday morning.

Further Collaboration

The time span I am proposing from 457 B.C. to 27 A.D. is also supported by another amazing piece of evidence. Do you remember how Daniel divided the first 483 years into two periods of time, first 49 years and then 434 years? Why did he do that? Go back and re-read Daniel 9:25 and notice that he makes specific reference to the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. Did he divide the period into two parts to indicate that the rebuilding of the city would occupy the first 49 years?

In a recent booklet entitled "The Daniel Papers," a publication of the Radio Bible Class, the author, Herb Vander Lugt, notes:

According to Barnes and several other trustworthy Bible commentators, the historian Prideaux declared Nehemiah's last action in rebuilding the city occurred in the 15th year of the Persian ruler Darius Nothus (423 - 404 B.C.). His 15th year was the 49th year from the 457 B.C. decree. Josephus seems to support this idea in his remarks about the death of Nehemiah.

A Prophetic Gap

One puzzle remains about Daniel's prophecy. What about the 70th week? Is it past or future? I believe there is no doubt whatsoever that it is future. The reason for that conclusion is simple. The prophecy begins by stating that the 490 years will produce six consequences among the Jewish people.

I began this article by outlining those six prophetic events in detail. If you will look back at them, you will readily see that they are still unfulfilled. The Jews are still in rebellion against God, they are still caught up in their sins, they are still refusing to accept the atonement for their iniquity, everlasting righteousness has not come to the earth, all prophecy concerning the Messiah has not yet been fulfilled, and “the most holy” has not been anointed.

There must, therefore, be a gap in the prophecy. This may seem strange to the casual reader. But students of prophecy are familiar with prophetic gaps. They are very common in prophetic literature because of the peculiar nature of the prophetic perspective. God would show His prophets great future events and the prophets would present them as if they were happening in rapid succession because that’s the way they appeared. The prophet was like a person looking down a mountain range seeing one mountain top after another, seemingly pressed up against each other, but in reality separated by great valleys which could not be seen.

Jesus Himself recognized this characteristic of prophecy when He read a prophecy from Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth. If you will check what He read (Luke 4:18- 19) against what Isaiah wrote (Isaiah 61:1-3), you will see that Jesus stopped reading in the middle of a sentence because the rest of the sentence had to do with His Second Coming.

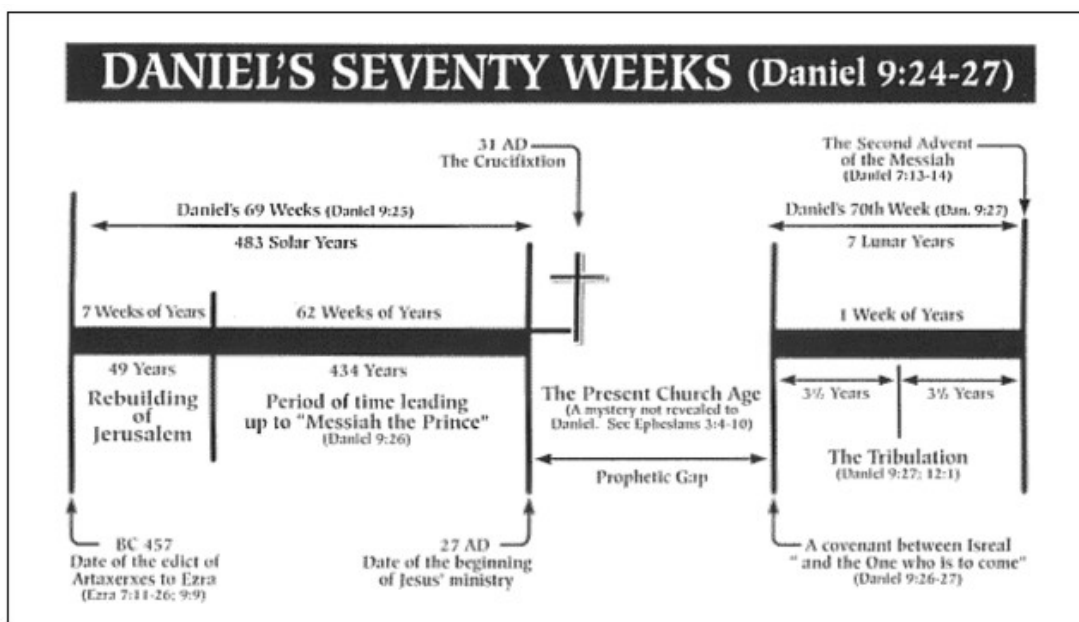
The Implications

For Christians, Daniel’s prophecy should serve to underscore the supernatural origin of the Bible. It should also serve as confirmation that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah.

For Jews, the prophecy should be deeply disturbing for two reasons. First, it clearly teaches that the Messiah had to come before the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. That means that either God failed to keep His promise or else the Jews missed recognizing their Messiah. Second, the prophecy clearly teaches that a terrible time of tribulation for the Jews still lies ahead.

Moses said it would be a time of “distress” that would occur in “the latter days” (Deuteronomy 4:30). Jeremiah called it “the time of Jacob’s distress” (Jeremiah 30:7). Daniel characterized it as “a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time” (Daniel 12:1). Zechariah says two-thirds of the Jews will “be cut of and perish” during that terrible time (Zechariah 13:8).

The process will be horrible. But the result will be glorious, for the remaining remnant will at long last turn their hearts to God, accept their Messiah, and cry out, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”



Recommended Reading:

1. Archer, Jr., Gleason L., Daniel (Vol. 7 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary edited by Frank E. Gaebelein, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985)
2. Hoehner, Harold, Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1977)
3. Jeremiah, David with C.C. Carlson, The Handwriting on the Wall (Word, Dallas, Texas, 1992)
4. Lugt, Herb Vander, The Daniel Papers: Daniel's Prophecy of 70 Weeks (Radio Bible Class, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994)
5. McClain, Alva J., Daniel's Prophecy of the 70 Weeks (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1940)
6. Showers, Renald, The Most High God (The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, West Collingswood, NJ, 1982)
7. Wood, Leon, A Commentary on Daniel (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1973)