

PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: ZECHARIAH

Notes for Lesson One: Zechariah & His Visions (Zechariah 1 & 2)

We shall now move on and study the book of Zechariah, who joined Haggai in calling the people to rebuild the temple. You will quickly notice that Zechariah is much different in style and intent. Whereas Haggai dealt with the situation in very straightforward terms, Zechariah presents a broader, more visionary perspective of how events in his lifetime fit into God's long-term plans.

Introduction to Zechariah (Zechariah 1:1-6)

These verses show us that Zechariah's ministry took place at the same time as Haggai's. They also show us that, like Haggai, Zechariah taught the people that turning away from God's call, in order to pursue their own desires, would lead only to problems. Yet, we shall also soon see that Zechariah has a different approach than Haggai, and has wider goals in mind.

The first verse of the book shows us that the ministries of Zechariah and Haggai took place at the same time (1:1; see also Haggai 1:1, 2:1, 2:10 and Ezra 5:1, 6:14). Like Haggai, Zechariah saw the still neglected temple project as an indication that the people had lost their focus and their devotion to God, because of the fear and discouragement resulting from the stiff opposition they had met when they first began to rebuild the temple. While not much is known about Zechariah personally, available genealogies suggest that he was probably fairly young at the time of his visions. He was the son of Berekiah and the grandson of Iddo, and the Iddo mentioned in Nehemiah 12:4 (one of the earliest returnees from Babylon) may have been his grandfather. None of this is certain, though, because Zechariah was one of the most common Jewish names in the Old Testament era (there are at least 30 different men named Zechariah in the Old Testament).

The two books of Haggai and Zechariah complement each other in several respects, and provide much material for thoughtful study. The Old Testament historian and commentator Joyce Baldwin has said that Haggai was a builder, laying a solid conceptual framework to motivate the people to build the temple, whereas Zechariah was an artist, adding color, symbolism, and light to the structure, so as to deepen the people's understanding and devotion. Through him, God wanted the people to think about the greater significance of what was happening in their lifetimes. This type of vision is always important, and is unfortunately rare. It is much easier to try to solve our immediate problems and meet our immediate goals, but we must always call ourselves to remember that the events that happen in our own lifetimes are only a small part of what God wants to do through us.

The prophet begins with a call to faithfulness (1:2-6). It is a firm message, and similar to the call that we saw Haggai give to the people. Zechariah calls on the example of previous generations, so many of whom had turned away from God, only to regret it deeply because of the bad fruit that it produced in their lives. Zechariah reminds them of God's discipline, and reminds them also of the value of repentance. He will not dwell at length on these things, but he wishes to establish them at the beginning, so that the unusual visions that follow can be seen in their context.

Before moving ahead to Zechariah's visions, let us make a brief survey of the book and its contents. The book begins (Zechariah 1-6) with a series of visions of encouragement. These

contain some strange sights that were revealed to the prophet, but most convey a fairly clear message designed to encourage those who were at work on the temple to continue with all their heart. The middle of the book (Zechariah 7-8) contains a short digression on what constitutes a genuine relationship with, and genuine worship of, God. The lessons in these chapters were precipitated by some questions arising from the changes in Israel's situation that were taking place. The book closes (Zechariah 9-14) with a series of important and interesting visions of the future. While serving at the time as further encouragement for Zechariah's contemporaries, many of these messages find their greatest significance and fulfillment in Jesus.

In fact, Zechariah is very significant to the New Testament. Amongst the sixteen prophetic books, only Isaiah is quoted more frequently in the New Testament than Zechariah. The last few chapters contain several significant descriptions of Jesus' ministry that demonstrated the ultimate fulfillment of the events taking place in the 6th century BC.

Study Suggestion: Why did Haggai and Zechariah approach the same basic situation with such different methods of addressing it? What was God using each of them to do? What can we learn from this about how God might teach us when there are needs in our own lives and ministries?

Zechariah's First Two Visions (Zechariah 1:7-21)

Two months after the last events covered in Haggai, Zechariah had a series of visions that were primarily designed to give encouragement to the temple builders. The first two of these visions used images of several familiar objects (horses, trees, horns, and workmen) in a way that emphasized the significant changes through which God was leading his people.

Zechariah's first vision consists of a group of horses and riders among some myrtle trees (a common, aromatic evergreen shrub) in a valley outside Jerusalem (1:7-17). He first sees a man riding a red horse, and then notices three other horses (or perhaps groups of horses). They are described as 'those the Lord has sent to go throughout the earth', and they give their report to an angel. God is emphasizing that he does know what is going on, that he has eyes and ears that reach throughout the world. In particular, he is well aware of all that his people have gone through in the past, and also of the present obstacles that they face.

The riders report to the angel that they have 'found the whole world at rest and in peace'. Note that this was not literally true of the world at that time (or at practically any other time!), but is meant in a somewhat different sense. It soon becomes clear that God's first concern is for the welfare of his people, and in that regard the rest of the world has been indifferent. The world feels at peace with regards to God's people, and indeed barely notices what they are doing as long as they do not cause any disturbances. Thus, on the heels of what, on the surface, would have seemed to be a satisfactory report, the angel pleads with God, asking how much longer he will withhold mercy from Jerusalem and Judah. (Note that the angel mentions the seventy year period that had been prophesied by Jeremiah.)

God comforts the angel and makes a proclamation regarding his burning concern for his people. The feeling of peace and security on the part of the nations does not please him, but angers him, because he is 'very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion'. He proclaims that the time has come for the temple and the rest of Jerusalem to be rebuilt, and promises that his people will once again enjoy prosperity and hope.

The prophet then has a second and less complicated vision (1:18-21). He sees four horns (perhaps attached to animals, perhaps floating in the air), and then sees four workmen who throw

them down. Horns are used frequently in the Old Testament, both in prophecy and in poetry, as a symbol of strength, and here they symbolize the foreign powers that have oppressed and conquered God's people. The number four, often used in similar contexts, simply refers to these enemies coming from every direction, as in the old saying 'the four corners of the earth'. The workmen, or blacksmiths, or smiths (translated 'craftsmen' in the NIV), are a sign that God has the available means to defeat the enemies of his people whenever he feels that the time has come. His 'workmen' can come in many forms, depending on the type of 'horn' that they must throw down.

Study Suggestion: First, read back over these two visions to make sure that you understand what Zechariah was saying. Then, consider how these visions related to the immediate situation, and how they could have encouraged the people as they built the temple. Finally, in what kinds of situations can they encourage us today?

The Third Vision: Jerusalem's Protector (Zechariah 2)

In the third vision, the prophet sees a man with a measuring line, calculating the dimensions of Jerusalem. God uses this vision to proclaim that he will once again protect Jerusalem and his people. He re-assures them that the time set for discipline is past, and that they should thus rebuild their confidence so that they can fulfill the plans he has for them.

The man with the measuring line (2:1-5) is determining 'how wide and how long' Jerusalem is. This would be a completely rational part of the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem, and in particular as a preparation for rebuilding the city walls, usually the first step in building or rebuilding an ancient city. But here, God wants the temple to be rebuilt first, and he thus calls out to the surveyor with a change of plans. Jerusalem will be a city without physical walls, and instead God will be a 'wall of fire' around it - that is, God will make himself an obstacle which no enemy will be able to get past. God also says that he will be Jerusalem's glory from within. We know that, indeed, it would be several decades before the physical walls were rebuilt, and throughout that time God indeed protected them, and they lived safely, despite their vulnerability.

The vision then turns to the fate of Jerusalem's enemies (2:6-9). Although God willingly used them to discipline his people, allowing them to harm and oppress them, now the time has come for things to be reversed with the return from exile. He is not pleased at the zest with which these pagans harmed 'the apple of his eye', and he will be a protective father, delivering discipline and justice where it has long been deferred.

The crucial thrust of this prophecy is seen in 2:10-13, as God looks for his people to develop an expanded vision. The things he says here are encouragement for the people at the time, but are meant even more as a look ahead to the ultimate fulfillment of the Jewish nation in the coming of Christ. For example, his promise that "I will live among you" refers both to the visible presence he would have when the temple was completed, and also to the even deeper ways that he lives amongst Christians through his Holy Spirit. Likewise, the promise that 'many nations will be joined with the Lord' finds its ultimate fulfillment through the gospel. God wants to give them a sense that the temple rebuilding is not only important in its own right, but is also a key step in a grand plan that will unfold over centuries to come. Finally, he re-iterates his more immediate message with the assurance that God has 'roused himself'. God has decided that the time for exile and discipline is over, and is ready to act on their behalf. He thus calls the people also to be roused, and to keep hard at work on the temple, not giving in this time to distraction or discouragement.

Study Suggestion: In what situations might God speak to us in a way similar to the message he gave to the surveyor with the measuring line? How was God a 'wall of fire' around Jerusalem? In what ways is he a 'wall of fire' around us? Study the things he says about the future, and consider how we can draw encouragement from them, whether in the same ways as Zechariah's original hearers would have, or in new ways.

For Further Study

Two of the books recommended earlier for studying Haggai would also be good choices for studying Zechariah:

Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Tyndale)

Michael Bentley, *Building For God's Glory - Haggai & Zechariah Simply Explained* (Welwyn)

Bentley's book is ideal for a first-time study without a lot of technical details. It gives a full explanation of the historical background, relates it to the spiritual message, and has plenty of good spiritual insights. Baldwin's book is for more advanced study, covering the spiritual themes but also with a more involved look at the details. There is also good coverage of Zechariah in the volume of the Expositor's Bible Commentary that includes the minor prophets. (Note that the Verhoef book mentioned in the references for the Haggai study does not cover Zechariah.) Given the complexity of some portions Zechariah, if you do study it on your own it is a good idea to use, if possible, a couple of different references. As always, see me if you want help locating any of these, or if you want more information on other possible study materials.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2001

(Originally taught as week four of a class on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

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PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: ZECHARIAH

Notes For Lesson Two: More Visions of Encouragement (Zechariah 3 & 4)

These two chapters continue the series of visions that Zechariah had while the people were getting back to work on the temple rebuilding. Like those in chapters one and two, these visions were meant to encourage the workers as they rebuilt the temple. But you will also notice several ways in which they look ahead to what was then the distant future.

Clean Garments For the High Priest (Zechariah 3)

Zechariah's fourth vision was filled with meaning, both for the people at the time and also for us, in its long-term implications. The vision of cleansing and renewal was an additional reassurance to the Jews in the prophet's own day, with its promise that they had been given a fresh start. This vision also finds its ultimate fulfillment in the more permanent cleansing through Jesus Christ, a meaning towards which some of the vision's details point directly.

The vision gives a clear promise of a fresh start (3:1-7). The prophet sees before him Joshua the high priest, whom we have now met several times in our study of the rebuilding era, and he also sees Satan, the accuser himself. Satan is making accusations against Joshua, in the presence of God, and these accusations are given weight by the filthy, defiled clothes that the high priest is wearing. The high priest is not personally being singled out for condemnation. Rather the vision shows us Joshua (as is appropriate by the intercessory role of the high priest) as a representative of the people as a whole, who (as Haggai said in one of our recent studies) had allowed themselves to become defiled when they abandoned the work God called them to do. Satan would like to drive home these accusations, both to make the people wallow in their own guilt and to rupture God's relationship with them. But God has other plans.

Rather than dwell on the substance of the accusations, God looks only to the future, to a fresh start for Joshua and the people. God wants renewal, not punishment. He describes Joshua as 'a burning stick snatched from the fire', and offers him clean garments and a clean turban. It is God alone who can grant this cleansing and renewal - Joshua himself is helpless before Satan's accusations. Even though he is the high priest, he cannot cleanse himself, nor does God ask him to do so. All that God asks is that from now on the people walk in his ways. Note the similarity with New Testament passages such as 1 John 1:7, which promises continual cleansing from sin for those who walk in the light, and recall also that 'Joshua' and 'Jesus' are the same name, meaning 'the Lord saves'.

The vision then takes a turn that explicitly looks ahead to Jesus Christ, when God tells them that "I am going to bring my servant" (3:8-10). Both the title of servant and the title of Branch had already been applied by Isaiah to refer to the Messiah, and we know that both refer to Jesus and his ministry. The other details in this part of the vision are also highly suggestive. The reference to the stone set in front of Joshua connects both with the immediate context of building the temple and also with the vision's ultimate fulfillment in Christ. The stone has an inscription, suggesting that it is the capstone (finishing stone), and it has seven 'eyes', or facets, to signify watchfulness. All of this would have encouraged the workers to continue rebuilding the temple, and to us it makes an explicit connection between their rebuilding work and the ministry of Jesus. Notice also that God says he will remove the sin of the land 'on a single day'! In Zechariah's day, the people were being given a fresh start after the years of neglecting the work

of God. In the longer term, God planned to remove all sin from his people permanently through the blood of Jesus. The closing verse of the vision (verse 10) illustrates the closeness and fellowship which all of this will make possible.

Study Suggestion: This vision and the next are meant to fill your mind with ideas. What New Testament Scriptures do these ideas make you think of? How does the vision of Joshua's cleansing help us to understand the cleansing we receive? What meaning do the other details of this vision have for us? What would all of this have meant to someone in 520 BC?

Vision of a Lampstand & Two Olive Trees (Zechariah 4)

After a mostly straightforward (if powerful) vision, Zechariah's fifth vision is more complex. At first it may seem a bit obscure, but it is full of meaning. God emphasizes several lessons significant to the temple rebuilding - or to carrying out God's ministry in any era - and again hints at the deeper significance of what he was doing among his people at the time. As we study it, keep in mind that the main goal is to give us ideas, even if you do not see specific meaning in every possible detail.

Even the objects that the prophet saw are a little obscure (4:1-5). He sees a lampstand (the King James calls it a 'candlestick') with some distinctive features. The lampstand has a bowl and seven lights, not unusual in itself - but it has a kind of channel arrangement to the lights. On each side of the bowl is an olive tree, and the two olive trees keep the lamp supplied with oil (verse 12 clarifies this). That is, unlike a conventional lampstand that required the user to refill it with oil every so often, this one has an automatic system that keeps it constantly replenished.

The angel who is Zechariah's guide does not immediately explain all this, but instead takes time first to give encouragement to Zerubbabel, the governor (4:6-10). As you read this message, keep in mind that it connects with the vision and with the general context of the occasion, and also with the vision in chapter three. The basic message to the governor is summed up in the saying "Not by might or by power, but by my Spirit" (verse 6). The rebuilding of the temple will be successful because God is guiding it, not because the people or their leaders were especially skilled or courageous. God also addresses the 'mountain' of opposition (mountains are a symbol of strength), saying that he will level the mountain and clear the way for his people. This word of encouragement also makes clear that the temple will be completed soon. Zerubbabel had been the one to launch the first attempt to rebuild it, 15 years earlier, and he would live to see it completed by his own hands. God also calls the people to recover an earlier perspective, and to rejoice even in small steps of progress (recall Ezra 3). He gives an image of Zerubbabel supervising the work with a plumb line (that is, checking to see that a portion of the building has been done correctly) and calls them to rejoice even in such a basic step being taken.

Note on last part of verse 10: Some commentators think that this refers back to the seven eyes on the stone of Zechariah 3:9. This would be an appropriate meaning, but would make its location in the text awkward or even nonsensical. It more likely refers to the seven lights of the lampstand, which also would fit the interpretation.

Finally, the prophet's questions are then answered (4:11-13), and he (and we) can begin to interpret the vision at the beginning of the chapter. He asks the angel repeatedly to explain, and most particularly to tell him the significance of the olive trees that give an unending supply of oil to the lamp. He learns that they are two anointed ones, chosen to serve the Lord. In its original context, this would have referred to Zerubbabel and Joshua, the subjects of these two visions. These two had been chosen to lead an important stage in the rebuilding of God's people. As we saw in Haggai, God expected them to take the lead in encouraging the people to build and in setting an example for them. In its broader context, our Anointed One or Christ is Jesus himself,

both priest and ruler, an even surer source of 'oil' (life and light) than any human leader. He is the ultimate fulfillment of the olive tree image. The main question that arises in interpreting the vision is what the lampstand represents. Some commentators take it to be God, but that is not likely because the lampstand needs the oil from the olive trees. Everything fits together better if we understand, as do most commentators, that the lampstand represents God's people, reflecting God's light to the world. They are supplied by the 'anointed' olive trees, who in turn are supplied by God. The immediate significance was for the leaders of the people to accept the call that God had given them, and to pass it along to the rest. The long-term significance is Messianic in nature. It is an image of Jesus' church being supplied constantly by him, and in turn reflecting his light, life, and love to the world.

Study Suggestion: Go back through the vision and review what it would have meant to its original hearers, and what it means to us today. Considering its original context, how could the encouragement given to the builders be of value to us? Considering its broader meaning, what New Testament Scriptures would give us similar images or ideas as this vision in Zechariah?

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PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: ZECHARIAH

Notes For Lesson Three: Concluding Visions of Encouragement (Zechariah 5 & 6)

The visions of encouragement conclude in these two chapters. These final visions drive home God's call for the people to leave sinful and selfish ways behind, and they also look ahead to the future and to the final fulfillment of the plans that God had revealed in Zechariah's day.

Visions of the Removal of Sin (Zechariah 5)

These two short visions communicate some simple but important ideas about God and sin. God emphatically indicates that he and sin are completely incompatible, and that sin cannot stand in his presence. At the same time, he assures the people that he is willing and able to remove their sin, since they are incapable of doing so themselves. In teaching these things, God hopes and expects that his people will turn from sin in the future so that they can serve him with all their heart.

In the first of these visions, the prophet sees a flying scroll (5:1-4). Scrolls were familiar objects, and it obviously represents God's Word and the law. But this one has some unusual characteristics. Besides the fact that it is flying through the air on its own, it is also quite large. Thirty feet would not be unheard of for a scroll's length, but no scroll ever would have been anywhere close to fifteen feet wide*. The exaggerated dimensions are an indication that the scroll's message is impossible to miss or to overlook.

* Note that the scroll happens to be the same size as the holy place in the temple, thus connecting it with the immediate context of the temple rebuilding. There does not seem, though, to be any deeper significance to the similarity of the dimensions, although some commentators have tried hard to make more out of it.

Zechariah is told that the scroll contains a curse on each side: one side cursing those who lie, and the other cursing those who steal, two basic offenses chosen to represent sin in a general way. The flying scroll is there to convict the people that they must deal firmly with sin if God's holy purpose for them is to be fulfilled. Note that the prophet is told that the scroll "shall enter into the house" of the wrongdoers. In other words, God's Word is not passive, and is not merely a bunch of words written on sheets of paper. As Hebrews 4:12-13 tells us, it is living and active, and thus here it is seeking out the sinner to convict him of his sin.

The next vision also teaches that sin must be removed for God to work through his people. This time, Zechariah sees a woman in a basket (5:5-11). The basket is called an "ephah", which is a standard Hebrew unit of measure, probably holding about 5 gallons or so. Here, the basket must be larger than that, since it holds a woman. Thus, like the scroll, it is a familiar object with enlarged or exaggerated dimensions, to indicate that its message is clear and obvious. The prophet is told that the woman in the basket is a personification of sin - the vision is reminding us that sin is an active force in our spiritual lives that must be dealt with, as the basket is about to be. Note that there is no special significance to the fact that sin is pictured as a female - some commentators make grave errors in reading far too much into this. In prophecy and poetry, abstract concepts such as sin are generally portrayed as female - as another example, look at the way that wisdom is portrayed in the Proverbs. The point here is that sin is being portrayed as a 'living' force that must be dealt with.

As the prophet watches, two other women, who have wings like a stork or other large bird, come to carry off the basket of sin. Sin must be removed from God's holy people, because he has a

holy purpose for them. Fittingly, the basket of sin is taken to Babylon (some versions use the equivalent name Shinar), which so often represents sin in the Bible, both figuratively and literally.

Study Suggestions: Describe the importance of these visions to Zechariah's original hearers. That is, what did God want them to learn about sin from these visions, and how did he remove their sin? Then, consider the lessons we should get from them. Why does God need to remove sin from us? How does he do it?

Vision of Four Chariots (Zechariah 6:1-8)

This vision has some basic similarities with Zechariah's first vision, in that it involves four groups of horses of different colors. In this vision, though, the horses are pulling chariots, and their mission is a different one. As with the earlier vision, though, this one also assures God's people of his power and of his readiness to act.

The prophet first sees two mountains of bronze (verse 1). This image would have evoked a number of thoughts in Zechariah's mind. Mountains are symbols of strength, and bronze also was both a symbol of strength and a practical source of strength. The image of the two mountains certainly also would have reminded Zechariah of the two bronze pillars that used to stand at the entrance to the temple, and the whole picture would have suggested an opening or gateway leading to (or from) God. Through this opening, then, come the horses and chariots that are the focus of the vision.

The horses and chariots (verses 1-4) convey a number of basic meanings. Horses were quite valuable to ancient armies and governments, for their speed and for their power. For many centuries, horses and riders were the best way to collect and send information. They were also one of the strong points of any army, and when they also carried chariots, they could be a formidable fighting force. These horses and chariots are thus an indication of the power and dominance that God is about to release on behalf of his people.

The mission of these chariots is to spread out and dominate (verses 5-8). The prophet is told that they are the "four spirits of heaven", and they are sent in different directions. There are a couple of questions about the details in this passage that commentators debate*, but the general meaning is clear: they will eventually go throughout the whole earth to carry God's power and control.

* Note that, with the way that most versions translate this passage, no horses go towards the east, and the red horses are not assigned a direction. This may simply reflect that fact that to the east of Israel was a desert region that was practically impassable at this time. The red horses would then have been staying in Israel as a reserve, or possibly to demonstrate God's power right there. A more complex explanation, which some scholars offer, is that the text has lost a verse somewhere, and should be re-worked to include the fourth direction and the fourth set of horses. Note also the partial similarity between the colors of the horses here and in Revelation 6. The colors of Zechariah's horses, though, most likely do not have the significance that they have in Revelation (though some commentators have tried hard to force a connection).

The prophet learns that the chariots have found rest for the spirit in 'the land of the north'. North was the direction one traveled to get to Babylon (the land was actually to the east, but going straight east was impossible because of the desert), and it was from Babylon and in Babylon that so many trials for God's people had come. But now he has found rest for his spirit in the north, because the time of discipline and trial was over, and a new era of rebuilding was underway.

Study Suggestion: Consider this and all of the previous visions that Zechariah has had. Why did God choose this means of speaking to him? What did these visions do that could not have been accomplished through a more straightforward explanation of God's plans? Answer both in terms of what God was doing at the time and in terms of God's purpose in preserving Zechariah's visions for us to study millennia later.

A Crown For Joshua (Zechariah 6:9-15)

In this important passage, we once again encounter Joshua the high priest. This time, he is not being cleansed of sin, but instead receives a crown. Joshua was never literally crowned as a ruler - rather, this is a symbolic action that foretells things to come, things that would show the ultimate fulfillment of the temple building in his own era.

The prophet is told to take a collection from some of the exiles (verses 9-10). Since specific names are given, this may have been a symbolic action that Zechariah actually carried out, rather than a vision that no one else saw, as with the others we have studied. The money is used to make a crown, which will be placed on the head of the high priest Joshua. The high priest never stood to receive an actual crown, but there is an important idea here. We have already seen the vision in chapter 3 in which Joshua was the subject of a Messianic prophecy, and recall also that the Hebrew name Joshua is the same as "Jesus".

In calling Joshua the Branch (verses 11-14), the vision becomes openly Messianic. Zechariah had used the term earlier in chapter 3, and Isaiah had also used the term two centuries earlier to refer to the Messiah. Here, Joshua is overtly called the Branch as the crown is symbolically placed on him. He is also described as the man who will build the temple. In Zechariah's lifetime, while the high priest Joshua provided valuable leadership in rebuilding the temple, it was of course the governor Zerubbabel, as the civil authority, who actually supervised the temple rebuilding, as the prophet himself has already indicated. Therefore, the image of a priest on his throne, while meant to encourage the temple builders at the time, also looks much farther into the future to the day when Jesus Christ assumed the throne as both our Lord and our high priest ("there will be harmony between the two").

The passage finishes with a reference to "those who are far away" (verse 15), who will come to help build the temple. Of course, in Zechariah's lifetime, the small group of returned exiles were pretty much on their own in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. But the temple of the Holy Spirit, which for centuries Christians have helped to build, has seen contributions from believers who come from all over the world.

Study Suggestion: What would this symbolic action of crowning Joshua have meant to those who first saw it? What purpose did God have in revealing these things to Zechariah? What should we get out of it today?

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PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: ZECHARIAH

Notes For Lesson Four: Genuine Worship of God (Zechariah 7 & 8)

In these chapters, Zechariah shifts to a new theme. Prompted by questions about fasting from the returned exiles, God uses the prophet to teach them some important lessons about his relationship with them. He calls them to adjust their perspective, but also gives them some powerful promises and re-assurances.

To Fast Or Not To Fast (Zechariah 7)

For several decades, the exiles had remembered the tumultuous events of Babylon's conquest of Jerusalem by fasting on the dates that commemorated key points of the Babylonian invasion. As the rebuilding once again began to make progress, the question arose in their minds whether they ought to continue to commemorate these past disasters. This apparently simple question became the springboard for an important discourse about their relationship with God.

The question that they brought to Zechariah (7:1-3) came about two years after the series of visions that we have been studying in chapters 1-6. Since that time, the work on the temple had proceeded steadily, as God guided the people through the obstacles and opposition that arose. The people thus began to feel more and more as if they had truly moved on to a new era, and that the period of discipline and trials was now behind them. In view of this, their question was a natural one. Since the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the people had commemorated it by a series of fast days that they had added to those that were part of the actual law. These added fast days were set on the dates of the most noteworthy (and, from the Jews' viewpoint, most disastrous) events in the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem. They had now been in the habit of observing these fasts for seven decades, but they still realized that these particular fasts were of their own making, not in the law. Thus it was a reasonable question for them to wonder whether now, with the rebuilding well under way, it might be time to discard these days and leave behind the memories of Jerusalem's fall.

The initial question refers to a fast in the 5th month, but there were at least four added fasts that they had been observing with some regularity. God's answer (verse 5) refers also to a 7th month fast, and later (8:19) Zechariah also refers to fasts in the 4th and 10th months. Note that there were also other fasts fixed by Levitical law in the 7th month (but not in the other months mentioned). The events from the Babylonian conquest that inspired these events are described in 2 Kings 25 and (except for one) Jeremiah 52. Nebuchadnezzar's siege had begun in the tenth month, about a year and a half before the final fall. They Babylonians broke through the city wall in the 4th month of 586 BC, and burned the temple and the king's palace in the 5th month. The Babylonians appointed Gedaliah as governor over the conquered territory, but he was assassinated by radicals in the 7th month of 586 BC, prompting a large group of Jews to flee to Egypt for fear of reprisals (this last one is covered in Jeremiah 40-41, rather than in chapter 52).

All of these events had been remembered in this series of fasts, but in response to their question, God asks them whether their fasts were for him, or were for themselves (7:4-7). That is to say, were they fasting as a genuine demonstration of respect to God and dependence on him, or did they just regret what had happened? Did they fast to commit themselves never to repeat the mistakes that had led to the captivity, or did they just feel sorry for themselves and their ancestors? Genuine fasting is done as an expression of dependence on God, and of respect for

God, and it is also a commitment to accept God's will and his lordship. But the flesh often views fasts and similar actions from a more worldly point of view, seeing them as meritorious deeds that earn a reward from God, or (as may have happened here) it can develop an unhealthy fixation on problems and disappointments. (Take a look also at Isaiah 58 in connection with the questions that Zechariah addresses here.) God follows this with a similar question about their times of feasting. There is also a big difference between feasting with a spirit of true thanksgiving and appreciation, versus simply giving lip service to God's blessings while indulging the flesh with the things he gives us.

God goes on to discuss what he wants from his people (7:8-14). Naturally, qualities such as true justice, mercy, and compassion are of far greater value to God than any outward observance, no matter how lavish it may be. He calls them to learn from the bad example of past generations, describing them as having hearts as hard as flint. This was why the exile occurred, not because of any slip-ups or failures in the people's outward observances. Because of their hard hearts, they were exiled, and "they made the pleasant land desolate", just as hard hearts and closed minds today render desolate the souls of all those who refuse to love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Study Suggestions: What questions might Christians ask that would be similar in nature to the question that the people asked in this chapter? What would God's answer today be to these questions? What general lessons about our relationship with God do we learn from this chapter's question and answer?

Promises of Blessing (Zechariah 8)

The strongly-worded answer to their question in the previous chapter was not a rebuke, but an exhortation. God strongly desired to pour out blessing on his people, and he needed them to snap out of their ritualistic and mechanical forms of worship before he could give them the greatest of the blessings that he had in mind: his presence. In this chapter, God assures his people of his care, and gives them several assurances of his presence and of the changes that his presence will bring.

God now states that he is "jealous For Zion" (8:1-2), that is, that his people belong to him and he is not willing to give them up. God's jealousy is different from most of the forms that human jealousy takes. Jealousy is a strong feeling that something belongs to oneself, and an unwillingness to share that thing with others (as opposed to envy, which is a desire to possess something that presently belongs to someone else). God's people belong to him, and he is perfectly justified in not wishing to share them with the world or with anything in the world.

God gives them his promise that he will again dwell in Jerusalem (8:3-8). Not only would the temple itself soon be finished, as a visible sign of his presence, but his hand would also be at work in their daily lives as well. He gives them some simple images to assure them of his blessing, in describing a Jerusalem in which life has returned to normal, in which young, old, and everyone in between will again be part of life. Perhaps the remnant would find it amazing that their lives could ever be the way they once had been, but with God all things are possible.

He then describes how the presence of God will turn everything around (8:9-19). First, it will allow their hands to be strong, for the building of the temple and anything else that God calls them to do. His own might and power will make up for their weakness. Then too, although they have long been considered cursed and hapless by the rest of the world, God will change this to a period of renewed blessing and strength. If they will follow him and his ways, they will

experience a complete renewal. And, getting back to their original questions, rather than this series of commemorative fasts that they asked him about, they will instead have a series of joyful occasions to celebrate.

He closes the chapter with some words about the power of God's presence (8:20-23). When God's people allow themselves to reflect his glory, they become an unmistakable manifestation of his presence that will be noticed by those with open hearts. As the prophet says, faithful believers can inspire others to seek God and to long for a relationship with God. The picture that he paints is an idealized one, but one whose truth we can see whenever God's people resolve to take on his likeness, and not the likeness of the world.

Study Suggestion: What promises does God give to his people in this chapter? How do these promises relate to the question that they asked in chapter seven? What significance do these promises have to us as Christians?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2001

(Originally taught as week seven of a class on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

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PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: ZECHARIAH

Notes For Lesson Five: Visions of the Future (Zechariah 9:1-11:3)

After Zechariah's series of visions of encouragement for the temple builders, and after giving God's response to their question about fasting, the prophet turned to the future. The last six chapters of Zechariah are filled with messages that connect events of his day with the (then) distant future. We shall soon see that these chapters contain many of the Old Testament's clearest references to Jesus Christ.

Judgment on Israel's Enemies (Zechariah 9:1-8)

In the last six chapters of the book, judgment is a prominent theme. God expresses his ability, right, and willingness to judge both his people and the rest of the world. God used Zechariah to proclaim the ways that he would judge in the present and in the future, as his plans were slowly realized. Here, God speaks of judgment on some of Israel's pagan neighbors. For some centuries, the same basic group of countries along Israel's borders had been a source of oppression, idolatry, violence, sin, and many other troubles. But God assured his people that their time was coming.

The prophet's message is one of coming judgment on the surrounding nations (9:1-8). These nations had both exploited Israel's troubles and also created a good share of those troubles. The passage specifically mentions Syria, Philistia, and Phoenicia, either by name or by referencing cities in those areas, and also mentions the cities of Tyre and Sidon. These were all ancient locations even in Zechariah's day. In the two centuries before Zechariah, the Assyrians and Babylonians had ravaged Israel's neighbors as badly as they had oppressed the Jews themselves. In fact, some of the smaller nations that are mentioned in the Old Testament had disappeared by the time Zechariah wrote this, and most of those mentioned here had been severely weakened. One exception was Tyre, which had stood strong and had even endured a lengthy siege by the Babylonians.

But even those nations which had survived so far would find that their time would come. The specific prophecies in this passage were all fulfilled when Alexander the Great led the Greek army in a campaign of conquest through the region, somewhat less than 200 years after Zechariah wrote this prophecy. Alexander even conquered Tyre by thinking of an approach that had eluded other invaders. Alexander's conquest changed much of the world, and its effects were still being felt in the time of Christ. While it is often remarked upon how God chose the time of the Roman empire and its superior communications and transportation to send his Son, it is also true that the earlier Greek empire shaped many of the conditions that affected daily life in the time of the New Testament. And in the shorter term, God used the Greeks to give the final discipline to the remaining nations that had oppressed and assaulted his people in the Old Testament era. Alexander delivered discipline to every one of their enemies that had not already been dealt with. And yet, the ferocious Alexander left Jerusalem alone, treating it far differently than the other cities in the region. Despite conflicts between Greek beliefs and Jewish beliefs, he respected the Jewish culture and religion, and dealt generously with God's people. While his time period (the 4th century BC) comes between the two portions of the Bible, it nevertheless clearly shows God's hand at work.

Study Suggestions: Why was it important for God to discipline the enemies of his people? What message is there for today's believers? What purpose was served by having Zechariah prophesy about it long before it took place?

Zion's King (Zechariah 9:9-17)

While God was preparing judgment on the enemies of his people, he was also making clear the way for the Savior of his own people, the king of Zion. These verses provide a description of their king, filled with images to impress upon them what his nature would be like. In this description, we can also see several clear indications that these prophecies would be filled through Jesus Christ.

Zechariah's description of the coming of the King of Zion (9:9-13) is an important look ahead to the Messiah, and was also an encouragement to those in his own day, assuring them that the work on the temple was important and that God was watching over them. The king is portrayed as bringing some very important blessings, most notably salvation (verse 9) and peace (verse 10). These would have meant a lot to Zechariah's listeners, and are even more significant in a Messianic context. The image of riding on a donkey in verse 9 was, of course, fulfilled by Jesus Christ in his final entry into Jerusalem, when he brought a form of salvation and peace to the world that transcended the temporary and rudimentary kinds of 'salvation' and 'peace' that the world longs for.

The nature of the king is also important, reflecting both God's general nature and the nature of Christ when he walked the earth. The king is righteous but also gentle, two qualities that often seem contradictory to the flesh, but that to God fit together. God's righteousness demanded that his people be disciplined and refined, just as Jesus was uncompromising in his condemnation of sin, his forthright call to his followers, and his graphic descriptions of the punishments that awaited the unsaved. But God is also by nature gentle, and longs to comfort and care for his people. He only disciplines them to break their stubborn self-will, so that he can give them what is truly good for them. In the same way, Jesus longed to gather his people to him "as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Luke 13:34), but before he can do that, they must repent and accept the cleansing and forgiveness that can only come from his blood. Likewise, the king brings peace, but he will also rule. For a king to be peace-loving does not mean that he is weak, and Zion's king will extend his rule across the whole earth. Even in Zechariah's day, God ruled the whole earth, whether his reign was recognized or not. Through Jesus, God reigns throughout the whole earth to an even deeper degree. Note the specific reference to Zion one day overcoming the Greeks, which was fulfilled in a number of different ways in the centuries ahead.

The chapter closes with a description of the Lord appearing (9:14-17). The emphasis is on the imagery, with words chosen to evoke God's might and grandeur. Using references to things such as arrows, lightning, and trumpets gives us the feeling that God can dominate whenever he wishes to, but that he keeps his might restrained until it is time. The significance of God's appearing here is somewhat different than it may appear at first glance. In Old Testament prophecy, any display of God's judgment is referred to as him "coming". This and similar passages thus do not necessarily refer to the 'second coming' of Christ, although of course some of the imagery is the same.

Study Suggestion: What significance did the "King of Zion" have to Zechariah's original listeners? What would have encouraged them about what the prophet says in these verses? How can Zechariah's words encourage us?

God & His People (Zechariah 10:1-11:3)

Besides revealing the plans he had for his people, God also wished to impress on them the many ways that he cared for them. He wanted them to learn to rely on him, not on idols or on sources of human strength. The first few verses compare the reliable and the unreliable (10:1-3). God's

steady hand is a trustworthy place to put our hope and security, knowing that he always gives us everything we need when we need it (the significance of Zechariah's rain image). But useless idols are deceitful, and any hope placed in them will lead to disappointment. The prophet also contrasts God with the unreliable human shepherds who had led his people into trouble in the past. All of this is an appeal for the people to place their confidence and trust in God alone.

The prophet also tells of how God will strengthen his people (10:4-11:3). He describes Judah in images of sturdiness - a cornerstone, a tent peg, a bow. These images also refer in a greater way to Jesus, who not only lived a perfect life, but also bore all our sins in his body. Zechariah also speaks of redemption and restoration, assuring the people that in rebuilding the temple they are taking just one step in the process of being built back up. The scattering they had experienced is now being reversed, with God bringing them back home and rebuilding the land. The passage closes with a warning to Israel's neighbors and enemies (mentioning specifically Egypt, Assyria, and Lebanon), assuring them that any nation who oppresses or harasses God's people will surely regret it.

Study Suggestion: Read through this chapter, and consider what these assurances would have meant to the original hearers. Then consider how they can help us in situations parallel to the temple rebuilding of Zechariah's lifetime.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2001

(Originally taught as week eight of a class on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

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PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: ZECHARIAH

Notes For Lesson Six: Visions of Shepherds, Sheep, & More (Zechariah 11:4-12:14)

Zechariah's series of visions of the future continue with some thought-provoking messages meant to challenge God's people to evaluate their relationship with him. These two chapters contain further references to Jesus Christ, as well as discussing some themes in God's relationship with his people that are important in any era.

Shepherds & Sheep (Zechariah 11:4-17)

This passage is one of the more difficult in Zechariah, both to interpret and to appreciate its rather severe message. The prophet speaks of problems that characterized God's relationship with his people both in the Old Testament era and afterwards. His message is a call to us to remember our God, and not to fall into the sad errors of past generations. It will help to make some preliminary observations about this passage, before we tackle it verse-by-verse. The basic picture is that a new shepherd takes over a flock of sheep whose previous shepherds cared little for it. But after the new shepherd brings reform and renewal, the sheep turn against him, forcing him to give them over to face danger alone. Other Old Testament prophets also used similar images to convict the people of their constant ingratitude towards God. The same themes apply even more specifically to the coming of the good shepherd Jesus, who was eventually rejected by most of God's people. And it is also a caution to believers in any era not to fall into the same pitfall.

The prophet himself becomes a shepherd (and a Christ-figure), sent to pasture the "flock marked for slaughter" (11:4-8a). The flock has run by heartless shepherds who plan to sell it off to be slaughtered. This is the spiritual fate of all who trust in anything other than God. Satan and his servants may offer fun and excitement, and thus may appear to care about us, but in reality they would gladly see us dead. God here describes how he has often had to withdraw his care from his people, so that they would see what it was really like to live without his guiding hand. The exile to Babylon had been one example of this. On a broader level, it reminds us that God can never have fellowship with darkness and sin. But now the new shepherd takes over, ruling with two staffs called Favor and Union, symbolic of the blessings that God's presence brings to his people when they live according to his will. (An actual shepherd would also have had two staffs, a heavy one and a light one.) The new shepherd rids the flock of the unfit shepherds, and guides it himself.

But things go sadly wrong (11:8b-14). The flock develops a bad, foolish attitude that leads them to turn against the shepherd in their hearts. The shepherd reluctantly breaks his two staffs, symbolizing that, because of their ingratitude and hardness, blessing and unity have now been withdrawn. This sad process happened numerous times in the long history of God's people in the Old Testament, and it would happen again when Jesus Christ came. This ultimate fulfillment is hinted at with the details about the thirty pieces of silver, realized literally in Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus. In Zechariah, the silver is given to the rejected shepherd as his pay, but he does not want it*. The flock suffers from the loss of their caring shepherd, and contrary to the nature of sheep they even start to turn on one another (verse 9).

* The potter who made articles for the temple had his shop not near the temple but towards the south of the city, near the Valley of Hinnom, which was a prime source of clay but which also was a refuse area known for its revolting sights and smells. In throwing the silver "to the potter in the house of the Lord", the deposed shepherd is symbolically throwing it in the trash. For New Testament parallels, see Matthew 27:1-10 and Acts 1:18-19.

God then appoints a foolish shepherd to replace the one the people had despised (11:15-17). This shepherd does not care for the lost, the injured, or anyone else, and the flock is back where it started. There have been many times when God had to turn his people over to a 'foolish shepherd' so that they could come to their senses, and see who really cared about them. This passage tells us of some sad truths, reminding us how easy it is for our hearts to stray from God even when he is in the midst of giving us spiritual blessings. It is an important passage about the history of God's people, and it is also a challenge for Christians today.

Study Suggestions: How are the principles in this passage important to us? Are there any dangers that can cause us to develop the bad attitude of the flock? How can we prevent ourselves from becoming like them?

Images of Jerusalem's Strength (Zechariah 12:1-9)

Despite all that had happened, God chose to make Jerusalem a stronghold that could never be taken as long as he protected it. Even when his people had been taken into exile, God kept it ready for their return, and helped them rebuild it. Jerusalem was already of great symbolic importance, and these images emphasize both its symbolic and practical significance. For us, it is a reminder of the less tangible but even more powerful stronghold that God builds through us, the body of Christ.

God gives two views of Jerusalem that, on a literal level, are somewhat contrasting, but that from a spiritual viewpoint are complementary. He speaks first of an immovable Jerusalem (12:1-5). Though many will attack, Jerusalem will be a rock that sends them reeling, and the harder they attack, they more they will simply injure themselves. It will quickly become obvious to all not only that the city is strong, but also that its strength comes from God. The second image is of Jerusalem as a consuming fire (12:6-9). It is described as a fire in a woodpile and a torch among sheaves - that is, it will quickly and easily consume everything in its path (see also Deuteronomy 4:23-24 and Hebrews 12:28-29). "On that day", God will both protect his own people and conquer their enemies. Looking at this and the above image of Jerusalem, there is a right conclusion and a wrong one. The wrong one, unfortunately chosen by many of the Jews, is that God will lead Jerusalem in a military conquest of all its enemies. The right conclusion is that through his people God will send his word and salvation out into all the world, and it will be unstoppable. Daniel meant the same thing when he prophesied in Daniel 2 that God's kingdom would break and shatter all of the world's empires. While the flesh may long for earthly victory and conquest, God knows that it is a far greater victory to send the good news of salvation in Christ throughout the whole world.

Study Suggestion: What do these images of Jerusalem as an immovable rock and a consuming fire mean to us? That is, how is 'Jerusalem' significant to us, and in what ways is it 'immovable' and 'consuming'?

Mourning in Israel (Zechariah 12:10-14)

In yet another shift of emphasis, the prophet sees God's people mourning and sorrowful because they have rejected God. The image of "the one they have pierced" strongly associates this vision with Jesus, and the themes it contains are important in a broader sense as well.

The prophet gives us a picture of a remorseful people looking on one that they have "pierced" (12:10-14). He prefaces the picture with the statement that God will pour out a Spirit of grace and supplication on his people - the implication is not, of course, that this spirit causes them to pierce this person, but that it enables them to feel remorse for it. Often it is an act of grace to allow us to see our mistakes, and to teach us from them. The identity of the "one they have pierced" has its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, pierced by nails and by a sword on the cross, as he

became the redemptive sacrifice for sin. John makes the connection explicit in John 19:28-37. Zechariah's original hearers would probably not have seen the specific importance of piercing, but they would have been convicted by the display of mourning in the land, knowing how often God's people had rejected him and harmed his servants and messengers.

Pieced together, the lessons of chapters 11 and 12 are supposed to fill our minds with ideas that help us to evaluate our relationship with God. We have the advantage over Zechariah's generation, in knowing that all these things have been fulfilled. We thus have even more reasons to remain grateful and meekly submissive to God, to have confidence in his promises of strength, and to take full advantage of the sacrifice made by Jesus on our behalf.

Study Suggestion: What lessons have Zechariah's original hearers have taken from this passage? What is the importance of the connection with Jesus? In what further contexts might this passage be important to Christians?

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(Originally taught as week nine of a class on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

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PROPHETS OF THE REBUILDING: ZECHARIAH

Notes For Lesson Seven: Cleansing, Crisis, & Climax (Zechariah 13-14)

The book of Zechariah concludes with a series of visions that use a great variety of images as they look ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ and the spiritual upheaval that his coming will bring. God knows that, because of the limitations of our stubborn flesh, he often must provoke a crisis in order to give his people the indescribable blessings he has planned for them.

A Great Cleansing (Zechariah 13:1-6)

The last two chapters contain many powerful images that sum up many of the themes involved in Jesus' coming - both historically and as he comes into individual lives. These visions look into what for Zechariah was the future, and also speak of some important general themes in God's relationship with his people. There is great cleansing, but also crisis and turmoil, whenever we face the facts about ourselves and about God. In this first section, Zechariah describes the cleansing that comes from God, a cleansing of the people from sin, impurity, idols, and falsehood.

The prophet tells them that a fountain will be opened (13:1-2), to bring cleansing from sin and impurity. The image of the fountain (water) is echoed in the next chapter as well, and the references to water combine the obvious and powerful image of cleansing with a look ahead to the baptism that in Christianity allows repentant believers to receive cleansing from their sins. As he makes the promise, the prophet also declares that God will remove the names of all idols from the land when this cleansing comes. That means that with the cleansing, the idols must and will be discarded, no longer permitted to dwell either openly or in the hearts of the people. So too, when we receive cleansing from sin through being baptized into Christ, we must confess that Jesus, not anything of this world, is our Lord. And in return we receive the Holy Spirit, who is able to keep our hearts clean of idolatry in spite of our fleshly weakness.

Zechariah then makes a somewhat unexpected statement, linking the removal of prophets and prophesy from the land with the cleansing from sin and the banishment of idols (13:3-6). While it may not be immediately clear, he is talking here about false prophets, those who for the sake of financial gain pretended to know God's will, not those like Zechariah who truly spoke in the name of the Lord. (Acts and other New Testament books show us that there were still genuine prophets in the New Testament church of Christ.) Notice the reference to the "prophet's garment of hair" in verse 4, which is described as a tip-off of deception. While the habit of wearing a hair garment was practiced by the genuine prophet Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8), later it had come to be adopted by phony prophets who thought that it gave them an air of authority and authenticity. Note also the reference to wounds (verse 6), which the bogus prophet tries to pass off as something else. A common practice of those who prophesied in the name of Canaanite false gods was to inflict wounds on themselves and one another as part of their pagan rituals, so this too exposes the fake prophets.

Thus it is the false prophets whom Zechariah insists will be removed from the land. In fact, their punishment is drastic, and the prophet paints a picture of the false prophets being condemned even by their own parents, in return for the damage they had done to God's people over the years through their deliberate teaching of error and their manipulation of the truth. They must and will be washed away when the promised cleansing comes.

Study Suggestion: Explain how the banishment of idols and the elimination of false prophets is linked to the fountain of cleansing. What significance do these promises have to us?

The Crisis - The Shepherd is Struck (Zechariah 13:7-9)

This short poetic passage describes a crisis situation in the relations of God with his people. We know from the New Testament that this passage found its ultimate fulfillment in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which separated those of God's people who believed the full message of grace and salvation from those who did not wish to accept the truth as revealed by Jesus.

When we read the prophecy of the shepherd struck and the sheep scattering (13:7-9), we are at once reminded of Jesus and his disciples. (See, for example, Matthew 26:31-35 and Mark 14:27-31.) In reading the full passage, we can also see that what Jesus had in mind when quoting it to the Twelve went even farther than predicting that they would scatter when he himself was struck down. We have by now, of course, seen a number of other references in Zechariah to shepherds and their sheep, an appropriate image both for describing our relationship with Jesus and for exemplifying God's relationship with his people in a general way.

In the aftermath of the shepherd being struck down, God's people divide into two groups. Once again, the most significant fulfillment of this is the way that God's people found themselves divided about Jesus (as God had foreseen they would be). There are also many lesser illustrations of the same principle, that is, of how hearts are judged and revealed in a crisis. When the shepherd is struck down, the majority of the sheep are also struck down, and die. Note that there is nothing significant about the specific fraction of two-thirds; this is simply telling us that the majority of the sheep will follow this path, as Jesus also said they would (for example, Matthew 7:13-14). But the sheep who remain not only survive, but emerge from the crisis refined, purified, and tested. They have not only lived, but have changed and matured, and are ready to fulfill God's purpose for them.

Study Suggestion: How was this passage fulfilled in Jesus' lifetime? (Make sure to check the details of the prophecy.) In what ways is it also proven true in our own experience?

The Climax - A Day of the Lord (Zechariah 14)

After the crisis comes the climax, "a day of the Lord". In a general sense, coming after the lessons of the previous chapter, it is a reminder of God's continual sifting of hearts, of his constant search for those among his own people who truly believe in him and love him. But once again, this passage looks ahead to the spiritual conflict initiated through Jesus. Before the time of Christ, the physical kingdoms of the world took turns assaulting Jerusalem. Since the crucifixion, spiritual Jerusalem (the body and church of Jesus Christ) has been under a continual siege from the forces of the world and of the devil. This is another of the more difficult passages to interpret in Zechariah, and we won't have the time to work through all of the details in class, but it will help you understand it if you remember that it is describing "a" day of the Lord, not "the" day of the Lord. In particular, it is not talking about the end of the world or the second coming* - rather, it has much more to do with the first coming of Jesus the Messiah and with some important general principles.

* Although many contemporary commentators think that prophetic books such as Zechariah, Daniel, and Ezekiel contain prophecies about the 'end times', there is actually very little (if anything) in the Old Testament that refers

specifically to the end of the world, to the final judgment, or to the second coming of Jesus. Though there are Old Testament passages that seem to do so on the surface, the reason why it seems so is that the language they use is similar to the language that is popularly used to discuss the so-called 'end times'. In most cases, the context is different, and almost all of these theories (entertaining and interesting as they may be) quickly become self-contradictory and/or contradict other biblical teachings. Though we humans have a natural (but fleshly) fascination with wanting to know exactly what the 'end times' will be like, God knows that we would have great difficulty understanding the details, and thus the actual Bible, while assuring us that the end will come, says little about the particulars. Contemporary Christians would do well to avoid becoming pre-occupied with such things, and instead concentrate on appreciating and understanding God, and on the ministries God has given us to fulfill. Note also that it was vital for there to be detailed prophecies made in advance about Jesus, because when he came, everyone would have to choose whether or not to follow him. There is no such need for any human to know in advance all of the details of the end of the world or of the final judgment.

The prophet tells us of a battle over Jerusalem (14:1-5). No doubt we are all familiar with those commentators who use this kind of verse to predict some kind of apocalyptic world war that in their minds will perfect the world and make it an earthly paradise. The real meaning is much different, and uses the graphic imagery of warfare to describe the ongoing spiritual battle between God and his enemies, and to assure us that God is fighting for his people in this crucial conflict. Spiritual battles are not as obvious to fleshly eyes, but they are just as fiercely fought, and the stakes are much higher. Zechariah's graphic references to all kinds of death and suffering are meant to shock us into realizing that spiritual warfare is not to be taken lightly just because we cannot see it. Once again, there is a general meaning in its picture of spiritual battle, but it is most completely fulfilled in the victory won through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Zechariah zeroes in on the effects of the Messiah again in verses 6 to 11, which are high-lighted by his image of a flow of living water.. He tells us that "on that day" there will be a unique set of conditions to make it undeniable that something unusual is happening. This was certainly true of the day when Jesus was crucified, with many supernatural events taking place (tombs coming open, darkness at noon, and more) to impress on all with open hearts that it was a day unlike any other. The promise of the "living water" of course finds a fulfillment more powerful than even Zechariah probably realized, in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. See, for example, John 4:7-15 and John 7:37-44 for New Testament parallels. Finally, Jerusalem is made secure - once again, not physical Jerusalem, which has rarely in its history been secure, but spiritual Jerusalem.

Zechariah's description of punishment on unbelievers (14:12-15) again contains graphic images which are meant as a figurative description of the scourges from which the disobedient will suffer. The prophets' descriptions of the plague that afflicts them and of the panic they suffer is an illustration of the misery and insecurity that characterizes the lives of those who reject Jesus. Not only are literal plagues and other disasters far worse for pagans who have no hope in heaven, but the unbelievers also endure many self-inflicted hardships from their own sin and folly.

But Zechariah wants to close on a positive note, and the last few verses round out the picture and emphasize that God's people are "Holy to the Lord" (14:16-21). He first indicates that there will be survivors from the nations that attacked Jerusalem, and that now have the chance to worship God if they wish. This idea was frequently fulfilled in a limited way throughout the period of captivity and exile, when pagans like Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus honored the living God because they saw his hand at work. And it has been fulfilled in an even greater way throughout the years in the way that so many former unbelievers, many of whom fought against God in the past, have become Christians and have glorified God by their repentance.

The last few verses give a description of the Lord's house having been cleansed. Every article, even the everyday ones, have become holy to God, and there is nothing and no one impure in the

house. This promise finds its fulfillment in us, for as the writer of Hebrews says, "and we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (Hebrews 3:6). Unlike the Jews, who had to undergo endless sacrifices and rituals to cleanse themselves, and to become holy on special occasions, in Christ we have been cleansed once for all through the blood of Jesus, and "by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14).

Study Suggestions: There are many possible study topics in this section. Why does Zechariah use such graphic imagery of suffering and violence (for example, verse 2, verse 12, and also 13:3)? What is he trying to illustrate? What role does water play in chapters 13 and 14? What would it have meant to Zechariah's original hearers? Knowing what it represents, what should we get from Zechariah's water images? How does the church of Christ fulfill the last two verses of the book?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2001

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