

II. First Section – Zechariah’s Night Visions

A. Opening Oracle

The book of Zechariah opens with an *oracle* – a word from the Lord (1:1-6) and a couple of general observations about this oracle are worth noting at the outset: First, it introduces the first main section of the book, namely Zechariah’s night visions (1:7-6:8). But the oracle doesn’t merely precede his night visions; it provides important contextual content for interpreting them. In this way it parallels the oracles of chapters 7 and 8 which introduce Zechariah’s burdens (9:1-14:21). But this opening oracle also introduces and frames the entire book by providing background information regarding the author, date of writing, historical setting, etc.

1. The oracle’s preface identifies the time frame for Zechariah’s prophecy. Zechariah’s prophetic ministry began in the second year of Darius’ reign (520 B.C – cf. Haggai 1:1). This date was important because it marked the beginning of the four-year period in which the Judean remnant who’d returned from exile devoted themselves in earnest to complete the rebuilding of the temple. As noted previously, this project commenced shortly after these Jews arrived in Jerusalem (circa 537 B.C.), but once the foundation was laid they made little further progress and the work effectively came to a halt for more than a decade (ref. Ezra 3:1-4:5). It was only when Yahweh raised up Haggai and Zechariah to exhort and encourage the people that the work resumed in earnest. After four years of continual labor, the temple was finally completed in 516 B.C. in the sixth year of Darius’ reign (ref. Ezra 5:1-6:15; cf. also Haggai 1:1-2:9 and Zechariah 4:1-14).

The rebuilding of the temple was the primary historical concern at the time of Zechariah’s writing. Not all of the Jews who’d returned to Judea shared this concern, but Yahweh did: This work was the focal point of Zechariah’s (and Haggai’s) prophetic commission. Yahweh raised him up to be His mouthpiece and, like all of His prophets, *Zechariah was called to interpret for his Israelite audience their present circumstance and obligations in the light of the nation’s past experiences and future place and role in God’s purposes.* And the temple played a key part in this interpretation: Yahweh didn’t commission His prophet merely to exhort the recovered exiles to get on with rebuilding the temple structure; He gave Zechariah profound insight into the ultimate meaning and importance of this rebuilding project and he was to communicate that insight to the people. God *did* intend for these Jews to be encouraged in their labors, but because they had come to understand the true significance of what they were doing.

- a. They mustn’t think they were restoring Solomon’s temple, and so also should not expect the return of Yahweh’s *Shekinah* when their work was complete. This temple would remain empty of His presence, but this fact should not discourage them in their labors or lead them to believe that their work was empty or vain.
- b. Yahweh would indeed return to His people just as He promised through His prophets, but in the *person* of His Servant-Messiah (cf. Ezekiel 34:23-31, 37:16-28, 44:1-4; also Malachi 3:1), not in His ethereal glory-presence as previously with the tabernacle and Solomon’s temple (ref. Exodus 40; 1 Kings 8:1-13).

2. The larger scriptural text reinforces this emphasis, for, outside of the prophetic record bearing his name, Zechariah is only mentioned in relation to his role in the temple's rebuilding (ref. Ezra 5:1, 6:14). Here he is introduced as the son of Berechiah and the grandson of Iddo (1:1, 7), and Ezra's omission of Berechiah in his account suggests that the post-exile Jews regarded Iddo as a more significant figure than his son. There are several men with the name *Iddo* in the Scriptures, but this particular individual was possibly the priest mentioned by Nehemiah as having come up to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (cf. Nehemiah 12:4, 16 with Ezra 2:1-2). If this was the case, then Zechariah had a priestly background, which made him all the more suited to his role of encouraging the rebuilding of the temple and interpreting its meaning to the restored exiles.

Perhaps most intriguing about Zechariah is his name, which likely means *Yahweh has remembered*. Zechariah is a common Hebrew name in the Old Testament, but it has a poignant significance in the case of this prophet. Hebrew names in general carry a meaning, and many of them expressed something notable concerning Israel's God. This was especially so with Israel's kings and prophets, and in the instance of the prophets, their names often spoke to a crucial truth or dynamic respecting the prophet's role or prophetic ministration. So Elijah – *Yahweh is my God* (ref. 1 Kings 18), Isaiah – *Yahweh is salvation or the salvation of Yahweh* (Isaiah 40-66), Ezekiel – *God strengthens* (Ezekiel 2-7, 24, etc.), Daniel – *God is my judge* (Daniel 1, 6-7, esp. chaps. 9 and 12), etc. With regard to Zechariah, his name highlighted for the restored exiles the critical truth that Yahweh yet remembered His covenant with David (and therefore His covenant with Abraham and Israel). The mere presence of this prophet and the mention of his name was Yahweh's explicit reminder that He would keep His oath regarding David's house, throne and kingdom in spite of everything that argued to the contrary.

3. Zechariah's oracle is pointed and succinct and accords perfectly with the role of Israel's prophets as interpreters of the nation's present in the light of its past and future.
 - a. He opened his oracle with a summary declaration regarding Israel's history and how the nation came to find itself in its present circumstance (1:2): *Israel had provoked Yahweh's anger by its persistent apostasy and had brought upon itself all of the calamity, desolation and suffering associated with the destruction of David's kingdom and the exile and captivity of his subjects.*

This process of desolation had taken four centuries, beginning with the death of David's son (2 Samuel 12:14) and culminating with the devastation of David's household consisting of both his dynastic line and the subjects of his kingdom. David's house, throne and kingdom were thrown down and destroyed as Yahweh had sworn, but this destruction had come gradually. Every step of the way, generation after generation, Yahweh had sent His prophets to proclaim judgment and coming desolation, but while also calling His people to return to Him. Day after day, year after year, century after century, Yahweh remained faithful as Israel's covenant Husband and Father while Zion, His covenant wife, persisted in her harlotry and continued to bear unfaithful, harlotrous children for Him (cf. Jeremiah 7:1-34 with Isaiah 50:1-3; Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1:1-9, 2:1-13; etc.).

Nevertheless, the Lord kept sending His prophets to the sons of Israel with His earnest plea to return to Him. At the same time, He brought His chastening hand against both Israel and Judah that they would perceive their waywardness and be moved to repentance. But all to no avail, and Yahweh finally fulfilled His threat of judgment and desolation (cf. Isaiah 1:1-6, 5:1-6:13). The kingdom of Israel was the first to be overthrown and taken captive. And though the Lord preserved Judah at that time as the remnant of David's kingdom, even that didn't move them to repentance. Astonishingly, Judah's corruption and harlotry came to exceed that of her apostate sister Israel, so that finally there was no option but for Judah to follow her sister into exile and captivity (cf. Isaiah 36-39 with Ezekiel 23-24).

This is the historical situation to which Zechariah referred (1:2-4), and the recovered exiles in Jerusalem were all too familiar with it; indeed, many had *lived* it as the terminal generation that had been dragged away in chains to Babylon. Their fathers in generation after generation had turned away from Yahweh and refused His pleas to renounce their apostasy and return to Him and these, their children, were the ones who'd suffered when His threats were finally realized.

- b. *But yet, these exiles had also experienced the Lord's faithful mercy in liberation and recovery*; they'd lived to return to Judah and rebuild Yahweh's house as He'd promised through Isaiah two centuries earlier (ref. Isaiah 44:24-45:4). And as those privileged few who had experienced Yahweh's faithfulness in both judgment and restoration, these Jews had a unique reason and heightened obligation to be faithful to Him as the remnant of the covenant household.

But the very fact that the Lord was exhorting them to return to Him indicates that they had not done so (1:3a). He'd secured their liberation and raised up leaders to take them back to Judea, provide for their well-being and oversee the rebuilding of His house, and yet, in their hearts, these exiles remained estranged from Him.

- c. And the greatest evidence that they had not returned to Yahweh was the fact that *He* had not returned to *them* (1:3b). Most significant in Zechariah's plea is that it highlights the critical truth that the Lord's return to the house of Israel – that is, to Abraham's covenant seed – would necessarily involve their return to Him; the one circumstance would not, indeed could not, occur without the other.

The significance of this is easily missed by those who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament salvation history and God's revelation of how He was going to accomplish His purpose to restore all things to Himself. The human race, in the persons of Adam and Eve, had departed from God and become alienated from Him in the Garden so that Israel's stubborn waywardness was merely the manifestation in one people group of the universal human problem. And man's departure from God resulted in His departure from them (Genesis 3:22-24). This reality of divine-human alienation continued even in the context of Israel's covenant sonship: Though Yahweh dwelled in the midst of His people, He was agonizingly distant from them, shrouded from their sight and inaccessible.

Despite Israel's unique distinction as God's covenant son (Exodus 4:22-23) and the nation's commitment to walk with Him in intimate devotion, estrangement defined the Father-son relationship from the beginning and through the centuries culminating with exile and captivity. And nothing changed when the exiles returned to Judea; though they were back in Yahweh's sanctuary land and were rebuilding His sanctuary, their hearts remained incorrigibly distant from Him, even as He remained distant from them. Their liberation from physical captivity didn't end their bondage; David's kingdom was yet in ruins and its sons remained slaves in exile from their covenant God (Nehemiah 9:1-37; note esp. vv. 30-37).

Zechariah's call to return to Yahweh reminded his hearers that He had yet to return to them. But it also highlighted the crucial truth already noted and which stands at the heart of Zechariah's overall prophecy: Rebuilding the temple would not secure Yahweh's return to dwell with them. The Lord's glory-presence was not going to fall on His sanctuary as formerly; He *would* return, but in His Servant who is the Davidic Branch. And in Himself and by His work, Branch would bring the sons of Abraham back to their God (cf. Isaiah 11, 49, 53-55; Jeremiah 30-33).

Yahweh's return to His people and their return to Him were not two separate phenomena, but one work of reconciliation bound up in the coming Davidic King – a reconciliation by which He would build Yahweh's everlasting sanctuary.

God's ancient promise in Eden had suggested this pattern (Genesis 3:15-24), but it was Moses who first made it clear to Israel that their future return to Yahweh following desolation and captivity – and therefore the end of their exile – would result from His work *in* them when He returned *to* them (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). That same formula became the mantra of the Lord's prophets, continuing right up to the time of Zechariah (cf. Isaiah 7-12, 40-66; Jeremiah 30-33; Ezekiel 34-37; Daniel 9; Hosea 1-3; Joel 2-3; Amos 9; Micah 4-5; Zephaniah 3; etc.).

- d. At bottom, Zechariah's call to these Jews to return to the Lord was his giving voice to Yahweh's demand that they take Him at His word. Had not His word proved faithful, steadfast and invincible throughout Israel's generations? It had prevailed over ("overtaken") their disobedient fathers, enduring to see them bow before its veracity as they received what it had pronounced against them. Moreover, Yahweh's word had even triumphed over the prophets who'd taken it into their mouths, for it lived on after they had taken their final breath (1:5-6).

Now the Lord's word was calling *this* remnant to return to Him. This word was equally firm and invincible, but because it had bound up in it Yahweh's oath that His people would *indeed* return to Him in truth because He was going to return to them. But for these Jews, returning to Yahweh meant trusting Him for His promise and giving themselves earnestly to the work He'd appointed for them. They must fulfill, *in faith*, their obligation to rebuild His sanctuary – not because they would see their God return to it and David's kingdom restored, but because their task played a crucial part in the process whose glorious outcome they sought.