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We Have Not Obeyed His Voice

Daniel 9:1-27

Fr. William Klock

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Last week we looked at the resurrection story in John 20 as it continued into the evening that first Easter Sunday—as Jesus appeared to his disciples while they were hiding, as he breathed new life into them through the Holy Spirit, and as he commissioned them with those words, “Even as the Father sent me, I am sending you.” With those actions, with those words, with that little group of disciples hiding in Jerusalem Jesus began the renewal of Israel. That was the beginning of a new people called to be light in the darkness and sent out to boldly proclaim the good news and the coming of God’s kingdom. At its core it was the same mission that the people of God had had since Abraham: to be light in the darkness, to make the one, true God known to the nations. But now, recentred in Jesus, this people would go out—as I said—as prophets, priests, and kings. As prophets, calling first Judah, then the nations to repentance. As priests, mediating, proclaiming the good news about Jesus who has died, who has risen, and who is now the world’s true Lord—it’s King. And as kings, as we make real Jesus’ kingdom in practical ways in the world, anticipating that day when we will reign with him.

And the New Testament tells us how those disciples went out into the world as prophets, priests, and kings. We read of their faithfulness. We read how they were opposed and persecuted and even killed. And yet we also see the seeds of what would come as little churches popped up all over the Roman Empire—even right under the nose of Caesar himself in Rome. And history shows us how the gospel continued to conquer and transform the world, until even mighty Caesar submitted himself and his empire to Jesus. The gospel did its

work. The old gods were defeated and their temples torn down—even turned into churches. The perverted sexual ethics of the Greeks and Romans faded away. The brutal gladiatorial games were outlawed. Slavery became a thing of the past. Women and children came to be valued and abortion and infanticide were done away with. The gospel taught the world about grace and mercy. It wasn’t perfect by any means, but I think most of us really have very little grasp just how much the power of the gospel transformed Western Civilisation for the better and in ways that displayed the life of the Spirit, that honoured Jesus, and that glorified God.

But what happened to all that? Christendom has fallen. The world around us is retreating back into darkness. Anti-gospel philosophies are taking over. Sexual immorality has become rampant in just a few short decades. We’re back to murdering our children before they’re born. The church has fallen out of favour. Christians are mocked. And while the gospel is still active, gone are those days when it captured whole peoples and radically transformed their societies. Instead, it’s become a regular thing to hear of prominent Christians apostatising. Whole churches forsake the gospel. Even our covenant children are turning away in troubling numbers.

Again, what happened? Could it be that we can learn something from Israel’s story of discipline and exile? That’s what got me thinking about preaching through the book of Daniel. The church today in the West seems to be in a sort of exile and Daniel offers us timely wisdom—showing us how to be faithful in an alien land and how to be light in a darkness that does its best to snuff us out. And I think a part of that wisdom that Daniel offers also addresses the question of “Why?” Why did this happen? If anything is clear in Daniel, it is that God is sovereign and that even the raging beasts of empire ultimately serve his purposes. And so as we find ourselves in exile, the story of Israel’s exile helps to answer why—if we have the humility to see it. And, I think, Daniel 9 exhorts us to just that sort of humility. It exhorts us to see the hand of God at work to fulfil his purposes in

even the fall of Christendom and the demise of the church. God’s people don’t just happen to experience defeat and they aren’t dragged into exile by random chance. Israel’s story reminds us that God has always had a purpose for his people—in the old covenant and in the new—and that he will do whatever it takes to make us the holy people, the light-in-the-darkness people he needs us to be. And that includes refining us to remove the dross, like gold in a crucible, when we’ve failed. There’s no Old Testament prophecy foretelling our current situation, but I think Israel’s story should prompt us to ask with great humility how we have failed in our prophetic, priestly, and kingly roles. It should prompt us to confess our sins, and to pray for the Lord’s gracious and merciful renewal. So let’s look at Daniel 9, starting with verses 1 and 2:

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

We’re back in the space between Chapters 5 and 6. Babylon has fallen to the Persians. Israel’s great enemy is gone. But Israel is still in exile. When will it end? When will the people return to Jerusalem? What does Daniel do? He turns to scripture. Daniel would not have had the Bible or even the Old Testament as we know it, but he did have both the Law and the Prophets in some form. And so Daniel goes to the Prophets and specifically to the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah had spoken of the exile lasting seventy years and as Daniel calculates it that seventy years is nearly up.

Before we go on, this is the first hint we get here that even if context allows us to line up Daniel’s chronology with historical events, the numbers are first and foremost symbolic. What comes later in this chapter has been the basis for countless eschatological

speculations, some reasonable and some completely crazy.

Our modern brains see numbers like this and want to think in terms of literal chronology. Seventy years means seventy years. And yet no matter how we try to line up the numbers of Daniel 9 with historical events, nothing is ever an exact fit. And that's because the numbers are symbolic—because that's how *their* brains worked—and what we have is more of a *chronography* than a *chronology*. It's a symbolic or stylised sketch meant to make sense of historical events. So the first vital thing to see with these numbers is the connection with the idea of the jubilee. Just as every seventh day was a sabbath, so every seventh year was a jubilee—a sort of year-long sabbath. The land was to have rest from planting and harvesting, debts were forgiven, land was returned to its owners, slaves were set free. It was very impractical from a human standpoint, but like the sabbath it showed the people's trust in the Lord to provide. It reminded them that it was his land and he had given it to them. They had not dug the wells or planted the vineyards. Both they and the land belonged to him. You can imagine that if people struggled to keep the sabbath, they'd really struggle to keep the jubilee. And they didn't. At best, only very, very rarely was the jubilee observed. And this became symbolic of Israel's failure to keep God's law. And so the Prophets spoke of Israel's exile in terms of the land finally having its rest—but one jubilee wasn't enough, so Jeremiah spoke of the exile as seventy years—ten jubilee cycles—to make up for Israel's long history of unfaithfulness. But, too, and this is the second part of the symbolism, seventy years is roughly a lifetime and the idea is that the exile would remove a full generation from the land—kind of like the forty years in the wilderness of Sinai. A full generation of exile gave time for a new generation to grow up, a generation that would be repentant, would return to the land, and would live in faithfulness. A new generation that would appreciate the Lord's presence and provision. So that's the idea behind this figure of seventy years. Keep that

in the back of your mind for when we come to the final verses of the chapter and remember that the numbers here in Chapter 9 aren't the important thing, what Daniel does in response to Jeremiah's prophecy is what's really important.

So Daniel sees that things are changing around him. The Babylonians that took his people into exile have been defeated—just as the Prophets had said they would. A generation has passed. He's now an old man. When will the Lord fulfil his promise to return his people to Jerusalem? When will he fulfil his promise to return to the temple? Again: Daniel goes to the scriptures, to God's words. Brothers and Sisters, if you want to hear from God, go to his word. Don't look for special revelation. Don't try to divine his will. Go to his word. And go to his word responsibly. Daniel knew that Jeremiah had prophesied the exile and so that's where he went. Because Jeremiah didn't just say that the exile would happen, through him the Lord explained why. It was because of the unfaithfulness of the people. It was because of his covenant with them. He would be their God and they would be his people. And he committed himself to them and, back at Sinai, they had committed themselves to him. He'd given them his law. That was their end of the covenant. Now, to be clear. They didn't earn their special place as God's people. That was grace. That was mercy. And they didn't earn anything by keeping the law. They kept the law because it was what identified them as God's people and made them different, made them light in the darkness. They kept the law because they loved him. Being faithful to God's law was their response to his loving-kindness.

But in the covenant, the Lord had also warned that if they were unfaithful—like a cheating spouse—they would be exiled from the land, they'd no longer be permitted to live in his presence. And Jeremiah, on the eve of the exile, had enumerated the many sins of the people. That was the reason for the exile. And through Jeremiah, the Lord had also promised that when the exile

was over, he would restore his people to the land and to himself and they would be faithful again.

And so Daniel goes to God's word and he reads all of this and he's moved to confession—not just for himself, because everything we've read so far would indicate that Daniel has been personally faithful—Daniel confesses on behalf of his people. This is the main section of Chapter 9. Let's read through the whole thing from verse 3 to 19:

Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him. He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity.

For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has been done against Jerusalem. As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by your truth. Therefore the LORD has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice. And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and have made a name for yourself, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

“O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name.”

Daniel's confession is a long one, but at the heart of it is the recognition that his people were in a covenant relationship with the Lord and that they had broken it. In chapter after chapter, Jeremiah enumerates the plethora of ways that Israel had sinned, that she's failed to keep the covenant, and that she's failed to trust in and to be faithful to the Lord. He had called and redeemed this people so that they could make him known to the nations, to be light in the darkness, but instead Israel had brought shame on

the Lord. Because of Israel, the nations mocked the Lord rather than giving him glory. Jeremiah recognized that the exile was his discipline. The Lord was not merely casting his people away in anger. Through Isaiah the Lord had said to his people, “you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you...Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you...bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” No, the exile wasn't a casting away. It was an act of loving discipline and when the time was right—Jeremiah's seventy years—the Lord would restore his people to Jerusalem and return to his temple.

And so knowing that, Daniel fell to his knees and confessed. And notice how he confesses the sins of his people. Occasionally, someone will say something to me about the confession in our liturgy. “I don't feel like I need to pray that this week.” “Why do we repeat it. Why do we confess our sins, hear the absolution, and yet again confess our unworthiness when we come to the Table and then when we leave?” Brothers and Sisters, it's not just about you or me as individuals. We are a people united in a covenant with the Lord and with each other. We're responsible as individuals, but we're also responsible as a community. When one of us sins, it affects all of us. Think about Israel. The righteous were carried away with the wicked in the exile. The righteous suffered with and because of the wicked. And yet we don't hear them crying out, “Why me? I didn't do anything wrong! This isn't fair!” Just the opposite, like Daniel, they threw ashes on their heads, put on sackcloth, knelt before the Lord, and confessed the sins of the *people*, and prayed for the Lord's mercy and grace.

I think we can learn something from that. The church today is in a mess. It's divided. Parts are preaching heresy. Parts are sold out to the world and its ways. Parts are consumed with materialism and greed and selfishness.

Some have shallow and man-centred preaching and some have shallow and man-centred worship. Some have no concern for holiness. Some trust in Caesar or Mammon or horses and chariots more than they trust in the Lord. And some of us can be very prideful, look down our noses, and as much as our criticisms may be good and right and true—and even needed—we become very self-righteous. We're blind to our own sins and shortcomings. And it never occurs to us that perhaps we're all in this together and this current “exile” in which the church finds herself and this collapse of Christendom is because we have failed in our collective witness—because instead of being kings and priests and prophets proclaiming and displaying the glories of the Lord, we have like Israel, brought shame on his name. Maybe others bear more guilt than we do, but notice that that was never Daniel's concern. Instead, he got down on his knees and repented and prayed “we” and “us” and begged for the Lord's mercy on the whole people. We have all in our own ways sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

In response to Daniel's prayer, we read in verses 20-23, that the Lord sent his angel, Gabriel, to show Daniel a vision—to give him insight and understanding, because the Lord had heard him and because the Lord greatly loved him. We'll finish with verses 24-27:

“Seventy weeks are decreed about 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. Know therefore and understand that from the going out 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 it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one 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. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.”

Sadly, this is the part of Daniel 9 that often gets all the attention—and then not even for the right reasons. People want to know the future and an unbelievable number of bizarre and downright silly explanations have been given to explain what’s really a very simple passage. This is usually because people try to apply this to events in their future, while overlooking the context. Chapter 8 is clear in pointing to the years around the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabean Revolt and so is the vision of Chapters 10-12. That’s what Gabriel is pointing towards here. Instead of Israel’s time of discipline ending completely after seventy years, the end of the exile will be more like the *beginning* of the end. Instead of seventy years, it will be seventy sevens—seventy being symbolic of a lifetime multiplied by the sevenfold chastisement of Leviticus 26. God’s people will return to Jerusalem, they will rebuild the temple, but that won’t be the end of their trials and tribulations. The first “week” of years will lead into sixty-two weeks of years, which will bring them to the reign of Antiochus, and that final week of years represents his reign over Judea, beginning with the murder of the high priest, leading in the middle to his desecration of the temple, and finally to his death and the deliverance of Judah.

This is a reminder, once again, of the sovereignty and faithfulness of the God of Israel. That’s one of Daniel’s major themes. When everything is wrong with the world and God’s people are suffering, Daniel reminds us that all these things are serving God’s purposes, that he is sovereign, and that he is faithful. He hasn’t cast us aside in anger and left us to be. Instead, our trials, his discipline, refine us as gold in the

crucible, so that when these days are over, we will give him glory before the eyes of the watching world.

Again, there’s no Old Testament prophecy (or New Testament prophecy, for that matter) that points to our current situation and tells us precisely what is happening the way Jeremiah pointed to Daniel’s day. In a sense we have to do what the author of Daniel did in those days of the Second Century as his people experienced the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanes. We have to go back to the story of God and his people. We need to remember that he has brought us into covenant with himself—in our case, through Jesus and the Spirit—and that he has made us prophets, priests, and kings for the sake of the kingdom of his son, for the sake of making him known, for the sake of transforming this world with the power of the gospel. He has made us to be light in the darkness. And, just as he did with Israel, he will take that light away if instead of bringing glory to his name, we bring shame.

And lest we think that is some old covenant thing that doesn’t apply to us, we have Jesus’ words to those seven churches under John’s care, the one’s John writes to in Revelation. Again, those words were written to them about their situation, about the trials and tribulations they were about to face, but their calling to be light in the darkness is our calling too. And Jesus warned them that if they would not repent of their sins and failures, if they refused to be faithful in their duties as prophets, priests, and kings, that the Lord would take away their lamps.

I had planned to preach on Daniel 9 to close out the season of Lent, but our Sunday snowpocalypse back in March pushed it forward. It’s a somber theme for Eastertide, but I don’t think it’s entirely inappropriate. Brother and Sisters, we are called to be a people shaped by the events and the message of Easter, but the things happening around us practically shout at us of our failure to do that. Maybe you and I aren’t the worst offenders. Maybe our church isn’t the worst offender. And so many of the

failures of the church and of Christendom happened before any of us were even born and, like Daniel, we’re experiencing exile largely because of the failure of previous generations. But you and I are reminded that we are joined in a covenant with all of our brothers and sisters. And so being Easter people right now means humbling ourselves, examining ourselves and our church and our churches in light of the scriptures, repenting, confessing, and praying for the church and for the kingdom as a whole and asking the Lord to show us his mercy and grace. And if those Jewish saints living through those dark days two centuries before Jesus could trust that the Lord would deliver them, you and I can hope and trust in the Lord even more. That, too, is part of Easter. As we proclaim in the Lord’s Supper: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. He will come again, someday, and he will come when his church has fulfilled the mission he has given. And that is reason to trust that he will never abandon us and it is reason to hope for that day when he has made his bride spotlessly perfect.

Let us pray: Almighty God, who gave your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always receive with thankfulness the immeasurable benefit of his sacrifice, and daily endeavour to follow in the blessed steps of his most holy life, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for evermore. *Amen.*