

Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

Zechariah – A Study Guide

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Introduction

A useful set of questions to have in mind when approaching passages in a book like Zechariah is:-

- What was the contemporary application?
- What was the fulfilment in the person and work of the Lord Jesus?
- What is the fulfilment in the unfolding history of the church?
- What will be the fulfilment in the Lord's return?

Historical Background

In 926 BC the kingdom of Israel divided into two kingdoms after a period of unity under the reigns of David and Solomon. The Northern kingdom (Israel) consisted of ten tribes, the Southern kingdom of two (Judah and Benjamin). It was during the period of national decline that followed this division that most of the Old Testament prophets emerged to preach their warnings, appeals and promises.

After a period of spiritual decline marked by persistent covenant breaking and rejection of the prophets, God sent his judgement upon the Northern kingdom, known as Samaria (see 2 Kings 17). Samaria fell to Assyrian forces and many thousands of citizens were taken away into captivity. They were replaced by Gentile peoples as recorded in 2 Kings 17:24 and the 'mongrel' pedigree of the Samaritan people came into being.

In the meantime the Southern kingdom continued safely under the leadership of kings and priests who were, for the most part, loyal to the covenant. However, idolatry and covenant breaking developed in the South despite many prophetic warnings. Eventually, God sent upon Judah invasion, conquest and exile to Babylon. The Exile occurred in several stages beginning with the siege and surrender of Jerusalem in 597 BC, then the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, culminating in the third deportation of 581 BC. The king responsible for these conquests was Nebuchadnezzar who reigned over the Chaldean empire from 604 – 561 BC.

The astonishing perspective of the Old Testament is that these tidal waves of political and military power were not accidents of history, but God's instruments for dealing with his covenant people. Jeremiah prophesied in Jeremiah 25:12 that God would give the land 70 years of rest as a compensation for the broken covenant. Nebuchadnezzar was God's tool for carrying out this promise. When God's time came (539 BC) the Babylonian empire was overthrown and the garden city was occupied by the great Persian leader, Cyrus. He decreed that the Jews should be allowed to return from Exile to restore their land and rebuild their city and its temple. This divinely orchestrated movement of nations and empires is wonderfully described in Isaiah 40.

The Persian empire was consolidated and enlarged under the rule of the fourth Persian king, Darius. The mention of Darius's name brings us to Zechariah 1:1 and to the late autumn of 520 BC. The prophet Haggai had not long commenced his ministry when the word of the Lord came to Zechariah.

Contemporary Setting

The Jewish nation, the people for God's own possession, were a shadow of what they had been in the glory days of David and Solomon. They were now a tiny dominion of the Persian Empire. Their borders measured 55km North to South and 65km East to West. The population was about 250,000. The capital city was in a sorry condition. The temple was being restored but was nothing like as glorious as Solomon's temple. The walls were still heaps of rubble and would remain so until Nehemiah came to the city in 444 BC. Many of the exiled Jewish families had chosen to remain in Persia. Zechariah was called to preach God's Word into this pitiable situation. He was given a message of return and restoration. It seems that these might be the key themes of the book that bears his name.

Section 1: The Kingdom described in vision (Zechariah 1-6)

Chapter 1:1-6: The Double Return

Notice the repetition of 'LORD Almighty' which is used over 500 times in the Old Testament, almost a fifth of those in Zechariah. The key theme of 'return' is here. There is a double return; we return to God (repentantly) and he returns to us. Covenant judgements can only be avoided by covenant faithfulness to the Lord Almighty. See Isaiah 40:1 – 11 for an excellent depiction of the repentance – return theme.

Chapter 1:7-6:15: The Eight Kingdom Visions

These eight visions were given to the prophet in one night. They take the form of an eight-fold chiasm with vision 1 corresponding in theme to vision 8, vision 2 to vision 7, and so on.

Vision 1: The Four Cavalry Troops (1:7-17)

If this vision corresponds to vision 8, then we're being invited to see four lots of riders here. The number 4 is the Bible's number for the physical world (see verse 11 'gone throughout the earth'). In an age in which Persian cavalry could be seen securing the empire's borders, this picture reassures God's people that God's empire is being secured behind the scenes by God's cavalry forces. The nations are enjoying their 'peace' but it won't be for long. Their military and political supremacy will be short-lived. God will 'return' to his people and their land and capital city will again be restored to covenant prosperity and triumph. Preachers still have this glorious task of depicting the future triumphs of the Lord Almighty despite the apparent victory of the world's powers. See the cavalry triumph of Revelation 19:11 – 21 followed by the prosperity of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Vision 2: The Four Conquering Craftsmen (1:18-20)

This is reminiscent of the international conspiracy of Psalm 2. The four horns are the world's powers. They set themselves against God's people and city, and appear to win. But God raises up a surprising conqueror in the form of four craftsmen ('carpenters' in the AV). Universal victory will be achieved for God's kingdom by the power of craftsmen who will destroy worldly power for good. The victories of Acts 4 represent this kind of triumph. The great craftsman who destroyed the powers of the enemy did so by the death of the Cross.

Vision 3: The City Surveyor (2:1-13)

The young man with the measuring line is setting out to make a survey in preparation for the restoration of Jerusalem. The width and length reference indicates his concern for the walls (so important for an ancient city's defence). But the new Jerusalem won't need walls because God will be her firewall, and anyway, the population will be so vast as to be uncontainable. People from all the world's compass points will become citizens of Zion. Return from the nations to a restored city.

Vision 4: The Renewed Priesthood (3:1-10)

The reason for the exile was spiritual uncleanness and covenant breaking, not least among the priests. The whole worship system in the temple had become polluted by idolatry (see Isaiah 1). Now a freshly cleansed priesthood will be restored. The contemporary symbol of this renewal was the high priest, Joshua. The picture is of a priesthood rescued by divine choice from its former uncleanness. The fulfilment will be bound up with "the Branch" (normally a description of the king to come from David's line). Satan's power to condemn is broken, the renewed priest is like a kingly branch saved from the fires of judgement.

Vision 5: The Renewed Temple (4:1-14)

After the priest comes the ruler figure (Zerubbabel). The ruler restores the temple in which the restored priesthood will operate. The temple is restored in the power of the Spirit and through the operation of grace. The mighty mountain of opposition will not be able to resist the restoration. The light that shines from this temple is perpetual thanks to the two olive trees that feed the lamp. Revelation 1 shows the Lord Jesus shining in the midst of the lamp stands (his church).

Vision 6: The Flying Scroll (5:1-4)

This is a “measuring device” that corresponds to the plumb line in the hand of the surveyor (vision 3). The measurements of the scroll are the same as the tabernacle’s holy place. The reference to a house destroyed by the inspection of God’s law, related to the “unclean house” in Leviticus 14:33-47. The restored covenant community must be characterised by holiness and covenant faithfulness. Compare 1 Corinthians 11 for a New Testament description for a “house” under judgement because of disobedience.

Vision 7: The Lady in Lead (5:5-11)

This continues the theme of cleansing and corresponds to the judgement on the world of vision 2. Covenant unfaithfulness, which traditionally took the form of the world invading the life of God’s people, must be a thing of the past. This woman is the unclean Babylon woman who corrupts the life of the covenant community. She must be forever removed (see Revelation 17 – 18).

Vision 8: The Four Chariots (6:1-8)

This corresponds to the four cavalry troops of vision 1. In vision 1 the world was at peace and the Spirit grieved, here the Spirit is at rest and the whole world is under the control of God’s kingdom rather than pagan powers. The vision of a restored kingdom is fully realised. The chariots have emerged from the presence of the Lord (as though from between the two bronze pillars of the temple) and established God’s rule universally. The visions close in verses 9-15 with a picture of a king/priest who builds the temple and rules over the kingdom.

Section 2: The Kingdom portrayed in prophecy (Zechariah 7-14)

Chapter 7:1-14: God Looks on the Heart

During the exile the people had observed times of fasting (possibly using Jeremiah’s Lamentations as their prayer book). Now that the return and restoration were under way, this delegation wanted to know if the time for fasting was over. The prophet takes the opportunity to remind the people that God is more interested in heart religion than ritual observance. The restored kingdom must be qualitatively different from the old covenant-breaking community of former days.

Chapter 8:1-23: The Rainbow of Renewed Mercies

Barry Webb calls this chapter a “seven-hued rainbow” of future blessings. As God restores his people after exile, this is what they can anticipate (each section is introduced by “thus says the Lord of hosts”).

1. the Lord’s husbandly love for his people (verse 2).
2. the Lord’s transforming presence among his people (verse 3).
3. the Lord’s comforting protection (verses 4 – 5)
4. the Lord’s amazing grace (verse 6).
5. the Lord restores our citizenship (verses 7 – 8)
6. the Lord restores our prosperity (verses 9 – 13)
7. the Lord restores our covenant environment of holiness (verses 14 – 23)

The future of this pathetic little nation in the suburbs of the Persian empire is looking incredibly bright in the promises of God.

Chapter 9-14 Two closing oracles

See chapter 9:1 and chapter 12:1 for the two “oracle” introductions.

Oracle 1: chapter 9 – 11

Chapter 9 - The Victorious Warrior King

Verses 1-8: the enemies of God’s people are defeated. The nations mentioned here are representative of the many worldly forces that oppose the work of God. Here, God, the

divine warrior, overcomes all who have oppressed his people.

Verses 9-13: the instrument by which this divine victory comes is in the form of a king who enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey. He sets his people free and uses them as a power for good in the earth. See Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and reflect on the instrument he used at the end of "holy week" to bring about this kingdom triumph.

Verses 14-17: the abundance of the future victory will be like a new entrance into a land flowing with abundance. This is a picture of complete and total victory and possession of the land.

Chapter 10:1-11:3 The King/Shepherd who Accomplishes the New Exodus

God is angry with the false shepherds who led his flock astray. Here he promises to return to them, gather them from the lands where they have been scattered (verse 8), and lead them through a new exodus and "they will return" (verse 9), so many of them that will hardly be room for them (verse 10).

Chapter 11:4-17 A Play in Two Acts (the two-shepherd play)

Zechariah is asked to play the part of two shepherds and in doing so pictures the state of Israel and portrays the need for a true shepherd.

Act 1: the Divine Shepherd Rejected (verses 4-14). God's shepherd is rejected by the people for the payment of 30 pieces of silver. This was a significant sum amounting to the value of a slave (Exodus 21:32). The money was thrown into the Temple to be used by the potters who work there. The breaking of the two staves indicate that the rejection of this shepherd is the breaking of the Covenant.

Act 2: the Destructive Shepherd Empowered (verses 15-17). God hands over his covenant-breaking people to shepherds who lead the sheep to judgement. This "play" in two acts was fulfilled in the life and death of the great Shepherd who was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver.

Oracle 2: Chapter 12 – 14

Chapter 12: War and Victory in Jerusalem

Verses 1-9: The Creator Fights for his City. The pagan nations gather (as they have done before) to destroy God's city. But, the Creator (see creation reference in verse 1) fights for his city and defeats her enemies. The pictures of divine judgement are a. potent drink; b. punishing stone; c. panicking horses; d. plundering fire. The Lord wins the battle for his city and the world is brought under his authority.

Verses 10-14: The Creator Dies for his City. This is the extraordinary conclusion. This cosmic victory is bought at the cost of the pierced body of God! Refer to the conclusion of the Day of Pentecost when 3,000 looked upon the one they had pierced and came to grief over sin and faith in the one who was pierced.

Chapter 13: A Smitten Shepherd and a Saved People

Verses 1-6: The piercing of the King will inaugurate a new "fountain" through which the covenant-breaking people can be truly cleansed and the land renewed. It will also inaugurate end of the age of prophecy.

Verses 7-9: Once again we see the centrality of the power of the work of a smitten shepherd who will save the flock and purify them for the glory of God.

Chapter 14: The New Jerusalem

Verses 1-5: The Final Exodus. As the waters were parted before Moses, so now the mountains part before the coming King and his holy armies.

Verses 6-21: There will be a New Jerusalem, the home of righteousness. No unclean thing will dwell there, and all the nations of the world will be represented in the city. Thus, the prophecy which began with a demoralised and destroyed city ends with a beautiful garden city which will be the eternal dwelling of God and his people. But, it will have been bought at great cost through the death of God's shepherd-king.

BOOKS

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