

4. The word of the Lord's burden to the nations pledged to purge their idolatry and gather them into Zion as part of His covenant household (vv. 7-8; cf. again 1:13-17, 2:10-11). That promise was followed by His announcement that Zion's king was coming to restore her. Like Isaiah before him, Zechariah recorded the foundational and marvelous truth that Zion's restoration meant her embrace of the entire world of men. She would need to enlarge her habitation to accommodate the vast multitude of children that Yahweh, her covenant Husband, was going to give her when He restored her to Himself (Isaiah 53-54).

Thus the Lord's burden concerning the *nations* had *Zion's* restoration as its key theme – a truth that is startling to some Christians and entirely missed by others. And so this burden which commenced with Yahweh's pronouncement of His judgment on the nations moved forward with His proclamation of Zion's deliverer-king. He would secure Zion's liberation and restoration and see her habitation again filled with people. Thus Yahweh's call to Zion to rejoice and shout triumphantly was followed by His affirmation of the unspeakable blessedness she would enjoy in her restoration (9:11-17).

- a. In this context, the foundation of Zion's future blessedness was the fact that her prisoners were going to be released (9:11). Three things about this are notable:

- 1) The first is that it emphasizes once more the crucial truth that Zion's children continued, at the time of Zechariah's writing, in their captivity and exile. Though many Jews had returned to Judea and Jerusalem (and more would follow), it yet remained for them to be liberated from their captivity. The exile of the covenant house involved their banishment, not from a land, but from their covenant Lord and Husband. Thus Israel's return would not occur until Yahweh returned to them. True, the pledge is here issued as if this liberation were already realized (“I *have* set your prisoners free...”), but this is because of its relationship to verses 9-10: It is in view of the king's coming and dominion that the Lord issued His proclamation that Zion's captive children had been released.
- 2) Israel's banishment would continue until Yahweh returned to them. This meant that no human agency (including their own) could bring their exile to an end. It didn't matter where they resided; Zion's children remained in exile until their Lord released and regathered them. Thus exile involved *captivity*. This had been the case with Israel's physical exile in Assyria and Babylon, and so it was with the spiritual reality it symbolized: The exile of Yahweh's people would come to an end when the captives were finally set free – not from a foreign land, but from the “*waterless pit*.”

This imagery harkens back to Joseph's imprisonment in a dry well in preparation for his exile (Genesis 37:22-24; cf. Jeremiah 38:6). Some scholars believe that the point of a *waterless pit* is that it signifies containment that isn't fatal; hence, imprisonment that anticipates future deliverance. (A person would eventually drown in a pit filled with water.)

In the Scripture a *pit* also symbolizes a place or realm of desolation and/or destruction (Job 9:1-31; Psalm 40:1-2, 55:22-23, 69:13-18, 88:1-6; Isaiah 24:16-19; Jeremiah 18:18-23, 48:42-44), and so sometimes the grave as the place of confinement for the dead (Job 17:13-16, 33:13-30; Psalm 28:1, 30:1-9; Isaiah 38:9-19; Ezekiel 31:1-14). Both of these images are suited to the present context and its promise of deliverance.

- 3) A third consideration is the fact that the burden associated this liberation of Zion's prisoners with the "blood of the covenant." There are obviously two general interpretive possibilities: This is a reference to a then-existing covenant or a covenant yet to come. The correlating preposition isn't conclusively helpful either since it has a broad semantic range, evident in the diverse renderings (most commonly *by*, *because* and *for*) in English versions. Most often this preposition functions in one of three basic ways: It expresses *location* (in space, time, or sphere), *reference* or *instrumentality* (personal or impersonal, direct or indirect). Related to the latter is the idea of *causality* (reflected in several English versions).

In this context, there are three primary options for the relationship between this deliverance and the covenant in question (here expressed in terms of its ratifying blood): Deliverance could be *for the sake of* the covenant, *by means of* the covenant or *with respect to* the covenant. Determining which was meant is largely dependent on which covenant was in view. Was this a reference to Yahweh's covenant with Israel (Sinai Covenant), the Abrahamic Covenant or the coming "new" covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)? All were ratified with blood (Genesis 15; Exodus 24:1-8; Luke 22:19-20; cf. also Hebrews 10:28-29, 13:20) and arguments can be made in support of all three. *In the end, it's likely that the reference was to the Sinai Covenant, but this doesn't remove from view the other two covenants.*

In the first place, the New Covenant fulfilled the other two: The Sinai Covenant carried forward the Abrahamic Covenant (ref. Exodus 3:1-10, 6:1-8), but so as to only prepare for its fulfillment in the New Covenant. As the Sinai Covenant (Law of Moses) served the promise bound up in the Abrahamic Covenant, so the Abrahamic promise was fulfilled in the New Covenant inaugurated in Abraham's covenant "seed" (Galatians 3:1-4:7). Even more, the then-future New Covenant is suggested by the fact that the liberation here promised is associated with Zion's restoration which itself was to occur in connection with the coming of David's Branch.

Taken together, these considerations indicate that the Lord's release of Zion's captive children reflected His faithful commitment to His covenant with Zion – the covenant grounded in Abraham and the promise to him. Hence this rendering:

*And you, Zion, by virtue of the blood of your covenant and with a view to its fulfillment, I have set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.*

Although Israel broke its covenant with the Lord immediately upon its ratification and continued to violate it throughout its history, Yahweh remained committed to His relationship with His unfaithful covenant “son.” For Israel – the seed of Abraham – was His chosen instrument for restoring the world to Himself. Israel was an intractable covenant-breaker, but Yahweh was ever faithful to His covenant and His purpose for the world bound up in it.

Thus the Lord’s liberation of Zion’s captive children reflected His solemn, unwavering commitment to His covenant with her. Her disobedience had brought His curse upon her, just as He had warned through His servant Moses. But Zion’s cursing would yield to restoration and blessing; exile and captivity were not to be the last word (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). Israel would yet inherit the Abrahamic blessing and thereby mediate that blessing to all the earth’s families.

And so, while the contextual referent seems to be the Sinai Covenant (here, Zion’s covenant), the fact that this covenant took up the Abrahamic promise and carried it forward toward its fulfillment in the Branch shows that the future new covenant was also in view. The day was coming when Yahweh was going to make a new covenant with the houses of Israel and Judah – a covenant ratified and established in a new Israelite in whom Jew and Gentile would alike become children of Abraham and so children of Zion and her covenant Husband (cf. 9:10, 16-17, 10:4-12 with 3:8-10 and 9:9; also 8:1-13, 13:1-2; cf. also Isaiah 50-54).

- b. This release of Zion’s children was to constitute the fulfillment which all of Yahweh’s previous acts of deliverance only prefigured. And as those acts involved liberation unto ingathering (best epitomized in the Exodus from Egypt), so it was to be with this final great deliverance: *The Lord was going to set Zion’s children free in order to gather them into His stronghold* (9:12; cf. Isaiah 51:1-11 where the first Exodus is treated as a prototype). Interestingly, the burden associates Zion’s return to Yahweh’s stronghold with her being restored in full (“I will restore double to you...”), again highlighting the foundational truth that Zion’s restoration was to be grounded in her reconciliation to her Lord.
- c. In this burden, as throughout Zechariah’s prophecy, Yahweh was pledging His faithfulness to Zion. He would “keep covenant” with her and renew His relationship with her. He was going to gather her children, but because of their captivity, He first had to liberate them. And to liberate them He had to conquer the enemies who’d taken them captive. Thus Yahweh followed His proclamation of ingathering and restoration with the assurance of Zion’s victory over her enemies – a victory that He Himself would achieve on her behalf (9:13-16). The Lord of Hosts – the commander of the armies of heaven and of Israel – was going to employ Judah and Israel (Ephraim) as His weapons against their adversaries, here represented by the kingdom of *Greece*. As noted previously, Greece was soon to become the dominant power in the Middle East, taking into its grasp God’s kingdom land and the remnant of His people. Yet this subjugation wasn’t to endure; Yahweh had decreed victory for Zion’s sons.

This promise enjoyed its prototypical fulfillment in the later Maccabean triumph over Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who ruled Palestine and the Near East for a brief period in the second century B.C. (175-164 B.C.) The Seleucids (Seleucus Nicator and his successors) gained control of the eastern portion of Alexander's empire (later also to include the land of Judea) following his death in 323 B.C. and continued to exercise rule in Judea until Antiochus was driven out by Judas Maccabeus and his rebel army in 165 B.C. This Jewish triumph over a Greek king hearkened back to the Lord's promise in this burden but it didn't fulfill it. For the Maccabean victory didn't secure Zion's deliverance and restoration in the way the burden described (ref. esp. 9:14, 16). *Most importantly, it didn't occur in connection with the coming of Zion's king and his triumph that would establish Yahweh's dominion throughout the earth* (ref. again 9:9-10).

- d. Treated within its larger context, the Lord's oath to Zion looked beyond physical deliverance and ingathering to spiritual restoration. The very essence of His word was His promise to return to Zion and regather her children to Himself in truth: to return to them such that they would return to Him. Only in that way would Israel's exile finally come to an end.

Thus the burden depicted the Lord's deliverance in terms of a shepherd rescuing His flock. This shepherd-sheep imagery is perhaps the most common way the Scripture describes the relationship between Yahweh and His people (cf. Psalm 74:1, 78:52, 79:13, 80:1, 95:7, 100:3; note especially Psalm 78:70-72 together with Isaiah 40:9-11; Jeremiah 23:1-8; Ezekiel 34:1-31; Micah 5:1-9). With respect to the *shepherd*, this imagery speaks to ownership, oversight, care and protection; with respect to the *sheep*, it speaks to dependence, trust, provision and security. It is thus the perfect way for the Lord to depict His rising up to deliver and restore His people – especially in light of the fact that this saving work is associated with Zion's king who is the great shepherd of the sheep (ref. again Jeremiah 23:1-8; Ezekiel 34:1-31; cf. also Jeremiah 33:12-16; Ezekiel 37:15-28).

And the Lord would arise and deliver His flock because they are like priceless stones in a holy crown which fill Zion, His sanctuary land, with radiant splendor. Yahweh's regal glory will at last be fully manifest when He has completed His work of purging, reconciliation and ingathering – when the true knowledge of Him covers the earth as the waters cover the sea; when His blessing has gone out to all the families of the earth through the faithfulness of the Seed of Abraham.

That day will not see its twilight; never again will Yahweh's image-sons rebel against their Father-Lord; never again will the ground be subjected to a curse of alienation, corruption and dissolution. The whole creation will at last attain to its Creator's design and Zion, the city of the Great God, will stand refulgent in all her brilliance. How appropriate, then, that the Lord's pledge of restoration should be punctuated with an exclamation of praise to Zion's excellence and beauty and the richness of her abundance which she will lavish on her children when her king has come and liberated, established, and glorified her (9:17; cf. Isaiah 52:1-15).