

Zechariah

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The second-to-last book of the minor prophets, and the second of the three post-exilic books, is Zechariah. We learn about his biographical information in Zechariah 1:1. According to this, he began prophesying at exactly the same time as Haggai, and in exactly the same situation, in which some of the exiles had returned to Jerusalem, but the temple had not yet been rebuilt. This opening description is confirmed by a similar comment in Ezra 5.

However, even though Zechariah prophesied at the same time as Haggai, his style and concerns are very different. For one thing, Zechariah uses apocalyptic language more than any of the other minor prophets. The bulk of the book, in fact, is made up of visions interpreted by angels. These visions include everything from lampstands to different-colored horses to flying scrolls, very similar to what we find in Revelation. We're not going to examine any of those visions in depth, but remember that all of the explanations we will consider are bracketed by apocalyptic language.

Second, where just about everything that Haggai says has to do with rebuilding the temple, Zechariah only mentions the house of the Lord in passing, a time or two. Instead, he is much more concerned with the general spiritual condition of the returned exiles and their leaders. We know from Nehemiah's account, which was written not much later than this, that the richer Jews who had returned from Babylon commonly oppressed their poorer countrymen, and Zechariah warns against this kind of abuse. Overall, he urges the people to be more righteous than their fathers.

Finally, though, even more so than Micah, Zechariah is concerned with looking ahead to the Messiah. The first part of the book is clearly set in post-exilic Jerusalem, but in its last few chapters, Zechariah looks ahead to a time that was much less well defined to him, and prophesied many of the events of the life of Jesus. All of these things have significance to our relationship with God. Let's find that significance as we consider the book of Zechariah.

Rebuilding.

One of the first themes that Zechariah addresses is the theme of rebuilding. In a physical sense, he's concerned with rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. Consider, for instance, the prophecy of Zechariah 1:16-17. Here, we see one of those passing references to the rebuilding of the temple, but God's primary concern here is obviously the rebuilding of the Jewish capital and indeed the rebuilding of the whole nation. They had been destroyed because of the wickedness of the Jews in previous days, but now, just as God was against them to destroy, He was for them to build.

We need to remember the importance of the Lord's help whenever we are trying to build. Whether we are trying to build a house, a business, or a family, we need to lean on God. As Solomon observes in Psalm 127, if we build without Him, we build in vain. This is true for two reasons. First, God teaches us how to build by giving us His commandments for our good. It might seem that we can get ahead if we cheat and lie and so on in our human relationships. Those things may seem to offer benefit in the short term, but in the long term, they will always come back to bite us, and when we obey God, we avoid those traps. Second, though, when we're building with Him, we have His blessing upon our work.

This teaches us just how important it is for us to make sure that we have the Lord on our side. Zechariah advises the Jews about this in Zechariah 1:4-6. God here isn't pointing forward to what the effects of His word will be, but backward, to what the effects were. The point is plain. The Jews need to listen to Him because of the example of their fathers. Instead of choosing to be righteous, their ancestors chose to be wicked. They rejected God's warnings, and then God's warnings caught up with them and destroyed them. God is saying to their descendants, "Be smarter than that."

Likewise, friends, we need to learn from the example of the wicked. There are all kinds of people who have chosen and still choose to flout God's law. They think they can be happier doing what they want instead of what God wants. Just as Psalm 37 promises, the wicked may spring up and flourish for a short while, but sooner or later, their wickedness catches up with them. They wreck their careers, they wreck their families, they wreck their health, and they wreck their happiness. On the off chance that they escape the consequences of their actions in this life, we can be certain that they will not escape those consequences in the life to come. We need to learn from them and be righteous.

If the Jews wanted to avoid the disaster of their fathers, though, they had to engage in rebuilding that was moral instead of merely physical. Just as we saw in Haggai, the Jews recognized this need and wanted to learn how. In the early part of Zechariah 7, they ask God if it would please Him if they continued fasting like they did during the captivity. We see God's reply in Zechariah 7:5-6, 8-10. Basically, what God is saying is that when they fasted, they weren't doing it for Him. They were doing it for themselves. They made up their own rule and were following it, instead of looking to God's commandments and following them. God says instead that they need to stop worrying about their made-up rituals of righteousness and give attention to His law instead. That way, they could be certain of pleasing Him.

It's almost funny just how common it is in the religious world around us for people to make up their own little rituals in the hope of pleasing God. They think that if they worship Him with musical instruments, that will please Him.

They think that if they fast from chocolate or something for forty days, that will please Him. They think that if they repeat some prayer over and over, that will please Him. Brethren, there's not a word in Scripture about any of those things, and people who practice them aren't serving God. They're just serving themselves. If we want to please God, we have to listen to what He actually tells us to do and then obey. Only then are we giving Him what He wants.

Leaders.

In addition to counseling all the people, Zechariah gives special attention to the leaders of the Jews. For example, consider this vision about Joshua the son of Jehozadak in Zechariah 3:3-5. If you recall, we saw Joshua a couple of weeks ago in our sermon on Haggai. He was the high priest at the time the temple was rebuilt, and he was one of the main leaders in that effort. Here, we see God demonstrating the way that He has purified Joshua and made him fit for obedience. Only a man who was spiritually clean could expect to do God's work and serve in His temple.

This teaches us an important lesson about leaders in the church today. God's people have always needed leaders to inspire and encourage them, and the need for leadership is just as great in the church of today. For our leaders to be effective, though, they must be pure leaders. A man who secretly indulges the sinful appetites of his flesh, whatever those appetites may be, is not going to be able to work usefully in the kingdom. A man who is an angry, iron-fisted tyrant at home will never have what it takes to nurture the flock of God. A leader who is proud of his position in the church, who's always looking for ways to exalt himself, will destroy himself and the church too. God needs righteous, meek, and humble men for His elders and deacons. If we serve in that way or we want to, that's the character we must perfect.

Just as Zechariah spends a great deal of time on Joshua, so too he discusses Zerubbabel. Look at Zechariah 4:8-10. If you remember, along with Joshua, Zerubbabel was the other main leader in the temple-rebuilding project. In fact, he'd served as a leader ever since the original return from Babylon. Judging from context, it appears that Zerubbabel was getting old by this point in time, and there was some doubt as to whether he would live to see the temple rebuilt. God tells the people not to worry about it. Zerubbabel could still do God's work, and God would still rejoice to see it.

This is an important word of encouragement for our older members today. In the churches I've been associated with, one of the most dispiriting things I've seen is that way that older Christians so often check out. Many of them seem to believe that once they retire from their jobs, they get to retire from work in the church too. That's not at all a Biblical concept, friends. Even if our older folks aren't as frisky as they once were, they still have energy to offer, and more than that, they have the wisdom and character developed by a lifetime of studying God's word. We don't have to be able to run a mile to work in the kingdom. All we have to be is willing, and God will help us, bless us, and be pleased with us.

The Messiah.

In addition to these very timely prophecies, Zechariah also looks into the far future to describe the Messiah. The latter part of the book is absolutely loaded with Messianic prophecies. In fact, we looked at several of them during my recent sermon about the prophecies concerning Jesus. However, there are three more that I didn't talk about that are equally important. For the first of these, consider with me Zechariah 6:11-13. Here, Joshua the high priest is being given an elaborate crown and set on a throne, so that he is both king and priest. Literally speaking, this never happened. There's never any indication that Joshua had any secular power among the Jews during his lifetime.

Instead, this passage is a clear reference forward to Jesus, who reigns as king and priest today. Jesus was a descendant of Zerubbabel, and through him of David and the kings of Judah. However, by virtue of the decree of God, He is also a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. He is also the branch from the root of Jesse. As such, He is both our monarch and our intercessor with God, and through Him, we have peace with the Almighty.

We see another, grimmer, Messianic prophecy in Zechariah 12:10. This describes both what would happen to Jesus and what the eventual reaction of the Jewish nation would be. The corpse of Jesus was wounded so deeply that water and blood streamed out, proving to everyone who saw Him that he was truly dead and not just faking. The mourning came a little bit later on the day of Pentecost, when the devout Jews who heard Peter's first sermon realized that they had in fact crucified the Son of God. Their mourning led them to salvation through baptism.

Finally, we see another significant prophecy about what would happen in the Messianic age in Zechariah 13:1-2. This one takes some unpacking, but its relevance quickly becomes plain. According to Scripture, the one who opened the fountain for sin and iniquity was Jesus. He is the One who gives to us the water of life. What this tells us is that on that day—at that time—many of the other manifestations of the supernatural would pass away. On the minus side, there wouldn't be any more prophets, which means no more miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. On the plus side, though, there wouldn't be any more unclean spirits either. The demons sent by Satan would no longer trouble the land.

This is important because it predicts the decline of spiritual gifts and demon possession that we see in the New Testament. Because the miraculous spiritual gifts could only be given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, they faded soon after the apostles. Likewise, God no longer permitted demon possession once men could no longer fight it.