

## SESSION TWENTY-SEVEN

### ZECHARIAH

#### *Overview and Chapters 1–4*

#### God Remembers His Covenant People

### I. INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH

The book of Zechariah is one of the most unique books of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Jerome (writing in the fifth-century AD) called Zechariah "the obscurest and longest of the twelve prophets."<sup>2</sup> Despite the perplexing prophecies of the book, it is nevertheless quite important. George L. Robinson called Zechariah "the most messianic, the most truly apocalyptic and eschatological, of all the writings of the OT." Zechariah 9–14 is the most quoted section of the prophets in the passion narratives of the gospels. Furthermore, the book strongly influenced the author of Revelation.

The book of Zechariah was named after the Jewish prophet of the postexilic period who wrote it. He was born in Babylon and with his grandfather was in the company of exiles who returned to Palestine with Joshua and Zerubbabel (Neh 12:4).<sup>3</sup> This was a time of great chaos for the Jews to whom being "in the land" meant everything. This was a time when men of courage and faith were needed to strengthen the fainthearted. Zechariah was such a man for the hour.

As a result of the decree of the Medo-Persian King Cyrus in 538 BC (Isa 44:28), 50,000 Jews were allowed to return to the "promised land" from Babylon (2 Chron 36:22,23; Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5).<sup>4</sup> They were under the civil leadership of Zerubbabel (the governor) and the religious leadership of Joshua (the high priest). At this time, their enthusiasm was high and their one thought was to rebuild the temple of God and resettle in the land. Upon returning, however, political turmoil was rampant. Though the altar of burnt offering had been erected and the temple foundation laid in 536 BC (Ezra 3:8-13), the work was halted before completion.

Consequently, sixteen dreary years passed by in which no progress was made on the temple, the very heart of Israel's theocratic system of worship to YHWH. During this time, Israel remained under a governorship of the Medo-Persian empire.

Finally, in 522 BC, Darius I (Darius Hystaspes) of Persia gained the throne, and under his reign the obstacles were removed which had prevented the temple from being built (his wise administration quickly brought stability to the empire, and he personally promoted religious toleration). However, a new problem arose . . . a change had taken place in the hearts of the people, and they were no longer desirous of completing the temple.

<sup>1</sup>On the history of interpretation, see Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 287-90; and Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentaries (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 169-73, 242-49.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, 166-67. He also reports the opinion of Rashi (d. 1105): "The prophecy is very abstruse, for it contains visions resembling dreams which want interpreting; and we shall never be able to discover the true interpretation until the teacher of righteousness arrives."

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth L. Barker, "Zechariah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1985), 597.

<sup>4</sup>Charles L. Feinberg, *God Remembers* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1965), 2.

Furthermore, they had become spiritually indifferent. But where the many lacked vision, there were a few men of God for whom the fulfillment of God's plans and covenant promises remained a staunch concern. With the future of God's chosen people in view, and ultimately God's glory at stake, Zechariah and Haggai (whose ministries were contemporaneous) responded to the call of God in 520 BC to speak forth all that God commanded them.

It is very much in keeping with our Lord's character to feel compassion for His people when they are low and discouraged. Those of Zechariah's day were certainly that. In such a context, God abundantly poured forth new revelation concerning His divine intentions. These intentions were to center around the Messiah through whom God would bless the world. What privilege this was to the Jews through whom the Messiah would come! Indeed, what responsibilities this privilege would carry with it! Yet the focusing upon Israel's role in the plan of God was a great encouragement from her compassionate God. For in such plans, Israel was to play a prominent role, being Yahweh's servant to usher in the Messiah.

This glorious note of the future was in stark contrast to the despair of the moment. Had God returned Israel to the land for nothing? Indeed not! Interestingly, Zechariah's name meant "the LORD remembers" (from Heb. זָכַר, *zākar*, "to remember"), a reminder that YHWH remembers His covenant promises with Israel to fulfill them. This is very appropriate, since the book bearing his name will depict how God will work through history to ultimately restore the nation, defend them and bless them under Messiah's rule. The whole episode of God's disciplinary action of sending His people into exile had purpose. If indeed it had been God's will to bring them back to the "promised land," then this must be indicative of His kind intention to "further the program" that would result in His glory. Hence, we understand Yahweh's beckoning call in the opening chapter, "Return to Me!"

#### **PURPOSE STATEMENT FOR THE BOOK**

To encourage post-exilic Israel to repent and rebuild the temple by (1) reminding her of God's covenant faithfulness and (2) providing a look at the nation's future in light of Messiah's coming.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARGUMENT**

#### **II. A CALL TO REPENT (1:1-6)**

The book is dated in the eighth month of the second year of Darius (1:1). This would be approximately Oct/Nov of 520 BC, and thus shortly after the resumption of the temple project on Sept 20, 520 BC (Hag 1:14-15). The question is raised as to why the book is dated by a pagan king. At that time, Israel had no king of her own, but Darius (the king of Persia) was a suzerain over Judah. This is in keeping with Israel's subjection throughout the period known as "the times of the Gentiles" (Lk 21:24).

The opening verses form a significant part of the book. God initiates the interaction proclaiming to His chosen people "Return to Me . . . that I may return to you." This is a call to repentance (cf. Deut 30), and this call is followed by an explanation.<sup>5</sup> Before the exile, God had sent forth His prophets who also had cried for repentance, and that the nation turn from her evil deeds and ways so as to be rightly related to YHWH again. As a consequence of their refusal to do so, God disciplined them and removed them from the land. But now,

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<sup>5</sup>The same Hebrew word translated "return" (שׁוּב) in vv 3-4 is translated "repent" in vs 6. Notice the stress on the personal relationship with God: "Return to Me!"

in Zechariah's day, that episode is past. Israel, back in the land, has opportunity to seize hold of God's grace and prosper by obedience in the land. Spiritual revival and the rebuilding of the temple are appropriate at this time. Yet if the nation lingers in her spiritual lethargy, God will discipline them as well (the words "and I will return to you" mean that God will not send divine discipline if they indeed repent).

The appropriate choice is to move forward in faith, beginning with repentance, that Yahweh's purposes might be fulfilled.<sup>6</sup> They can be confident in Him, for He (as 'the LORD of Hosts') ". . . is the controller of history who musters all the powers of heaven and earth to accomplish his will."<sup>7</sup> The rest of the book will substantiate the wisdom of a faithful response and serve to motivate the Jews to act accordingly. "The appropriation and enjoyment of God's promises of blessing must be prefaced by genuine repentance."<sup>8</sup>

### III. THE EIGHT NIGHT VISIONS (1:7–6:15)

This section of the book, consisting of eight night-visions of apocalyptic nature, has a basically positive note and is designed to instruct the nation that she has not been forgotten by God.<sup>9</sup> Neither has she been cast out of God's plan. A basic framework of God's ultimate program with Israel is elucidated in these chapters, and served to encourage the Jews to overcome their spiritual lethargy. The overriding theme is the restoration of Judah (and its capital Jerusalem) with a depiction of their future blessings.<sup>10</sup> This encouragement is advanced by the fact that Israel shall be cleansed and the temple will be rebuilt. Yet the temple to be sought for ultimately shall come at the hand of "branch," the Priest-king (i.e., the Messiah).

#### A. *Vision of the Red Horse Rider Among the Myrtle Trees (1:7-17)*

The first vision is given on the 24th of the eleventh month. This would be in Feb of 519 BC, about three months after the call to repentance and five months since the rebuilding of the temple had begun.

In the nation's depressed state, the first question that would naturally be asked is whether God was still concerned with Israel. This vision answers that question. The fact that it is a *vision*, by the way, implies that we might expect symbolic imagery. The prominent figure is the rider on the red horse, who is identified in vs 11 as the Angel of Yahweh. Since those *who patrol the earth* report back to the Angel of Yahweh, we can probably conclude that these are angelic beings (cf. 6:1-8).<sup>11</sup> "The myrtle because of its fragrance and

<sup>6</sup>A comparison with Haggai indicates that the nation had already made a repentant response *to some degree*. In God's eyes, however, the repentance was not thorough-going enough. This is confirmed by the statement in 6:15b at the end of the first major section of the book: "And it will take place, if you completely obey the LORD your God." God wanted more than just the rebuilding of the temple. He wanted to see them living out His desires with a concern for social justice (note 7:8-10 and 8:16-17,19). The statement in 1:6 "Then they repented" probably refers to the response of the people while still in exile (cf. Dan 9), not the present audience.

<sup>7</sup>Barker, 607.

<sup>8</sup>Merrill F. Unger, *Zechariah: Prophet of Messiah's Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963), 20.

<sup>9</sup>Ralph H. Alexander defines *apocalyptic* as "symbolic visionary prophetic literature, composed during oppressive conditions, consisting of visions whose events are recorded exactly as they were seen by the author and explained through a divine interpreter, and whose theological content is primarily eschatological" ("Hermeneutics of Old Testament Apocalyptic Literature" [Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968], 45).

<sup>10</sup>Other recurring themes include the judgment of the nations, the purification of the land, the rebuilding of the temple, and the centrality of Joshua and Zerubbabel in God's program.

<sup>11</sup>The Persian monarchs used messengers on swift steeds to keep them informed on all matters concerning the empire. These divine messengers remind us that the LORD knew all about the countries of the earth.

lowliness typifies and symbolizes Israel; the deep place speaks of her degradation."<sup>12</sup> The report that the earth was peaceful and at rest (vs 11) may have been disappointing for God's chosen people.<sup>13</sup> Barker comments,

The report . . . told of rest and peace among the nations, when, instead, they were expecting the 'shaking of all nations,' (Hag 2:6-9, 20-23) as the sign of returning favor and full blessing to Zion.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the question emerges in vs 12: where is the indication of God's compassion for His covenant people and chosen city? Was the 70 years of discipline in exile (Jer 25:11-12; 29:10) not enough? The main emphasis of the section comes out in vs 13 where encouragement is highlighted by "gracious words, comforting words." The reason for the encouragement is that God intends to restore His nation to prosperity, to insure the rebuilding of the temple (vs 16), and to "again choose Jerusalem" (possibly meaning as the place from which His glory shall dwell; cf. Deut 12:5,10-11). "Although God's covenant people are troubled while the oppressing nations are at ease, God is 'jealous' for his people and will restore them, their towns, and the temple."<sup>15</sup> The latter chapters of the book will clarify how this shall come about, with the final fulfillment coming about under Messiah's reign. This first vision, then, serves as the general theme for the ones which follow, the others adding the details.

**LESSON:** Even when Israel was being disciplined, God could say that He was still "exceedingly jealous" for them. We must always be careful to keep God's discipline separate from His loving attitude for His own. God remains faithful and loyal to Israel and to us in the New Covenant today, even when we are being disciplined.

### **B. Vision of the 4 Horns and 4 Craftsmen (1:18-21)**

Now that Israel had been given hope of her future, the next logical question that would arise would be "what about our oppressors?" Hence, this vision builds on the 1st vision and God's anger against the nations. The four horns represent four kingdoms (cf. Dan 7:24).<sup>16</sup> Since they are responsible for having already oppressed Israel and having "scattered Judah" by exile (1:19, 21), they may represent Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Medo-Persia (contrast the list of nations in Dan 2 and 7). The craftsmen then are the powers that God raises up to throw down these nations that, in arrogant defiance of God, went beyond their proper bounds in punishing and scattering the covenant people.<sup>17</sup> The point of the vision is that God will deal with Israel's enemies and remove their threat (even those that seem invincible), thus encouraging the covenant nation to continue the rebuilding of the temple and seek the blessings of being in the land. We should not miss the point that this is in keeping with God's plan of restoration in Deuteronomy 30.

<sup>12</sup>Feinberg, 27. "Myrtle trees" are associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, being used for the making of booths (see Neh 8:15; Palestinian Talmud *Sukkah* iii.4). Note that the book ends with the thought of the Feast of Tabernacles in the millennium (Zech 14:16).

<sup>13</sup>The "earth at rest" probably looks at the political calm of the Persian Empire, following the suppression of widespread revolts which accompanied the accession of Darius I (these were successfully dealt with by the 2nd year of Darius's reign).

<sup>14</sup>Barker, 612.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 610-11. He adds, "When one compares several other pertinent biblical references, it appears likely that the temple completed and dedicated in 516 B.C. (Ezra 6:15-16) was only the initial stage in the complete fulfillment (or in the 'filling to the full') of vv. 16-17 (note Isa 2:2-3; Jer 31:38-40; Ezek 40-42; Acts 15:14-18)" (613). [Note: Others use the date 515 BC for the completion of the temple (e.g., Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 496; and Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, 434)].

<sup>16</sup>Barker notes, "When used figuratively, 'horn' usually symbolizes strength—either strength in general (Ps 18:2) or the strength of a country, i.e., its king (Ps 89:17; Dan 7:24; 8:20-21; Rev 17:12), or the power of a nation in general (here?)" (615). Chisholm adds, "The horn of a wild animal, which often symbolizes strength (Deut 33:17; 1 Sam 2:10; Pss. 75:10; 89:17,24; 92:10; 112:9; Jer. 48:25; Lam. 2:17; Ezek. 29:21) make an apt figure for the military power of these nations" (239).

<sup>17</sup>Craftsmen are those who work with metal and forge weapons (cf. Isa 54:16-17 for use of same word).

### C. Vision of the Man with the Measuring Line (2:1-13)

This vision is of a man who sets out to measure the walls of Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> He is quickly interrupted by an angel who instructs him that the city will be inhabited without walls due to the abundance of inhabitants. The point of the vision is that there will be no need to be concerned about protection, for the Lord's intention is to protect the city and be the glory in her midst (vs 5). One day Jesus will come again and enter Jerusalem as the "King of glory" (Ps 24:7-10; Mt 24:29-30).

The Jews should expect and hope for the time of their fullest blessing. This section anticipates full kingdom blessing in the messianic era, including the fulfillment of the OT covenants such as the Abrahamic Covenant.<sup>19</sup> Notice how vs 11 echoes the promises of Genesis 12:3 concerning the nations of the world. In vv 10-13, God holds forth a picture of Israel's blessed time when the Messiah shall reign: "Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst." When compared with Zechariah 9:9, the figure anticipated here in ch 2 is Israel's King who is just and endowed with salvation. This early introduction of the Messiah in the book serves to create a hunger in the hearts of the Jews to hasten that day by responding faithfully to Zechariah's message.

The thought of rebuilding and restoring the city suggests hard work in which many *willing hands* would be needed. Unfortunately, only a small portion of the Jews returned with Zerubbabel in 538 BC, though God's will was for all of them to return (cf. Isa 48:20). Hence, a call is given to those who remained in the Babylonian regions of the exile: "Flee from the land of the north!" (vs 6; the "land of the north" being a reference to Babylon—cf. Jer 1:14). Zechariah 2:8-9 looks at the Lord's revenge of the plunderers, and vv 10-12 look forward to the time when the nations will be restored to the Lord after the Second Coming of Christ.

### D. The Cleansing of Joshua, The High Priest (3:1-10)

The first three visions dwelt on the themes of the deliverance of Israel from captivity and oppression, the consequent enlargement and expansion, and the subsequent prosperity and material blessing of the land. In this chapter, Israel is given a glimpse of the national cleansing that YHWH anticipates for them, with the characters (as symbols—vs 8) foreshadowing greater events in the future. Visions 4 and 5 are *paired together*, in that they focus on the two historic leaders of that day (Joshua and Zerubbabel) who are symbolized by the two olive trees (4:11-14). Chapter 3 emphasizes Joshua, whereas chapter 4 emphasizes Zerubbabel.

In this scene, Joshua depicts the sinful state of Israel, since by virtue of his position as high priest he is the nation's representative. Satan wants to accuse Israel of failure as God's covenant people (as witnessed by the recent exile), and thus see God reject them irrevocably. However, God cannot and will not do that, since the divine promises and purposes of God are at stake (Rom 3:1-4; 11:1-2). Furthermore, if Israel is a "brand plucked from the fire" (i.e., delivered from the discipline of the exile; cf. Amos 4:11), then God must not reject

<sup>18</sup>The 'measuring line' is a symbol of preparation for rebuilding and restoring Jerusalem and the temple, ultimately in the messianic kingdom, as the following verses make plain. The restoration of the people, the temple, and the city immediately after the Babylonian exile was only the first stage in the progressive fulfillment of the promises that follow (see also Ezek 40:3,5)" (Barker, 616). [The connection with the messianic kingdom receives support from verses 2:5,10,11, which specify that the Lord will then dwell in their midst].

<sup>19</sup>This vision looks at the time in the millennium after the Lord's return when Jerusalem will be the capital of the world, and the city will be greatly expanded. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the climax of the book depicts Jerusalem *in security* after the Second Coming of Christ (see Zech 14:9-11). Those who advocate some sort of *spiritualized interpretation* (e.g., this is looking at the "church" or the heavenly New Jerusalem) face a couple of problems: (1) vs 12 speaks of the Lord possessing Judah as His portion in the holy land; and (2) Jerusalem's security in the context of Zechariah is connected with the Second Coming.

His people (else, why would He have delivered them?). The change of garments represents the removal of iniquity (vs 5), and this is applied to the nation as well in vs 9: "I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day." This aspect will find fulfillment when the New Covenant is effected with Israel as a nation at the Second Coming (cf. Rom 11:26-27).<sup>20</sup>

For Joshua and his fellow priests there was encouragement that Israel will be purged, cleansed, and reinstated into her priestly office and functions. Israel was called to a role of being a priestly nation (Ex 19:6), and one day will be restored to that function. Vs 8 indicates that this was to be accompanied by the work of "My Servant the Branch," a term for the Messiah (cf. Isa 4:2; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 6:12). Hence, Israel's restoration as a priestly nation will be realized in the messianic age.

Feinberg summarizes this chapter:

. . . its first part deals with the past sins of Israel as forgiven of God through the then ministering high priest; its second division looks forward to that coming day when the High Priest, unexcelled and unparalleled, will take away all the sins of Israel forever.<sup>21</sup>

### **E. The Golden Lampstand and the Two Olive Trees (4:1-14)**

The fifth vision explicitly mentions the symbolism of two olive trees and a golden lampstand (the common factor is that olive oil was used in the lampstand to keep it burning; cf. Ex 31:8; 39:37; Num 8:4). In light of vv 6 and 14, the two olive trees are identified as Zerubbabel, a member of the line of David, and Joshua. Thus, this vision is similar to the previous one in that contemporary figures are utilized (although the emphasis now shifts to the civil leadership under Zerubbabel).

Just as the light of the lampstand was dependent on the oil supply, so Zerubbabel's work on the temple and in the lives of the people was to be completed, not by human might or power, but by divine power. The inferred oil serves as a symbol of the fullness of God's power through His Spirit. Barker comments,

The work was dependent on God; he would provide the oil or strength of his Spirit. Such enablement was sorely needed because of the opposition and apathy hindering the rebuilding (Hag 2:1-9).<sup>22</sup>

The "great mountain" mentioned in vs 7 is a figurative reference to the challenges and opposition that stood in their way in the task of rebuilding (cf. Isa 40:4). In addition to the assurance of divine aid, Zerubbabel also had the divine promise of success (vs 9). Thus, the main purposes of the vision were (1) to encourage the two leaders, Joshua and Zerubbabel, in the work of rebuilding the temple by reminding them of their divine resources and (2) to vindicate them in the eyes of the community.<sup>23</sup> Zerubbabel had laid the foundation of the temple in 537-36 BC (see Ezra 3:8-11; 5:16), and (despite the 16 years of inactivity) his hands would finish the project in Zechariah's day, i.e., by 515 BC.

<sup>20</sup>Substantiation for the view that the cleansing is connected with the Second Coming is provided by the similar phraseology of Zechariah 3:10 with Micah 4:4, the latter coming immediately after a passage which speaks of the millennial kingdom.

<sup>21</sup>Feinberg, 67.

<sup>22</sup>Barker, 629.

<sup>23</sup>Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972), 119.

The close association of ruler and priest in this chapter may be intended to point ultimately to the messianic King-priest (cf. 6:13; Ps 110; Heb 7). He, too, will bear testimony as "the faithful and true witness" in the power of God's Spirit.

## **A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE**

"What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain" (Zech 4:7). With these words, the prophet used figurative language to describe the seemingly impossible task of rebuilding the temple. The work was so complicated and there were so many challenges standing in the way that it seemed to them as difficult as trying to move a great mountain. Sometimes it seems to us as well that God has called us to a ministry that is impossible to achieve. We may face opposition from outsiders, we may face criticism from other believers, or we may struggle with limited resources. Yet, this passage also reminds us that God has not called us to face these challenges in our own strength or ability. We must constantly look to Him, for the true solution is to be found in what His Spirit will accomplish: "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts" (Zech 4:6). This is a wonderful reminder to us that "great mountains" (obstacles) are not impossible to God when we are dependent upon God's Spirit.