

4. The Third Oracle – Yahweh’s Jealousy for Jerusalem

The third message within the four-part oracle advanced the Lord’s “word” to the exiles by again highlighting His commitment to His larger purpose in the world. The men of Bethel wanted to know from Him whether they should continue their ritual fasting for the sanctuary; Yahweh had responded that it made no difference since their mourning, like everything they did, was actually concerned with *them* and not Him. The great irony in their mourning the sanctuary was that they were no different from their forefathers – *the very people whose self-concerned willfulness was the cause of the temple’s destruction*. In truth, they were just as responsible for that woeful outcome as their forefathers were.

And so, though the children of Israel had begun to return to Judea and Jerusalem, the reality was that they yet remained in exile; their hearts remained far away from their God. Geographical return had not resolved the fundamental problem of Israel’s estrangement (ref. again 1:2-4). Abraham’s offspring remained alienated from Abraham’s God, and yet the Lord’s purpose and promise to Abraham stood fast; He would yet fulfill His covenant oath to be the God of Abraham’s seed and dwell in their midst (cf. 2:1-11, 8:7-8 with Genesis 17:1-8). And this meant that desolation must yield to restoration and renewal.

- a. Thus the third “word” in the oracle returned to the central theme of the prophecy, namely Yahweh’s restoration of His dwelling place. The men of Bethel inquired about the sanctuary; the Lord responded by addressing the restoration of *Jerusalem (Zion)* – a restoration that would see the renewal of His relationship with His people; His return to them and their return to Him (8:1-5; cf. 1:3, 16-17). And given the nature of their exile, their return to their Lord meant their forgiveness, cleansing and regathering to *Him*, not to a geographical location (ref. 1:12-2:12). This message is the focus of the larger oracle, and so also of the burdens which it introduced (cf. 9:1-12, 10:1-12, 12:8-13:2, 14:9-21).

Notably, the Lord here grounded His pledge to restore Zion in His fierce and enduring *jealousy* for her (8:2, cf. 1:14). Jealousy is a relational concept and here draws upon the imagery of Zion as Yahweh’s *spouse* (cf. Ezekiel 16, 23 with Isaiah 49:14-22, 54:1-8; Hosea 1-2; etc.). Here it’s important to recall that “Zion” is a broad concept which ultimately extends to the relationship between the Lord and His creation. Zion speaks to *sacred space*, and thus is used in the Scripture to refer to *Jerusalem* as Yahweh’s dwelling place and, indirectly, to *Israel* as the community (often designated the “daughter of Zion”) among whom He dwelled and through whom He interacted with the world (cf. Psalm 9:11, 20:2, 48:1-14; cf. also Isaiah 1:8, 27, 3:16-17, 66:7-9; Zechariah 9:9). And since the scriptural idea of sacred space (God’s dwelling place) looked to a fulfillment to come in relation to the Messiah, so it was with the concept of Zion (ref. Psalm 2:6-8; cf. also Isaiah 49:1-21, 52:1-53:12, 59:1-60:22; etc.).

Yahweh’s jealousy for Zion indicated, not His commitment to a city, a physical sanctuary and a nation as such, but rather His passionate and unwavering zeal to see His purpose for His creation fully realized.

Thus the Scripture ascribed two dimensions to the Lord's jealousy.

- The first dimension is negative and speaks to Yahweh's jealous *wrath* – that is, His zeal to punish Zion for her unfaithfulness to Him as His covenant “wife.” Throughout her history Zion had shown herself to be an unrepentant adulteress and so, when the day of His patience and pleading came to an end, Yahweh desolated her and sent her away into exile (cf. Isaiah 49:14, 50:1, 51:17-20 with Hosea 1:1-2:13; also Ezekiel 16:1-43).
- The positive dimension – which is the emphasis in this passage – speaks to Yahweh's fervent *devotion* to Zion. True, He had poured out His wrath on Zion and sent her away, but not as the epitaph on His relationship with her. There was no certificate of divorce, for His intention was to restore her to Himself (cf. 8:2, 1:14; again Isaiah 50:1; 52:1-54:17; Hosea 1-2).

Jealousy motivated the Lord's indignation against Zion, but not the unrighteous and irrational jealousy of human beings. His indignation reflected His jealousy for accomplishing His purpose for His creation, which the wider Scripture shows to be the perfecting of His relationship with it centered in man, the image-son. Zion signified *sacred space* – God's dwelling place in relation to His creation – and therefore Zion's desolation could not be final. The world was created to be an *inhabitation* in which its inhabitants would find their blessedness in their intimate *cohabitation* with their Creator (Genesis 1-2; ref. again 2:1-11; cf. also Isaiah 45:11-25 with 12:1-6; also Hosea 11:8-11; Joel 3:18-21; Zephaniah 3:14-17).

- b. Zion's restoration was Yahweh's sure word to the exiles but He depicted it in terms that made it seem surreal and unimaginable. Jerusalem might very well be rebuilt, but could it exist in absolute security and peace, free of all domination and oppression? For nothing short of the total elimination of the subjugating power would allow Zion to enjoy the prosperity and secure inhabitation the Lord was here pledging (cf. again 1:16-2:11, esp. 1:18-21). But such a thing surely seemed implausible given the extent and power of Darius' kingdom. Darius might indeed allow the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt as decreed by his predecessor Cyrus (Isaiah 44:24-28), but not as the seat of an independent kingdom.

Even more, could a rebuilt Jerusalem legitimately carry the title of *City of Truth* with Mount Zion actually being God's *holy* mountain? These words indicated more than the reconstruction of a city and a return to the former state of things; they indicated an entirely new order – a form of the Lord's kingdom previously unknown (cf. Isaiah 65:8-25). If such a thing seemed miraculous to the exiles who heard this oracle, it only reinforced that it would be the Lord's work. What was impossible for them to accomplish (or even fully grasp) was not for Him; the day was coming when Jerusalem would indeed be the City of Truth because Yahweh's relationship with His people would at last be defined by righteousness and truth (8:6-8). In that day He was going to fulfill His ancient oath to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-7; cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 37:15-28; Revelation 21:1-3).

- c. As incredible as all of this might have sounded, the Lord was committed to seeing it realized. And the exiles had a compelling reason to believe Him. For they knew well their woeful circumstances at the time they'd returned to Judea and begun rebuilding the temple; those days saw hardship, conflict and opposition from enemies (8:9-10; cf. Ezra 1-4; Haggai 1:3-11), and yet Yahweh – *the Lord of Hosts* – had upheld His word concerning His sanctuary. He'd insisted that the temple would be rebuilt and He was orchestrating circumstances and events toward that outcome, a fact which none of the exiles in Judea could deny. Indeed, His hand had prevailed over the opponents of His purposes so as to move them to supply the resource for His house and now its completion was clearly in sight.

And so it would be with His word concerning Zion and its inhabitation; restoration *in full* was coming to it (cf. the language of 8:12 with Hosea 2:18-23; Joel 3:16-18; Amos 9:11-15). Zion would yet become in reality what the Lord had proclaimed it to be: the seat of His kingdom and the place of divine-human communion. Yahweh's holy habitation was going to see the ingathering of holy inhabitants – not simply from Judah and Israel, but the nations of the earth. In the day when Abraham's seed became true sons, they would fulfill their calling to minister God's blessing to all men (cf. 8:8, 13, 20-23 with 1:10-11; also Isaiah 11:1-12, 49:1-13). He had neither forgotten nor relented: His pledge to establish Zion as sacred space stood firm and it would be fulfilled (8:11-13; cf. Psalm 110, 132:11-18; Isaiah 12, 52:1-10; Micah 4:1-8); whatever their circumstances told them, the exiles of Israel were to believe Him and hold fast to His word.

- d. The Lord had purposed harm for the sons of Israel because of their unbelief and rebellion (8:14; cf. 7:4-14) and Zechariah's generation knew all too well that He'd been faithful to carry it out. They'd *experienced* His harm and they needed to be just as certain that He was going to fulfill His purpose for good. Destruction, desolation and exile weren't the final word, but only a further step toward the Lord's goal of complete restoration. Once again He was affirming this and the exiles needed to hold His word in settled faith (8:14-15). But such faith embodied an appropriate *response* – the response God had called for all along and which had never been satisfied by the sons of the kingdom: the response of faithful sonship which expresses itself in sincere, devoted love (8:16-17, cf. 7:9-10).

Following the pattern of His previous instruction, the Lord expressed this obligation of love in terms of the relationship the people were to maintain with each other. Love renounces unrighteousness and rejoices in the truth – not mere factual correctness, but conformity to rightness and integrity: the truth of man as God knows him and created him to be. These exiles – and all the house of Israel – were to *live out* this truth with one another in their speech (8:16a), conduct and judgment (8:16b) and attitudes (8:17). Living in the truth would result in harmony (*shalom* – peace) in the covenant household and thus bear authentic and accurate witness to God to the watching world. The Lord demanded that the people hearing His words believe Him and the glorious destiny He'd ordained; the way for them to honor their obligation was to order their hearts and lives toward that destiny.