



# bb-TBC-52

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## **And to the ends of the earth**

During the time of the Babylonian exile the prophet Daniel had several visions and prophecies that outlined future events. In one such message there is the **only** direct reference to the Messiah in the Old Testament.

### ▼ Daniel 9:25–27 ASV

Know therefore and discern, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the anointed one, the prince, shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: it shall be built again, with street and moat, even in troublous times.

And after the threescore and two weeks shall **the anointed one** (the Messiah) be cut off, and shall have nothing: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and even unto the end shall be war; desolations are determined.

And he shall make a firm covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease; and upon the wing of abominations *shall come* one that maketh desolate; and even unto the full end, and that determined, shall *wrath* be poured out upon the desolate.

(Daniel 9:25–27 ASV)

The interpretation of this passage has divided Christians for almost 200 years, at least, in their understanding of future events.

The units that Daniel uses are 'weeks of years' i.e. seven year blocks. The nation had been sentenced to 70 years exile and as Daniel prays God gives him an outline of 70 **times** 7 years in units of seven years each. In the final 'week' Daniel refers to Messiah being 'cut off', seemingly a clear pointer to Calvary and then predicts that a foreign nation will destroy both the city and the sanctuary. It is clear that this was future when Daniel received it as the city and the sanctuary were already in ruins at that time. He has the prophet's gift of looking over the valleys and seeing the mountain peaks.

## **Daniel's 70 weeks**

There is a reference here to a covenant being confirmed or strengthened with 'many' for one 'week' i.e. for seven years. And, that half way through that period he would cause 'sacrifice and the oblation to cease'. This would seem to be seems to mean the end of temple sacrifices and ceremonies. It is not easy to interpret all these details.



As Charles Spurgeon once said 'only fools and madmen are certain in their interpretation of the Revelation' and perhaps we should extend that comment to include the prophecies of Daniel.

But here is my hypothesis, my 'best fit' of which I am not 'certain' but at least 'comfortable'. Christ's public ministry to the covenant nation was approximately three and a half years, or half a 'week'. During that time he focused on the people of the Sinai covenant, the lost sheep of Israel.

But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matthew 10:6 NKJV)

But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matthew 15:24 NKJV)

...confirming God's plan and word to them. He strictly forbade his disciples to widen this focus saying that his role was to reach the lost sheep of the house of Israel; language which links with the promises of God to restore his exiled flocks and bring them together under a single shepherd. The days of his public ministry were as though all the promises were coming true.

Their days were as the days of heaven upon earth, as Moses had once promised Israel. Like a second Joshua he conquered the land and brought God's kingdom in wherever the sole of his foot was placed. Storms, sicknesses, demons.. all came under his rule. The kingdom was at hand, within reach.

After three and a half years he was violently 'cut off' and his death effectively made 'sacrifice and oblation' redundant. Christ was raised from the dead and continued his ministry through his Agent or Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

The second period of three and a half years would seem to culminate with the death of Stephen as the first martyr. The sense of continuity can be heard in the opening phrases of the Acts;

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Acts 1:1 NKJV.

Luke's gospel is the 'beginning'; the Acts is the 'continuation' of the 'doing and teaching' of Christ.

For the earliest part of the Acts the scene is set in Jerusalem and the circles then begin to widen. For the first period Christ, in the person of the Holy Spirit, continues his labours among the original covenant people. This was their destiny and he would honour his promises.

He confirmed the covenant with many, with very many. In fact, the chief priests complained that the Christians had filled Jerusalem with this teaching and great crowds of people numbering thousands came to genuine faith in Christ. However it was this vast increase in the numbers of the believers that precipitated an action by the religious leaders that had far reaching consequences.

The conflict ultimately focused on one man, Stephen. Stephen was a Hellenist-Jew. He was thoroughly Jewish but his mind-set and his mother tongue was Greek. There were thousands like him in Jerusalem and throughout the Mediterranean world. The Christians now numbered so many thousands that they could be thought of as yet another group within Judaism. There had already been Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and others and now there was a large and vigorous group known as The Nazarenes; the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

▼ Acts 24:5 NKJV

For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. (Acts 24:5 NKJV)

Their patterns were increasingly different to the other Jewish sects and would have given the appearance of a 'church within a church'. We must not forget that the covenant people were already regarded as 'the church'. Now however, we have another church, within the church and it is outside the control of the religious leaders and they become increasingly agitated. The 'church within a church' began to function as a separate community. They had their own times of prayer and teaching and had adopted a simple ceremony of the Lord's supper in which they remembered the Christ and the cross and looked forward 'till he come' to his return and kingdom in all its fulness.

They began their own 'community care' programme and the needy widows received a daily allowance. However, because the majority of Nazarenes were from a Hebrew-Jewish background and the apostles too were from this background the simple organisation tended to function best among the Hebrew-speaking Jews. There was a complaint that the Greek-speaking widows in the community were being neglected. Seven men were chosen to administer the allowance specifically to this group. Men who were clearly part of that Greek-speaking community; we have the list of their names and each name is Greek.

One of these men was a fiery evangelist, a man full of the Spirit and faith and one who could not be silenced. It seemed he would be the perfect 'test-case' for the authorities to show their muscle. He was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the official Jewish authority in the land, and the charges were brought.

## **The evidence against Stephen**

If it is true that 'there is no smoke without fire' we may get a fairly accurate idea of the messages that Stephen had been preaching. The charges all have to do with Stephen's attitude to Moses, the Sinai Covenant and the Temple. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said,

### ▼ Acts 6:11-14 NKJV

"This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." Acts 6:11-14 NKJV.

As with any mob, the story line becomes a little confused but we can identify some clear elements of Stephen's preaching.

1. It seems that Stephen was making a clear distinction between Moses and Jesus of Nazareth.
2. He made statements about the Sinai law and the Temple that caused people to say he is 'against' the Temple and the Law,
3. and he seemed to have claimed that Jesus of Nazareth would bring the Temple ceremonies to an end and change the customs that Moses had instituted.

For the religious rulers of the day this man was instigating revolution. For us, as we read the record, we can see that Stephen was putting 'clear blue water' between the Old and the New Covenants. Stephen's answer to the charge is to launch on a mini-history of the covenant people from their physical beginnings in Abraham, through the time of their captivity in Egypt and through to Moses' first abortive attempt to bring them deliverance.

The council must have wondered where all this was going. He finds the point he wants to make in the protest of a fellow Israelite captive in Egypt who asked Moses;

▼ Acts 7:27 NKJV

"Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Acts 7:27 NKJV.

We are back to the old question of authority. During his earthly ministry this question was frequently asked about Jesus of Nazareth; "Tell us, by what authority are You doing these things? Or who is he who gave You this authority?" Luke 20:2 NKJV. But the link with Moses is especially telling because Moses, himself, prophesied that God would send a prophet like himself;

▼ Acts 7:37-38. KJV

This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that was in the **church** in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: Acts 7:37-38. KJV.

(I have reverted to the old King James version here where the Greek word **ekklesia** is translated as it is in most of the New Testament by the word 'church'. )

Stephen is building his case.

1. Moses was the mediator of a covenant.
2. That covenant brought a covenant people into being
3. and that people was required to give absolute obedience to the mediator of the covenant or suffer the penalty of death.

And Moses predicted that God would perform an action-replay but with another man.

1. God would raise up another prophet with a like destiny; another who would lead the people to freedom.
2. Another who would bring them into the presence of God and establish a covenant in which they would become the covenant people of God.
3. Another whose word would be law in their midst.

And tragically the action-replay was being repeated in every detail;

▼ Acts 7:39 NKJV

...whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt... Acts 7:39 NKJV.

Stephen now turns the tables and suddenly it is the nation's leaders who are in court under trial;

▼ Acts 7:51 NKJV

"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Acts 7:51 NKJV.

At the time of the first outpouring of the Spirit Peter had brought a similar accusation against the people;

▼ Acts 2:23 NKJV

Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; Acts 2:23 NKJV.

And their response is recorded too;

▼ Acts 2:37 NKJV

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Acts 2:37 NKJV.

Peter was able to continue in offering free forgiveness and the promise of the Spirit to all who surrendered to Christ. It gives a tragic backdrop to the events recorded in Acts 7. When the religious leaders heard Stephen they too were 'cut to the heart' but with a very different response;

▼ Acts 7:54 NKJV

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. Acts 7:54 NKJV.

They threw Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. As the old evangelists used to say 'it is the same sun which melts the butter and hardens the clay'.

They heard, essentially, the beginnings of the same message but, as the people had rejected Moses and refused to obey him, now they rejected the word of Christ through Stephen.

This was the last recorded national opportunity for the original covenant nation to enter into its destiny and submit to the man at God's right hand. It is not possible to measure the time precisely, but did this “fill up the last half-week”, three and a half years, of God's unique faithfulness to the covenant people?

Whether that is so or not the rejection of Stephen's testimony and his stoning mark a watershed in the Acts. Up until this time the focus has been Jerusalem but from this point onwards the focus will shift, slowly but surely, to the ends of the earth. There can surely be no accident that this is the exact moment that Luke brings another character into his account of Christ's continuing mission through the agency of the Spirit.

This is the moment that we first read of Paul or Saul as he was known then;

▼ Acts 7:57-58 NKJV

Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. Acts 7:57-58 NKJV.

In the next three chapters the gospel moves South, North and West. North towards the land of the Samaritans. South in the life of a court official from Ethiopia. North towards Damascus and West towards the Roman centre and chief garrison town of Syria, Caesarea. Saul was one of the young Jewish leaders of his day. A man of boundless energy and determination and the worst enemy “the Nazarenes” would ever have.

He used the death of Stephen as the ripe moment to launch a programme of persecution against the Nazarenes and the saints were scattered by his activities. All, except the apostles who stayed with the harassed flock in Jerusalem, fled from the city. Peter's ‘running away’ days were over.

## **Jerusalem, Samaria and the world**

One of Stephen's colleagues in the distribution of the Hellenist's widows' allowance was another powerful evangelist, Philip. Philip went north and came to the city of Samaria. The city of Samaria had once been the capital of the northern 'house of Israel' and had been captured in 722BC by the armies of Assyria. It then underwent its own special history. As we have seen earlier, the Assyrians not only deported the house of Israel into the far reaches of their empire but they repopulated the land with foreign groups who intermarried with the dregs of Israel that had been left behind.

Life was difficult for the new immigrants. They were attacked by wild animals and decided they must placate the god of their new homeland. They managed to get some renegade Jewish priests who taught them some basics from the books of Moses and the people became known as Samaritans from their new homeland. They were a mongrel people and theirs was a mongrel religion.

When the remnant of Judah returned to the ruins of Jerusalem and began to rebuild their temple the Samaritans wanted to join in but they were banned by the returned people of Judah and animosity burned between the two peoples. At one time the Samaritans built their own temple on the sacred site of Gerizim but the Jews burned it down in the years between the Old and New Testaments. As John's gospel expressed it many years later...

▼ John 4:9 NKJV

Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. John 4:9 NKJV.

We need to carry John's comment with us into Philip's visit to the city of Samaria; "the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans", but one Jew did and revealed to them that he was the Saviour of the World. Even though Judaism had excluded them, Christ had included them in his itinerary and brought a promise of living waters to the people.

With the arrival of Philip the time has come for the promise to be fulfilled. Philip preached Christ to them. It is a simple statement. God confirmed the preaching with wonderful signs and the joy was city-wide. There were some notable converts, among them a local wonder-worker whose name was Simon.

We are told that Philip preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and that many believed, were baptised and 'continued earnestly' with Philip. But for all these wonderful events there was something incomplete about the experience of these believers and it is very informative to observe the logic of the early Christians in action;

▼ Acts 8:14-16 NKJV

Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Acts 8:14-16 NKJV.

When Peter and John arrived in Samaria, (and John remember had once wanted to bring down a very different kind of fire on the Samaritans (Luke 9:54)), they laid hands on the converts and they received the Holy Spirit. We are not told exactly what happened but Simon saw enough to make him want to be able to have the same power of giving the Spirit.

Peter's rebuke declares that Simon, who had believed, been baptised and continued in company with Philip, was still in the grip of sin and that his heart was not right. The Samaritans have believed but the promise made to some of their countrymen that they would drink and never thirst again has not yet been fulfilled.

These passages have perplexed Christian commentators as they have tried to explain why things happened as they did here in Samaria. In simple terms the kingdom is expanding and non-covenant community peoples are being drawn into it.

There is a strong connection, as we have seen, between the kingdom of God and the coming of the Spirit and a strong connection between the coming of the kingdom and the commencement of the New Covenant. In that upper room where Christ had spoken about the New Covenant and where later he said so much about the coming Spirit, he ended the New Covenant commemorative meal by connecting the New Covenant with the coming kingdom;

▼ Luke 22:15-16 NKJV

Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Luke 22:15-16 NKJV.

The Old Covenant community first celebrated Passover just once before they were joined in covenant with God at Sinai. Their first Passover was not commemorative but in anticipation, it looked forwards. In the upper room the same pattern emerges. Before the New Covenant is established, they celebrate not a commemorative meal but a meal in which they anticipate the New Covenant and its blessings.

It was, as we have seen, during this same evening that Christ gave the most explicit promises of the coming Spirit. A coming covenant, a coming kingdom, a coming Spirit all come together in this final hour of fellowship with his followers.

Simon in Samaria had responded deeply to what he had heard but he has not come into union with Christ. The Spirit has been manifested all around him but

not in him. In heart he remains what he had always been... a man outside the New Covenant.

The kingdom continued to spread and in Acts 10 it soon engulfs the home of a Roman centurion. We quickly forget things that we do not understand and Peter had not yet understood the full implications of the New Covenant. It had been promised to a reconstituted Israel and events in Jerusalem had fitted his expectations. We cannot be sure of his thinking in regards to the Samaritans. Perhaps he thought there was sufficient pure blood in this mixed multitude to qualify them for a place in the kingdom and a part in the New Covenant community, but what was he to make of a request to visit the home of a thoroughgoing Gentile with not a drop of Israelite blood in him. He had seen implications of a wider truth but he had not understood them and so had forgotten them.

Cornelius, the centurion from Caesarea has a wonderful character reference. He was part of an occupying army and yet highly regarded by some of his household who were Jews. He gave charitable gifts regularly and generously. Cornelius' servants said that Cornelius' reputation was known throughout Judaism and they pleaded with Peter to journey to Caesarea to instruct him.

Peter had received a perplexing vision in which God had told him not to call unclean what God had cleansed and he travelled to Caesarea with six companions. The thrilling story is well known but we should point out Peter's diffidence. He is really not sure what he is doing in this home. He is unsure as to what is expected of him and begins to speak. It appears that Cornelius already had a good grasp of the public ministry of Christ as Peter puts it "you already know these things." (Acts 10:37) Peter begins to expound the consequences of the cross declaring that 'whoever believes in Christ will receive remission of sins'.

His message was interrupted by a powerful visitation of the Spirit. The language is vital and dynamic; "the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word..." Even though Peter has still not quite fitted all this into his theology he is convinced, as were his colleagues;

## **Breakthrough!**

▼ Acts 10:45 NKJV

And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. Acts 10:45 NKJV.

This is a repeat of the day of Pentecost and Peter recognises it as such. He slowly grasps the truth; God is including the Gentiles, people outside the Sinai Covenant community in this New Covenant. And seeing the clear implications he instructs them to be baptised in water in submission to the person of Jesus Christ. This, incidentally, is the only time that 'baptism' was 'commanded' in the record of the Acts.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem he is cross-questioned by a strongly Jews-only contingent within the gathering and explains what has occurred. He tells the story in terms of his own experience on the day of Pentecost. He gathers together a whole bundle of words, outpouring, the Spirit falling, Spirit-baptism used to describe the day of Pentecost and applies them to the household of Cornelius.

His questioners demand an explanation of his behaviour and Peter's only defence is that

▼ Acts 11:15 NKJV

"the Holy Spirit fell on them, as upon us at the beginning". Acts 11:15 NKJV.

How could they argue against such a thing? We have a description of their final response to Peter's testimony in the words;

▼ Acts 11:18 NKJV

When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." Acts 11:18 NKJV.

It is hard today to recapture the almost incredulous gasp of the people who heard... "then God has included the Gentiles". Events often occur before their explanations and we ought to be generous in our judgments as we observe the theological struggles of these early Christians. Isaiah had said;

"Do not remember the former things, Nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing." Is 43:18-19 NKJV.

But that is often easier said than done. The things that were happening represent a genuine paradigm shift. They had no points of reference from which to understand what was happening. What they needed was someone who could

grasp the implications of the events and express them, by the Spirit, in a way that made all the right connections. God had just the man in mind. The last time many of them saw him he had been holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen; his name was Paul.

Bailey, Ron. The Better Covenant ). Chap 18: and to the end of the earth. Kindle Edition.

## **Summary.**

In this session we suggested a fulfilment of Daniel's 70 Weeks prophecy in Christ's reaching out to the people of the Old Covenant during his life and in the first years of the New Covenant. We traced the widening circle of those who were responding to the message and see as each group has their own conscious event of the 'coming of the Spirit'. We tried to be generous in understanding Peter's struggles with the whole concept of the New Covenant and introduced the man to whom God would give the definitive explanation; Paul.