

2. Zion's restoration is a core theme in Zechariah's prophecy and this restoration was to involve both the reconstruction of Yahweh's dwelling place and the ingathering of the earth's peoples. But these ideas point to another critical component of the prophecy, namely the Lord's promise of His return to Zion and the consequent end of exile for the covenant household. Zion could enjoy no recovery short of the Lord's return, for it was His presence in the midst of His people that made Zion truly *Zion* (ref. again 1:14-17, 2:1-11, 8:1-8). So also, without His presence there could be no *sanctuary*, but only an empty building, however grand and glorious; Mount Zion would yet remain *ichabod*. Yahweh was indeed going to return to Zion, but in conjunction with His people's return to Him. This, too, was necessary for ending Israel's exile since the exile reflected their estrangement from God as much as His withdrawal from them (1:1-3; cf. Isaiah 51:9-16 with 40:1-11, 59:1-60:7; also Hosea 1:1-3:5; Zephaniah 3:1-20; Malachi 3:1-4:1, etc.).

The Lord's promise to restore Zion included His commitment to end the alienation between Him and Abraham's children. His return to them meant their return to Him – not geographically, politically or symbolically, but in spirit and truth. The day was coming when the hearts of the children would be turned to the fathers – a day when Abraham's offspring would become his children *indeed* by sharing in his faith and devotion to his covenant Lord and His purposes in the world. Reconciliation, then, was the fundamental issue in ending Israel's exile and reestablishing David's house and kingdom.

And that day would be a day of great joy and celebration, but also of deep mourning as the children came to see with clear eyes the depth and depravity of their lovelessness, faithlessness and apostasy and the great calamity and misery it had incurred. The Lord was going to recover and establish Zion, but the nature of her desolation and the reason for it meant that restoration would involve an agonizing and most sorrowful *repentance*. This is the matter to which Zechariah's burden next turned its attention (12:9-14).

- a. In the first part of the burden the Lord pledged His intervention on behalf of Zion and her security and well-being. He was going to arise on Zion's behalf, but for the sake of reconciling her children to Himself and reestablishing His presence as their enthroned King. Again, such reconciliation implies His return to Zion, but also His people's return to Him. Zion's restoration demanded her children's repentance (cf. Isaiah 54-55; Hosea 1-3), but this, too, was to be the work of the sovereign Creator: The One who *forms* man's spirit within him (12:1) is the One who *renews* man's spirit and *recovers* it to Himself (Ezekiel 36:16-38). Moreover, the Lord proclaimed this renewal to be the outcome of condescending favor and mercy; in that great day Yahweh was going to pour out upon David's house and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a "*spirit of grace and supplication*" (12:10).

Fundamental to the meaning of this expression is the term *spirit*. It can refer either to an inner attitude and orientation (cf. Numbers 5:29-30, 14:24; Isaiah 19:13-14, 29:10, 57:15) or the Holy Spirit. The first option lends the meaning that Yahweh was pledging, out of His good favor, to provoke an inward "spirit" of repentance and supplication in the people of Jerusalem and David's house. So McComiskey: "*They have a new spirit, prompting them to a heart response to God.*"

But if *spirit* refers to the Holy Spirit, then this promise accords with what is a central component of the prophets' revelation of the kingdom of God, namely the outpouring of Yahweh's Spirit as the Spirit of re-creation, reconciliation and ingathering (cf. Isaiah 32, 44:1-4; Ezekiel 11:16-20, 36:16-32; Joel 2:28-29 with John 14:16-26, 15:26-16:14, 20:19-22 and Acts 1-2; cf. also Zechariah 4:1-6 with 6:9-15). Zechariah's expression – "I will *pour out* a (the) spirit" – strongly suggests this latter sense (cf. again Isaiah 32:14-15, 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28-29), with the result that the Lord was promising to graciously pour out His Spirit upon the people of David's house and kingdom.

But in the end, both options stand together; *in fact, they imply one another*. For it is by His Spirit that the Lord provokes a "spirit" of repentance and supplication in men (ref. Psalm 51:10-12). (*Supplication* refers to petitions to God which reflect a posture of dependence and submission.) Conversely, if men are characterized by a dependent, supplicatory "spirit," it is because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

- c. The outcome of this outpouring was to be opened eyes and hearts for the house of David and the people of Judah and Jerusalem. The Spirit would cause them to see and discern what was previously hidden from them. Specifically, the Spirit was going to enable them to discern *one who was pierced* (as with a sword).

This description immediately suggests the person of the messianic Branch, first because of His centrality in Zechariah's prophecy (ref. 3:1-10, 6:9-15, 9:9-10, 11:12-13, 13:7, 14:3-4, etc.), but also because of Isaiah's prophecy which came to Israel some two centuries earlier. In Isaiah it is Yahweh's *Servant* who is pierced (53:1-6), but the broader context of the prophecy associates this Servant with the Branch of David (cf. Isaiah 9-11 with 49-55). These correlations suggest that Zechariah's figure should be associated with Isaiah's Servant-Branch offered up as a vicarious sacrifice on behalf of other men. Even more conclusively, John explicitly connected this prophecy with Jesus' crucifixion (John 19:31-37). Two further things about this statement are also important to consider:

- 1) The first is the *pronoun shift* and the *referent* associated with each of the pronouns. Given that Yahweh was the one speaking to this point in the burden (12:1), it follows that "me" refers back to Him. But this raises the question of Yahweh – the immortal God – being "pierced." It also implies that Yahweh and His Servant-Branch are, in some sense, one and the same. Indeed, Isaiah's prophecy explicitly connects them: It was in the person of His Servant that the Lord was going to fulfill His pledge to come and restore all things and establish His kingdom (ref. Isaiah 59:1-21; cf. also 40:1-11 with 42:1-9; so Zechariah 1:14-17, 2:1-11, 8:1-9 with 6:9-15 and 9:9-17; ref. also Malachi 3:1). But this correspondence is more than representational: Branch's coming and work *are* Yahweh's coming and work (cf. Isaiah 59:15-21; John 5:1-44, 6:24-57). Thus the Servant-Branch wouldn't be pierced merely on the Lord's behalf; *His piercing – that is, His sacrificial self-giving – would be Yahweh's self-giving* (Hosea 1-3).

The Lord's outpouring of His Spirit was to result in opened eyes and hearts for the people of Jerusalem and David's house. But as wonderful as this might seem, this epiphany was going to be agonizing: They would realize that *they* had fulfilled Isaiah's woeful prophecy of Messiah's rejection and death. Though Isaiah had predicted Israel's culpability in this act (53:1-8), Zechariah's burden surely must have troubled him as well as the Jews with him; he and exiled Israel were *longing* for the messianic Branch to come and raise up David's fallen tabernacle; Isaiah's prophecy notwithstanding, how could it possibly happen that any in Israel would rise up against and kill their Deliverer-King?

And the horror of this revelation was only amplified by the prophecy's insistence that this piercing would be the piercing of Yahweh Himself. Those hearing the words of Zechariah's burden could not have known whether this prophecy referred to their generation or a future one, but either way, they must have shuddered at what they heard. It was difficult to imagine that, when David's Branch finally appeared, the children of David's house would kill him; but the idea that by piercing him they were piercing *their God* was utterly inconceivable. And yet, the reality would actually be worse: When that fateful day arrived, Israel would indeed kill the Lord's Servant-Deliverer – the One whose coming was *Yahweh's* coming, but with the settled conviction that, by doing so, they were actually demonstrating their devotion to their covenant God (cf. Matthew 26:57-66 with John 19:1-7). They would pierce Yahweh with the confidence that they were honoring and serving Him in righteousness.

This intimate connection between Yahweh and the Branch provides insight into one likely reason for the shift in pronouns. Most English versions read, "they will look upon *me* and mourn for *him*..." and it's quite possible that this shift was intended to highlight the enigmatic truth that this messianic figure is Yahweh *Himself* while also being *distinct* from Him. Thus the first pronoun (*me*) points to Yahweh as the person who is pierced while the second (*him*) distinguishes this person from Him.

But there is another equally valid interpretation, namely that the second pronoun should be rendered impersonally as *it* rather than *him*. First of all, this is entirely consistent with Hebrew grammar, which has no neuter gender. Pronouns take the gender of their antecedent (the noun or substantive they replace), but in the case of Hebrew pronouns, this means they will always be masculine or feminine in form even if they denote an impersonal or inanimate entity (as expressed by the English pronoun *it*).

Another feature of biblical Hebrew is that non-specific or general entities and ideas don't follow concrete gender rules. Thus one event or occurrence may be referenced by a feminine pronoun while another is referenced by a masculine one. (Again, Hebrew has no neuter gender.)

In this instance, then, the masculine pronoun “it” would refer to the incident and matter of the piercing of this figure (“me”) associated with the person of Yahweh. Thus the sense of the statement: *Having come, by the Spirit, to discern the significance of this event, the house of David and inhabitants of Jerusalem are provoked to mourning over it.*

- 2) The second thing to consider about the statement is the matter of *mourning* and how it is to be understood in the present context. First of all, it clearly has reference to the piercing of Yahweh. The house of David and people of Jerusalem were going to mourn as the outcome of “looking upon” Him – that is, contemplating Him with a clear and discerning gaze. Secondly, the insight underlying this mourning was to be given by the outpoured Spirit. The Spirit would enable the offenders to discern who it was that they had put to death – their covenant Lord in the person of His Servant-Branch – and so recognize the true nature and gravity of their deed. So far from mere sadness over the news of a man’s tragic death, this mourning expresses the sort of horror and agonized sorrow which flow from a clear-eyed awareness of one’s culpability in this most heinous of offenses; it is a mourning that is supplicatory – a mourning that is thoroughly *penitential*.

This much is evident from the first part of verse 10, but the imagery that follows in the balance of the verse brings it into sharp focus: The mourning of David’s house and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will be the kind of uniquely bitter lamentation a person experiences in the loss of his first-born, only son (12:10b). This similitude is presented in the form of Hebrew parallelism and, in this case, the two parallel statements function together in a synthetic way. That is, they build into each other to form a synthesized whole.

- The first statement characterizes this mourning as that which befits the loss of an *only-begotten* son. Though some English versions adopt the sense of an only son, the Hebrew term connotes a *singular* son: a son who is unique or incomparable; a son who is, for some reason, distinguished from all others. Such a son is an *only* son, though not necessarily the *sole* son in a family (cf. Genesis 16-17, esp. 17:15-21 with 22:1-2).
- The second statement identifies this mourning as marked by the sort of bitter grief that accompanies the loss of a *first-born* son. Here the emphasis is on a son who enjoys preeminence over his brothers, specifically the rights of *primogeniture*. In ancient Hebrew (and other) cultures, the first-born son enjoyed unique standing and rights among the other sons; the bulk of the father’s inheritance went to him and the father’s name and household were perpetuated through him. Interestingly, this is the identity Yahweh ascribed to Israel in contrast to Pharaoh’s first-born son (Exodus 4:22-23). It is also significant that the first-born of the sons of Israel belonged to Yahweh and had to be redeemed, first with the Levites and then with monetary payment (cf. Exodus 13; Numbers 3, 18:15-16).

The status of “first-born” afforded hereditary preference. This son was entitled to the largest share of the family wealth; more importantly, the first-born carried forward the father’s (and so the family’s) name, honor and legacy. God Himself drew upon this concept by taking Israel’s first-born (beast and man) as His own possession. In this way He affirmed to the people that the entire nation and its future belonged to Him (cf. Exodus 4:22-23, 13:1-16; also Numbers 3:5-13). Most often the status of “first-born” rested upon the eldest son, but it could be shifted to a younger brother, highlighting that it signified the concept of *first in prominence* more than *first in birth* (cf. Genesis 25:21-34, 27:1-37, 38:27-30, 48:1-20).

These ideas are important to grasping the significance of Zechariah likening this mourning to that of a person who has lost his first-born son. It may well be that the parallelism of 12:10b indicates a first-born son who is also an only male child; that would certainly heighten the agony associated with his loss. But whether the only son or the unique son, the death of the first-born would be met with the most bitter pain and sorrow. *For the principle of primogeniture meant that, in a very real way, the death of the first-born was the death of the father and the entire family.* Thus much more was at stake in the death of a first-born son than the passing of a beloved child, as painful as that is.

At first glance it may appear that this imagery was employed simply to emphasize the severity of the mourning which is the focal point of the passage (vv. 10-14), but a closer examination indicates another, more important reason for it. In context, the notion of “first-born” pertains to the one who is pierced more than the mourning following upon his loss. Yes, the death of an Israelite first-born son provoked bitter anguish in his family, but the point here is that just such anguish will come upon those who pierced the Lord in the person of the Branch. It’s not merely that their mourning will *resemble* those who’ve lost a first-born son; they will mourn like such mourners because they, too, will have lost a singular, first-born son. Indeed, they will realize that this singular son died at their own hands.

One might argue that Zechariah’s hearers wouldn’t have associated the “first-born” imagery with this pierced individual. This seems especially so given the close correlation between this person and Yahweh. And this burden was delivered centuries before Jesus of Nazareth was designated by God as His first-born (“only-begotten”) Son. Nevertheless, the prophets connected Yahweh with His Servant in terms of His own promise to visit His people: The Lord was coming to banish the curse and restore the desolate heritages, but in the person of His Servant-Messiah. And Isaiah associated this Servant with the Davidic Branch who is the centerpiece of Zechariah’s prophecy: the One whose coming and triumph would see Zion’s purging and restoration and the raising of Yahweh’s everlasting sanctuary. David’s Branch – the son of Yahweh’s “first-born” king (Psalm 89:19-29) and Zion’s true King – was coming to her (9:9), but in humility to give Himself for her healing (3:1-10; cf. Isaiah 53). Though yet veiled in mystery, Yahweh’s piercing was the death of the first-born (cf. 12:10 with 13:7, 11:12-13).