

¹ In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, Zechariah 1:1 It was the autumn of 520 BC - the Persian empire was entering a quiet period. Darius had defeated two rivals for the throne of Persia. A previous ruler of Persia, Cyrus, had allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem so that they could call on their God, YHWH, to bless him. The province to which they returned was named Yehud after Yehudah, the Aramaic for Judah. Judah was the largest remaining tribal family of Israel. They had been conquered and taken captive by Babylon in 587BC and Babylon had been conquered by Persia. Now, many of the Jewish captives were back in their homeland facing great difficulties.

The population of about 50,000 was not homogenous. There were foreigners along with those who did not go into exile whose fathers were poor Jews, and also people from the northern tribes whom the tribe of Judah saw as an impure race, and now there were also those Jews who had returned from captivity. Each group had their own interests. Farming was not yielding much produce, and there weren't sufficient resources for mining or industry (Haggai 1:6). The capital was in ruins. It was a new province carved out of what had just been a part of Samaria, so the Samaritan rulers resented the new influence in the area and tried to block any efforts for improvement. They even accused the region of treason and convinced the king to order the work of rebuilding the temple to stop (Ezra 4:21ⁱ). Those who had returned from captivity were hoping for a restoration of the glory days of Israel, but instead they found life in the region to be extremely difficult.

We will find in this book five headings that begin the five sections. The first verse, 1:7ⁱⁱ, 7:1ⁱⁱⁱ; 9:1^{iv}; and 12:1^v. We will examine the eight visions in 1:7-6:8 and two oracles (prophecies) in chapter 12-14. The visions and the oracles are preceded by introductions the first of which we are looking at today. **The message of the book is the coming kingdom of God.**

Zechariah is most likely the grandson of a priest who returned to Jerusalem with one of the earliest groups (Nehemiah 12:4^{vi}). That would mean that Zechariah was also a priest. He was not alone in his ministry, for his ministry overlapped that of Haggai (Ezra 5:1-2^{vii}). He bears the title of prophet and the first verse declares that the word of the LORD came to him. Before Jesus came, prophets were the direct voice of God. It was one of the main means by which God spoke to the nation of Israel.

It is important to understand the difference between prophets in the Old Testament and people with the gift of prophecy in the New Testament. While both are to convey the Word of the Lord, the prophet John the Baptist and all those before him had the power of the Holy Spirit rest upon them and give them very specific instructions. They literally were the mouthpiece of God. The role had so much authority that if it was misused by false declarations, the person was to be stoned (Deuteronomy 13:5^{viii}).

The gift in the New Testament is less authoritative in that the Spirit resides within all believers and others are to judge what was said as to the validity of the words and their application (1 Corinthians 14:29)^{ix}. Jesus made this clear distinction in Luke 16:16:

¹⁶ *"The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.* Jesus inaugurated the kingdom in the hearts of His followers which changes the role prophecy. Those who held the office of prophet in the Old Testament pointed forward to that day. Zechariah certainly did, as we will see in future passages. That is why **Jesus' first message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."** Matthew 4:17^x Jesus' reign in hearts of people would begin at the first Pentecost after the crucifixion. The Spirit was poured out and the church began. The church consists of those who are called out from the world to be vessels of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us live with Jesus as our King.

Zechariah was five centuries before Jesus, yet his message was similar. The difference in nuance was that Zechariah was mostly referring to the physical kingdom that the Messiah would reign over in the Millennium. His call was for people to be holy so that God could bless the nation and make way for the coming Messiah to physically reign. The idea that people had to be holy before the Messiah came was one reason for the Essene movement. Rabbi declared that if there were a few truly righteous people the Messiah would come. The idea came from Isaiah 40:3^{xi}, and was what John the Baptist preached and the reason he baptized. It was to prepare people's hearts for the coming of the Lord (Matthew 3:11^{xii}).

² *"The LORD was very angry with your fathers.* Zechariah 1:2 Idolatry and the shedding of innocent blood brought the wrath of God upon the previous generation resulting in captivity (Jeremiah 2:8-9^{xiii}). That should have been a warning to the current generation to live in the fear of God. If the blessing of God was not upon their lives, they should have been asking why? What sins were being allowed to continue? Under the Old Covenant God promised physical prosperity when people were obedient to His commands (Deuteronomy 28:2-6^{xiv}). The commands were given for their good (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)^{xv}. They included such things as health laws, societal structure, and directions for proper worship that united the hearts of the nation and pointed to God's soon coming Redeemer, the Messiah.

It wasn't just disappointment that God felt with their fathers. It was anger! Of all the people in the world He had chosen them, delivered them from captivity, gave them land with homes and fields and wells, sent them prophets to warn them when they strayed, and delivered them from more powerful enemies time and time again. Still they turned to the idols of their neighbors and worshiped them. God even warned them before they came into the Promised Land that if they turned to idols He would have to send them into captivity (Deuteronomy 28:49^{xvi}). They did it anyway. We wonder how a people could be so stubbornly obstinate until we read our own history, both national and personal, and realize rebellion is the nature of fallen man (Isaiah 1:5^{xvii}).

There are so many parallels with our own nation. Pilgrims came seeking religious freedom. We had cycle after cycle beginning with the blessing of prosperity followed by

our turning from God, followed by calamity in weather, war, or financial followed by repentance and the cycle would start again. Individual lives often follow this pattern. Because of our fallen nature we tend to go our own way when we are prosperous, but then run back to God when we are in need (Deuteronomy 8:11-14^{xviii}). The good news is that He takes us back. That's why we sing praises for His mercy and grace.

³ Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. Zechariah 1:3 The first great promise of the book is "Return to me and I will return to you." YHWH Saba, the Lord of heavens army promised it! That powerful name is used twice. This was the hope that things could change. It is a word for all mankind for all time. God is gracious. He is not willing that any perish (2 Peter 3:9^{xix}). He wants to bless us. He wants us to love Him more than His gifts. But **when our affections turn to God's created things He must withhold His blessing, because misplaced affections damage our souls and often our bodies as well.** To return to God would result in blessing and favor and restoration to the Promised Land.

Our current president wants to make America great again. The only way that could happen is if we returned to God. No man can make it happen. Corruption runs too deep. As in the time of Zechariah, hearts must return to God before God will pour out a blessing. A blessing without returning to Him would only cause us to harden our hearts even more and destine us for a greater fall.

Our nation is as divided into factions similar to those of the people of the province of Yehud. While we are much more prosperous than they were, the message is the same. The only way any national decline can be stopped is a return to God. It begins in each heart. The promise is for you and me. God says, "Return to me and I will return to you." **There is nothing more valuable or needed than the presence of God in our lives, and yet how we tend to avoid it.** Oh, we like the good feeling in a worship service, but to take time at the start of our day to quiet our hearts before the Lord and listen for His leading is a real struggle. Is it the same with you? I know it is because we are all of like nature.

That quiet place is where revival begins. It is where the battle for the day is fought. In prayer we seek God's help. Whenever we pray we are making the confession that we cannot live without God. We are openly testifying to our reliance on him. We are no longer depending on our own frail resources. As Forsyth says, prayer 'relaxes the tension of our self-inflation'. Biblical narratives and Christian history testify alike to the primacy of prayer in the life of the believer. All the great people in Scripture prayed and across the following centuries men and women have made it a daily priority to spend time with God. The Indian Christian, Sadhu Sundar Singh, prayed earnestly after his costly conversion and testified, **'I used to ask for specific things. Now I ask for God ...** How our life is transformed when we are in the company of a noble friend. Then how much more will communion with the One who is good beyond all measure transform us.^{xx}

⁴ Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. Zechariah 1:4 Refusal to listen to God's call to repent was the final rebellion that resulted in captivity. God is willing to forgive if we will listen and turn. If we will not, it is our own actions that bring judgment upon us. The people of Yehud had seen God's faithfulness to judge their fathers. Would they follow their bad example or return to God? They had already been compromising with the world and no doubt justifying it as necessary to survive (Nehemiah 9:2^{xxi}). But that means they didn't really believe that God would prosper them if they obeyed. Zechariah was holding their feet to the fire as to what they truly believed.

God is certainly calling out to us today with the same message. We need ears to hear and a willingness to pay attention. What happened to our fathers? Maybe you had a godly example. Thank God for that heritage! But many have had bad examples and seen the price our fathers paid for living for the world. Will we learn? Will we turn? The example set for me was to let frustration turn to anger, even rage. I learned to limit it, but recently the Lord convicted me with one sentence. **Dead men don't get frustrated.** It is my old nature that doesn't like some of the circumstances that God allows in my life. I justified my frustration and fought to keep from erupting into anger. That little phrase put it all into perspective for me. If we really walk in the Spirit, in the new nature, we trust that our circumstances are allowed by God and will turn out for our good as promised in Romans 8:28.^{xxii} That means there is no reason to be frustrated, but rather I should be praising God. I had to repent, which is to go 180 degrees in a different direction. My frustration was murmuring in disguise. I should have been trusting God and praising Him.

How many churches are actually sounding the call to repent and turn to God with all our hearts? How many congregations hear and pay attention? It is not a popular message, but it is a most needed message. If attendance is up, is everything really ok? Too often the church has the same goals as the world, comfort, pleasure, and financial prosperity. This is a call to attention, to pay attention, and consider our direction (1 Peter 5:8^{xxiii}; Ephesians 6:10-11^{xxiv}).

What does repentance look like? It is a recognition that we have other loves upon which we focus and of our refusal to embrace the great love of God. It is recognizing how we break God's heart, and how often He has shown us mercy and grace instead of giving us what we deserve. It is acknowledging His second, third, and fourth chances. But most of all, repentance is to turn from evil ways and deeds to fellowship with God and a desire to do His will. It manifests in unselfish love for others (John 13:35^{xxv}).

⁵ Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? Zechariah 1:5 Zechariah is reminding them of the consequences of refusing to turn. When judgment hits, then you know it was God who was trying to spare you. Then you can finally agree with Him. Save yourself the pain and sorrow. Turn when you first hear the call. I wonder if when America faces its inevitable judgment will there even be enough knowledge of God to recognize that He allowed it for our good (Luke 18:8^{xxvi})?

Not only did these residents of Jerusalem know their fathers had died but now those fathers stood before their Judge. It was their fathers who had killed the prophets (Matthew 23:31^{xxvii}). Zechariah is reminding the people of the brevity of life, the sins of their fathers, and the swift judgment of God. What truly matters? So much of life is simply vanity if we are not living for the glory of God. Or even worse, we can be storing up wrath for ourselves on the day of wrath (Romans 2:5^{xxviii}).

6 But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.'" Zechariah 1:6 Once judgment overtook them they repented. If that is what it takes to turn hearts back to Himself, that is what God will do. He does that because that is what is best for our eternal good (Hebrews 12:6^{xxix}). Like a loving parent, He would much rather have us heed His warnings and treasure His love so that He did not have to deal harshly with us. Our focus is often extremely shortsighted. We look for the current pleasure that is passing rather than true pleasure that is lasting and truly fulfilling (Psalm 16:11^{xxx}).

These verses are the introduction to the visions, but also to the whole book. Zechariah's mission is to turn hearts to God so they can be a holy people to build a holy temple that looks forward to their holy Messiah and His eternal reign. Before that can come to pass, the people had to see the importance of setting themselves apart from the world for God's service. They needed to become a holy people for this holy task (Romans 6:13^{xxxi}).

The message in this introduction is just as fitting for us today. We can look at all the loss and sorrow that have resulted from our fathers turning from God. Some of them repented on their death beds, but their lives were wasted in passing pleasures. They may have made a name for themselves in the world, but the names heaven will remember are those who lived to bring glory to God. Heaven will honor the souls that faithfully listened and served in even the humblest of capacities (Matthew 25:44-46^{xxxii}).

Return to me and I will return to you! God promised it. That promise is unconditional and full of grace. It calls us to ask ourselves if Jesus is our first love (Revelation 2:4^{xxxiii}). It asks us if we have gone backward in our life of faith. If you have will you return? Jesus didn't qualify it with how far you have fallen or how long you've been away, thank God! That is because He just wants you in His arms, experiencing His love, and loving Him in response. Will you return to Him?

Questions

- 1 What were conditions like in Yehud? 2 Who was Zechariah?
- 3 How are Old Testament prophets different from today's gift of prophecy?
- 4 How were Jesus and Zechariah's messages similar? Different?
- 5 Why was God angry with their forefathers? 6 What is God's promise in this passage?
- 7 How is America like Yehud? 8 Where does revival start?
- 9 What was their fathers' failure? Ours?
- 10 What is the warning? 11 Why is the introduction a call to repentance?

ⁱ Ezra 4:21 (ESV)

²¹ Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me.

ⁱⁱ Zechariah 1:7 (ESV)

⁷ On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying,

ⁱⁱⁱ Zechariah 7:1 (ESV)

¹ In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev.

^{iviv} Zechariah 9:1 (ESV)

¹ The oracle of the word of the LORD is against the land of Hadrach and Damascus is its resting place. For the LORD has an eye on mankind and on all the tribes of Israel,

^v Zechariah 12:1 (ESV)

¹ The oracle of the word of the LORD concerning Israel: Thus declares the LORD, who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him:

^{vi} Nehemiah 12:4 (ESV)

⁴ Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah,

^{vii} Ezra 5:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. ² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

^{viii} Deuteronomy 13:5 (ESV)

⁵ But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

^{ix} 1 Corinthians 14:29 (ESV)

²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

^x Matthew 4:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

^{xi} Isaiah 40:3 (ESV)

³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

^{xii} Matthew 3:11 (NIV)

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

^{xiii} Matthew 4:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

^{xiv} Deuteronomy 28:2-6 (ESV)

² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. ³ Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. ⁴ Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. ⁵ Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ⁶ Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

^{xv} Deuteronomy 10:12-13 (ESV)

¹² "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?

^{xvi} Deuteronomy 28:49-50 (ESV)

⁴⁹ The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, ⁵⁰ a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young.

^{xvii} **Isaiah 1:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

^{xviii} **Deuteronomy 8:11-14 (ESV)**

¹¹ "Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, ¹² lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,

^{xix} **2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)**

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

^{xx} Stott, John - The Bible Speaks Today – The Message of Nehemiah: God's Servant in a Time of Change.

^{xxi} **Nehemiah 9:2 (ESV)**

² And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

^{xxii} **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

^{xxiii} **1 Peter 5:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

^{xxiv} **Ephesians 6:10-11 (ESV)**

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

^{xxv} **John 13:35 (ESV)**

³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

^{xxvi} **Luke 18:8 (ESV)**

⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

^{xxvii} **Matthew 23:31 (ESV)**

³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

^{xxviii} **Romans 2:5 (ESV)**

⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

^{xxix} **Hebrews 12:6 (ESV)**

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

^{xxx} **Psalms 16:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

^{xxxi} **Romans 6:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

^{xxxii} **Matthew 25:44-46 (ESV)**

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

^{xxxiii} **Revelation 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.