

Excursus: The Purging of Zion and the Present Corruption

This section of Zechariah's second burden highlights some important interpretive issues. These issues pertain not just to this particular burden, but to the broader prophecy and, indeed, the overall prophetic witness in the Old Testament scriptures. How the interpreter interacts with these considerations will largely determine the time frame and circumstances he will assign to the context and its fulfillment. In that regard, many readers find in this passage imagery and assertions that are impossible to reconcile with the scheme of the present age.

First of all, the Israelite language seems to point away from the present to a future time when God will deal specifically with the nation of Israel and its land. The fact that the burden speaks of the Lord's work of eradication and purging in conclusive and exhaustive terms is also challenging. At face value, it seems impossible to associate the fulfillment of this prophecy with the conditions that mark the present age; could anyone really believe that any component or aspect of this creation has been comprehensively purged of all falseness and uncleanness?

This clearly isn't true of the world as a whole; indeed, it cannot even be said of Christ's Church. Every Christian knows that impurity and falseness continue to plague his own heart and life as well as the community of believers. Neither is it true of Israel and its land, though the prophecy explicitly declares them to be the object of the Lord's cleansing work.

Regardless of how one understands the referent(s) of this purging, it seems that its fulfillment must yet lie in the future. Thus it's not surprising that many Christians – even those not of a dispensational persuasion – interpret this prophecy in terms of the end of the present age, whether in relation to an impending millennial kingdom or the new heavens and earth.

But the challenge to such a futuristic view is reconciling it with Jesus' (and the New Testament's) insistence that all of the Scriptures were speaking of Him and what He came to accomplish. Granted, Jesus' redemptive and restorative work implicates the events and outcomes at the end of the age, *but only as the extension unto full fruition of what He accomplished in His first coming*. This means that any relevance this passage might have to the future is grounded in its fundamental pertinence to the "Christ event" (that is, the great work of God embodied in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Jesus Christ).

This may be true hermeneutically, but it doesn't answer the question of how to reconcile the language and imagery of this burden with the realities of the present age. If it's hard to discern in present world circumstances the deliverance and mourning detailed in the burden, it's even harder to discern the sort of purging it holds forth. The key is reading the burden – and all prophetic Scripture – in its own right: *We must let the Scripture speak and tell its story in its own way and learn to listen with ears attuned to its manner of speaking*. We've got to learn to hear it rather than ourselves. In terms of the present concern, three considerations are foremost:

1. The first is recognizing that the formula, "in that day," indicates that chapters 12-13 (at least, if not the whole burden) must be interpreted as referring to the same time frame and circumstance; either the whole section pertains to a future time or none of it does.

And given the contextual emphases of Yahweh's piercing (12:10) and the striking of the Shepherd (13:7), the text points to this "day" as referring to the "Christ event." One may argue that 12:10 concerns Israel's *acknowledgment* of their guilt in Christ's crucifixion rather than the *event* itself. This being the case, thousands of years can intervene between the piercing of the Messiah and Israel's penitent ownership of it. But this day of mourning is the day of deliverance as well as the day of purging. And the burden intimately connects the Lord's purging work with the striking of the Shepherd – an event that cannot be pressed out to the end of the age. *The burden demands that we see the time of Israel's mourning as the time of Yahweh's piercing and that we associate that piercing with the sword coming against His Shepherd.* This neither precludes nor argues against any future relevance for these things or for the burden as a whole; it simply grounds that relevance in the fulfillment that was realized in Christ in the "fullness of the times."

But if we must understand the Lord's purging work in terms of the "Christ event," how do we reconcile this with what we observe in the world and in the Church? *Why would the burden speak in such definitive, conclusive and comprehensive terms when that sort of depiction is contradicted by the practical reality of the present time?* The answer lies in two other considerations: the nature of the "already-but-not-yet" dynamic of the present age and the scriptural pattern for speaking about eschatological matters.

2. Many Christians acknowledge the principle of "already-but-not-yet," but without a proper understanding of it. Too often it is viewed quantitatively rather than qualitatively. That is, *already* is understood to refer to prophetic content which has already been fulfilled, while *not yet* refers to that portion which remains to be fulfilled. Thus "already-but-not-yet" is treated in preterist vs. futurist terms as pertaining to the *amount* of fulfillment rather than its *state* (condition). But as it expresses the Scripture's own perspective on the salvation history and its culmination in Jesus Christ, "already-but-not-yet" speaks to the reality of complete and exhaustive fulfillment on the one hand (the *already*) and the ongoing progress (fruition) of this fulfillment on the other (the *not yet*). Put simply, the Scripture insists that *all* of God's design for His creation – which the Scripture itself is conspicuously and thoroughly concerned with – has been realized in His Son and His work. *All has been accomplished and therefore all has been fulfilled; but this accomplishment is now bearing its fruit in the creation.* If this paradigm is true, then one would expect to see it expressed in every facet of the creation's existence coming out of the "Christ event"; in fact, this is precisely the case, as the following examples show:

- the creation's redemption and reconciliation (Colossians 1:19; Romans 8:18ff);
- the conquest of God's enemies (cf. Ephesians 6:10-16 with Colossians 2:15 and Luke 10:17-19 with Revelation 12:1-12; cf. also Acts 14:11-17 and 17:22-30 with Revelation 20:1ff);
- the kingdom of God as described by Jesus (cf. Mark 1:13-14 with Matthew 12:22-30, 13:24-33, 45-48; also Matthew 23:13 with 25:1 and Luke 22:14-18) and also by Paul (cf. Romans 14:14-17 and 1 Corinthians 4:18-21 with 15:24, 50-58; also Colossians 1:13 and 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12 with 2 Timothy 4:1);

- Christ's kingship and reign over the kingdom of God (cf. Acts 2:22-36; Romans 8:31-34; Ephesians 1:18ff with Matthew 25:31-33);
- Our sonship as sons of the kingdom (cf. Ephesians 2:1-7; Colossians 3:1-4 with Romans 8:23-25 and Philipians 3:1ff; ref. esp. John 3:1-3);

3. A final consideration is the pattern the Scripture follows in speaking about eschatological issues (matters relating to the fulfillment of divine purpose). This obviously implicates the prophetic writings, but only as they are woven into the fabric of the Old Testament scriptures. *These scriptures as a whole reveal this pattern for the entire Old Testament is eschatological.* This may not be immediately evident, but is easily demonstrated by the Scripture's historical nature. For history is itself eschatological because it is the *history of redemption*. That is to say, history is the intentional and methodical outworking of God's comprehensive design for His creation. And the salient points of this history – with their divine interpretation – are the subject of the Old Testament scriptures.

Beginning with the germinal promise in Eden (Genesis 3:15), the Scriptures continue to emphasize that the Lord's work of creational recovery and restoration was to be cosmic, cataclysmic and exhaustive. In this way recovery would correspond to the fall, which itself involved creation-wide cataclysm: the imposition upon God's creation of the curse of alienation and death. A true remedy must correspond to the disease, and thus the Scripture employs language and forms of expression which capture this correspondence. *But in depicting the remedy in this way, the Scriptures also illumine the nature, scope and severity of the disease.* Superlative language and imagery spotlights the transcendent greatness of the Lord's restorative work, even as it discloses the horrors of the fall and its curse on the creation – horrors which fallen men, left to themselves, cannot fully discern.

This manner of depiction is perhaps most powerfully (and appropriately) displayed in the scriptural theme of the *Day of Yahweh*. The Scripture treats this concept as designating a cataclysmic theophanic event. That is, it is a "day" marked by Yahweh arising to intervene in the world for the purpose of judgment, liberation and restoration. This "day" would see the Lord defeating His enemies with the result that He would liberate His captive people and regather them to Himself, purging their uncleanness and the uncleanness of the earth in the process. Though many Christians associate the Day of Yahweh with an end-time, global judgment, the Old Testament scriptures apply this designation to various historical episodes in Israel's life preceding the coming of Christ:

- Isaiah 13:6-8 speaks to the covenant land's impending desolation at the hand of Babylon, the imperial successor to Assyria and the conqueror of Judah as the remnant of David's kingdom. But it also looks beyond that to Yahweh's "day" in which He would punish Babylon, Babylon, in turn, provides a metaphor for all the nations as they exist in contradiction and rebellion against Yahweh (13:9-22).
- The prophet Joel also spoke of Israel's coming desolation as the "Day of Yahweh" (1:15-2:17). Commentators differ as to whether Assyria or Babylon was in mind, but the point of the prophecy remains the same either way.

Like Isaiah, Joel found an immediate referent for the Day of Yahweh theme in the Lord's impending punishment of His covenant people. But he, too, looked beyond that near-term fulfillment to a distant, worldwide judgment in which Yahweh would defeat and vanquish forever all those powers and forces which oppose Him and His true sons (3:1ff).

- Amos likewise employed the expression, "the Day of the Lord," with respect to Israel's impending destruction. The sons of Israel had been longing for Yahweh to arise to punish their enemies; what they needed to realize was that His day of indignation would fall upon them as well (5:1-27).
- Later, Zephaniah followed the same prophetic pattern as he pronounced Judah's captivity and desolation at the hands of the Babylonians (1:1-13). But like others of the prophets, Zephaniah extrapolated from the impending Israelite judgment to a global counterpart 1:14-18).

In summary, the prophetic witness has the various localized expressions of the Day of the Lord (whether implicating Israel or Judah or the nations that would come against them) prefiguring and pointing to a final, creation-wide event associated with the inauguration of the Lord's eschatological kingdom (cf. Isaiah 13:1-13; Ezekiel 30:1-26; Joel 2:18-32, 3:9-21; Amos 5:1-27; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:1-18). And consistent with the fact that all of the Scriptures – as the record of the salvation history – testify to the person and work of the messianic Servant, the Day of the Lord realized its fulfillment in substance in Yahweh's judgment and deliverance in Jesus – the triumphal Son of David and the Lord's Servant-Redeemer (cf. Joel 2:18-32 with Acts 2:14-21; also Isaiah 40:1-11 with John 1:19-34; ref. esp. Malachi 4:1-6 as concluding the Old Testament witness).

The prophetic scriptures treated eschatological issues in cataclysmic terms, and so also in terms of one great, all-comprehending event. The prophets rightly emphasized that the day of Yahweh's coming would bring the conclusive resolution of the creation's alienation and corruption, but this left the impression that all things would be purged and transformed *in a moment*. Jesus recognized this and thus His instruction concerning His kingdom emphasized its future coming as well as its presence: His kingdom – the promised eschatological "kingdom of God" – was a matter of *already-but-not-yet*. This was a point of stumbling for the Israelites of Jesus' generation; indeed, John the Baptist struggled to reconcile his understanding of the prophets' proclamation of the all-transforming cataclysm of the Day of Yahweh with the way things were playing out in the Jesus' life and ministry (cf. Luke 3:15-17 and John 1:19-34 with Matthew 11:1-6).

In His Servant, God was indeed going to deal fully and conclusively with the creational curse and its consequences, and thus it was proper – even necessary – for His prophets to speak in this way. And Jesus aligned Himself with the prophets when He proclaimed the words, "*It is finished.*" By His death and resurrection He accomplished Yahweh's triumph over His enemies and liberated and reconciled all things as the prophets pledged (Colossians 1:19-20). But this all-encompassing victory must bear its fruit until all creation is transformed in Christ and God is "all in all." In that day, the mustard seed will have become a stately tree (Matthew 13:31-33).