

'Your Kingdom Come!' **Studies in Zechariah**

Some 50,000 people have returned from Babylon to Judah, as reported by the book of Ezra, 'everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem' (Ezra 1:5). They begin well, but then, other factors come into play and the temple work is shelved for some 15 years—until the second year of Darius, 520 BC, at which time, Zechariah begins to prophesy (Ezra 4:24—5:1).

Zechariah will expose some of the problems preventing this work happening, and Malachi more-so (some 80 years later), but the emphasis in this book is on what God is doing and will do, and it is these things that re-awaken the Jews to be about the work of building the temple.

We will need to see how this worked out in the 5th century BC but there are two reasons why we should heed its message. Firstly, it sets out an agenda for the Messiah. Secondly, it encourages us to seek God's kingdom first. The NT has 11 direct quotations and over 60 allusions to the book.

After an introductory word of the Lord (1:1-6), and three months later, the word of the Lord comes to Zechariah as eight visions, all on one night (1:7—6:8). This first section ends with a further word about a reigning priest who will, finally, build the temple (6:9-15).

A second section contains an introduction (chs. 7-8) and two oracles (chs. 9—11 and 12—14) and these build on what has already been said. The whole book demonstrates the relationship between the now and the not yet. The present cannot contain all that God has promised, but then, as Barry Webb writes, 'the kingdom of God can never be anything other than an overwhelmingly great reality' (*The Message of Zechariah*, p. 96). We must not 'despise the day of small things' (Zech. 4:10).

Jesus teaches us to pray 'Your kingdom come!' Zechariah inspires us to say this prayer truly by taking us behind the scenes to see what God is doing for our welfare and for the healing of the nations.

1:1-6

God's first word is a call to repent. His kingdom authority has been exercised in giving them over to the Babylonians because of their idolatry and hypocrisy, so they should not be like their fathers who had not repented. God's return to Israel is conditional on their turning to him. In fact, the prophecies about repentance (Ezek. 36:22-32), and the facts themselves, indicate that repentance is the fruit of God's saving action. God has announced that his people will return and that he will dwell among them. Then again, in the prophecy about future renewal, Zechariah is told that a spirit of grace and asking for grace would be poured out on his people (12:10). So repentance is a gift, but also a necessity.

The ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus begin in the same way: 'Repent for the kingdom is at hand!' Repentance is at once a gift of mercy and a requirement. It is the message we take to the world. All must turn to God, away from idols (1 Thes. 1:9; Acts 17:30-31).

We are not told what sins the returnees turned from but repent they did, not least, in acknowledging that God had been right to judge their fathers. We need to turn from any thought that God should look after us or that we deserve his favour, and recognise that what took place on the cross was entirely right—given that Christ was bearing our sins. God has said "No!" to all that we are of ourselves so that we may look to his Son for our

righteousness. Looking for God's reign among us must take account of the fact that no good resides in us. We are to live in the repentance God has given and look to him always to lead us in righteousness.

1:7-17

Now, two months later, Zechariah has a night of visions (to 6:8). Revelation has often come to the prophets in this way, opening up what cannot be seen by observation or discerned by wisdom, and having the authority of non-negotiated address. A rider on a red horse takes centre stage—he is the first mentioned (v. 8), he answers Zechariah's enquiry (v. 10), receives the report of the other riders and is called 'the angel of the Lord' (v. 11). Then, he makes intercession for the Judeans. The interpreting angel through whom Zechariah comes to understand what is happening gives him the word he must pass on. 'I am jealous for Jerusalem and angry with the destroying nations.' God has returned (as Israel had) to his people—with mercy! The temple will be built and Jerusalem will prosper. God will comfort them with the only secure comfort available in this world—'God has chosen you', and here, Israel's election is in full action again. They are not abandoned; God is among them (Exod. 33:16).

Some of the great themes of Israel's history are revived: God is over the nations (Deut. 4:7, 34); an intercessor looks for mercy (Exod. 33:12-17); comfort is found (Isa. 40:1); God is jealous for his people and for his glory in the earth (Ezek. 36:21-23); God will live among his people and they will prosper under his reign (Ezek. 37:27-28; Mic. 4:1-5). These truths have been Israel's witness from their beginnings. Only God can execute his plan, and now, he has a people who are looking for him to act.

All revelation has a history and trajectory. It is true in its first appearance but points to all that God is going to do. Christ is, for us, the Angel of the Lord who has interceded on the cross and now at the right hand of God. All nations are subject to him. Because of his intercession, the church is established as his temple and will lead to the blessing of the nations. All the promises of God concerning his people have found their "Yes!" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). We must walk and work in the Father's jealous mercy.

1:18-21

What do the horns and tradesmen signify? A horn would suggest might and power in these times but what power? The horns are nothing less than the powers that demolished Israel. The terror of this was real—none had dared lift their head, and this would still be part of their cultural memory. But God has his craftsmen, in this case, demolition experts, and they will reverse the terror. During this period, as Ezra and Nehemiah make clear, nothing can happen without the permission, and in some cases, without the funding of Persia. But then, those same histories, along with Daniel and Esther, make it clear that God goes about doing precisely what he wants to do for the glory of his name and the blessing of his people.

The world is ever present to the Church and we live under secular governments, but then, Christ has abolished death and brought immortality to light by his gospel. All powers are subject to him (Matt. 12:29; Col. 2:15), and if we do not lose our nerve, the world may well tremble at the confidence of the simple believing Christian (Phil. 1:28; 1 Pet. 3:5-6).

2:1-13

A new scene appears and Zechariah lifts up his eyes. An angel is about to measure Jerusalem and tells the prophet's interpreting angel to explain his action. All Jerusalem will be filled with glory, that is, be the temple (as measured in Ezekiel 40), protected by God's fire, as Eden was (Gen 3:24), or Israel was (Exod. 13:20-22) or will be (Isa. 4:2-6). With God among them, the people will be numerous and prosperous.

Three instructions follow—probably from Zechariah who is eager for God’s reign to be recognised (Judeans will know the Lord has sent him—vv. 8, 9, 11). First, the people still in Babylon (or perhaps those who have already come) should flee from its fading splendor because God will now make Jerusalem the centre of world influence. She is God’s delight and other nations will become her spoils in battle. Second, Jerusalem should sing with delight because of God’s presence. Other nations will be drawn to her (cf. Psa. 51:12-13). Again, all this is because God’s election of Israel (v. 12 with 1:17). Third, the nations should be quiet and listen to what God is doing through his people.

The church is now God’s temple (Eph. 2:21); the Lord is present among us (Acts 2:1-4); Christ is distributing the spoils of his battle in the gifts he gives his church (Eph. 4:7-12) and the nations are destined to give homage to their one Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:9-11). We are to leave behind our love affair with this world (Isa. 52:11; 2 Cor. 6:17), and not live as embattled victims but as servants of the Lord, awaiting the final revelation of his victory (Acts 4:23-31).

3:1-10

After three visions that have to do with all the people and their rebuilding of the temple, this and the next one focus on their priest and governor, Joshua and Zerubbabel. The last three then return to focus on the whole community.

Joshua is revealed as he is, that is, as he stands before the angel of the Lord, who, it seems, is responsible for the priest’s appropriateness to serve. Joshua is unclean. If he is unclean, actually and ceremonially, what chance is there for Israel because he their representative (Exod. 28:29, 36, 38)? They may build a temple but there will be no worship! At this point, the Lord himself speaks and turns the rebuke to Satan instead of to Joshua. He has chosen Israel (a third reference to this) and has snatched Joshua from the burning of judgement. In other words, his sinfulness is acknowledged but not allowed to be determinative. It is the angel (or the Lord) who demands that new clothes be given to the high priest. Delightfully, Zechariah chimes in to ask for a new turban as well. This cleansing comes with a solemn charge to walk in this forgiveness by obeying God’s commands. In so doing, his ministry (or future reward) will be secured (cf. Matt. 5:19).

This is all now related to the future. Joshua and his fellow priests signify the coming Branch, a reference to Isaiah 11:1 and Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15 (also in Zech. 6:12). What is going on with Joshua will have its full reach when Christ comes as King and Priest. A stone is engraved (either the one in the temple or one worn by the priest) signifying that the Lord would ‘remove the iniquity of this land in a single day’. That will be the day when Israel will have true peace.

All of Israel’s history, as all Christian ministry now, can rise no higher than to anticipate or represent the ministry of Christ who bears away the sin of the world (John 1:29; Heb. 9:26; 10:14). The accusations against us could be manifold, but Christ, who secures the life and work of his church, all those the Father has chosen, refuses to allow accusation against us to stand and declares us clean (cf. 2 Sam. 12:13; Isa. 6:7). It is this that assures us of a final day of peace.