

Zechariah's first and second visions

Littlebourne - Sunday 8th September 2024 - Zechariah 1:7-21

We started Zechariah last week with the first 7 verses, which preface the bulk of the first section of the book. It's around 520 BC, and the exiles from Judah have returned to Jerusalem and have a project to rebuild the temple.

Verses 2-6 told us that the people need some encouragement. Zechariah's message is to return to the Lord - don't be like those that led to the exile, turn back to God and repent. Rebuilding the temple is one thing, but what God really wants is a change of heart from the people. The task at hand is more than just stacking bricks.

These first six chapters tell us about Zechariah's eight visions, that relate to the present and future situation of the people.

v7-8

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, 8 "I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses.

It's three months on from the first words of this book, the eleventh month. From what we can read in the book of the prophet Haggai, this is two months on from the foundation of the temple being laid. Haggai 2:18-19:

18 Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider: 19 Is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on I will bless you."

Building the temple has begun, and what Zechariah has to say should be read in that light - his visions are for a people now rebuilding. The word of the Lord comes to Zechariah in that time.

The vision starts with mention that it's what he saw 'in the night'. Is this a dream, or something else?

Maybe Zechariah is outside Jerusalem in the evening - the myrtle trees in the ravine, the glen, the valley - this is something that would apparently have existed near Jerusalem, so it's possible that Zechariah was there, and saw these things there.

The last part of setting the scene is the rider and the horses - presumably the other horses have riders too, but this isn't mentioned. The only details we have are the colours of the horses, and it's not clear if these colours mean anything.

v9-14

9 Then I said, 'What are these, my lord?' The angel who talked with me said to me, 'I will show you what they are.' 10 So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, 'These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth.' 11 And they answered the angel of the Lord who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, 'We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest.'

12 Then the angel of the Lord said, 'O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?' 13 And the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.

Now, we see it revealed that Zechariah is talking to an angel. It's not clear whether this angel is someone he's been talking to already or not.

This host of characters just show up, no explanation. There's Zechariah, the angel that he is talking to, the rider/man among the myrtle trees, and the Angel of the Lord, who might, depending on how you read this, be the same man as the rider. Lastly, there is the Lord - YHWH - who we don't see, but who the Angel of the Lord talks to.

You might recognise the title 'Angel of the Lord' from elsewhere in scripture - it's a title used in several places in the Old Testament. We don't get an explanation of who this is, but there are clues when this angel appears. The Angel of the Lord speaks as God, identifies Himself as God, for example in Genesis 22:

11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

We always think of it being God appearing to Moses in the burning bush, but it's also 'the Angel of the Lord'. Exodus 3:2:

2 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

There are plenty of other examples, including those where people see this angel of the Lord and fear for their lives, 'having seen the Lord'. So the Angel of the Lord is commonly thought of as a theophany - an appearance of God in some physical form.

It's explained that the rider and these horses - and presumably their riders - have been patrolling the earth. Their report is that all remains at rest. It's peaceful out there. It's this fraught time for Judah, but the nations around are not in such a state - they are at rest.

The Angel of the Lord asks:

O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?

We see another important title - Lord of hosts. This is a title that occurs many times in the Old Testament and means more literally YHWH of armies, or God of armies. Zechariah will use this title a lot - he uses it 46 times. Compared to other books of the Old Testament, he uses it far more often than any other. Only Jeremiah (81) and Isaiah (60) use the title more, but they are far longer books.

For seventy years, Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, have been in exile. For seventy years, they have lived in another land, without the temple, but now things are changing. God's reply is gracious and comforting words, which the interpreting angel repeats back to Zechariah. Jeremiah, at the beginning of the exile, prophesied this (Jeremiah 25:11-12):

11 This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. 12 Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

v14-17

14 So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. 15 And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. 16 Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. 17 Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.'

The Lord of hosts says that He is exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. He's jealous in the sense of wanting to hold on to what is his. Our God is a jealous God, not in the sense of sinful jealousy, envy or covetousness, but in righteous jealousy for what is rightfully His.

In contrast, He is angry with the nations that are at ease. The earth was at rest, the self-assured nations were feeling secure. They were used by God to be agents of judgement on Jerusalem, but they have taken it too far now. God was a little angry, but the nations went further than that. Just as Jeremiah prophesied, the nations that God used are now due their judgement.

Therefore, says God, He has returned to Jerusalem and will rebuild the temple. He says that a measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem, which we see more about in the next chapter. The measuring line is a tool for planning and building, or in this case rebuilding.

God will again prosper Jerusalem - this is what recorded history tells us, the second temple gets built and the people again prosper. This second temple lasts for around 586 years, right up until its destruction in AD 70, one generation after Christ's ministry on earth.

v18-21

18 And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four horns! 19 And I said to the angel who talked with me, "What are these?" And he said to me, "These are the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem." 20 Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen. 21 And I said, "What are these coming to do?" He said, "These are the horns that scattered Judah, so that no one raised his head. And these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it."

Now this next vision, second of the eight visions, is a bit shorter. Zechariah sees four horns - representing those that scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem, the nations that lifted up their horns against Judah.

Horns might be a familiar metaphor in Biblical prophecy - we see horns in Daniel and Revelation as well, symbols of power. These could be similar to the four horns in Daniel - symbolising some of the great empires in existence in the time of Daniel to the first century. Some see the four horns as symbolising the four corners of the earth. The other place we see four horns is on the altar in the temple - possibly the symbolism here is that as these four horns are brought down, so the four horns of true worship will be built up, as the temple is rebuilt. The four symbolic craftsmen or smiths are there to terrify the nations that stood against Judah, whilst a craftsman's job is usually to build something up.

To the thousandth generation

One thing I thought of as we look at the history of these events alongside these visions, is that verse from Exodus 34 (v6-7):

6 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

The exile took place only after successive generations had turned from God. God gave plenty of chances and only when they had failed again and again, in spite of some good kings that God provided - Josiah for example, did God allow them to be overrun by the nations around them. 2 Kings 24:20:

20 For because of the anger of the Lord it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he cast them out from his presence.

It came to the point - or some translations say 'finally', 'at long last'.

Equally, we see in today's passage, God is slow to anger against the other nations too - he stays his hand until they have, on their own, gone too far. He doesn't punish them for being His instrument of justice against unfaithful Judah, but for what they have done of their own accord. Think of when God says that only when the 'iniquity of the Amorites has reached full measure', that they can be wiped out by Joshua and the Israelites.

Notice in those verses from Exodus, that God visits iniquity on the third and fourth generation - our sins absolutely affect our children, we make life difficult for them in what we do wrong and how we offend God. But God's love is to the thousandth generation. It's not too late for things to turn around, for generations to turn back to God and receive the blessing that comes with following God rightly.

Negative world

God has not forgotten His people. We can sometimes feel like the church is weak and feeble today. We might feel like we're in exile to a degree. I don't want to overstate this, it's not as bad as some people like to make out, but nor are things all rosy. We certainly don't have things anywhere near as bad as Christians in other countries - but that's not to say things haven't changed.

Aaron Ren put it like this in 2017, when he started to develop this concept for his book:

Within the story of American secularization, there have been three distinct stages:

- *Positive World (Pre-1994): Society at large retains a mostly positive view of Christianity. To be known as a good, churchgoing man remains part of being an upstanding citizen. Publicly being a Christian is a status-enhancer. Christian moral norms are the basic moral norms of society and violating them can bring negative consequences.*
- *Neutral World (1994–2014): Society takes a neutral stance toward Christianity. Christianity no longer has privileged status but is not disfavored. Being publicly known as a Christian has neither a positive nor a negative impact on one's social status. Christianity is a valid option within a pluralistic public square. Christian moral norms retain some residual effect.*
- *Negative World (2014–Present): Society has come to have a negative view of Christianity. Being known as a Christian is a social negative, particularly in the elite domains of society. Christian morality is expressly repudiated and seen as a threat to the public good and the new public moral order. Subscribing to Christian moral views or violating the secular moral order brings negative consequences.*

The date boundaries are of course fuzzy, and he writes in an American context, but I think this applies to our nation as well - we're pretty firmly in negative world now. We don't have politicians talk about how they are Christians anymore - I tried to think of what religion recent Prime Ministers were and all I could come up with off the top of my head was that Starmer claims atheism, Sunak is Hindu, and Tony Blair converted to Catholicism way back in neutral world times. We're in a different world than the one we were born in, and we need to be like the men of Issachar, who understood the times (1 Chronicles 12:32) and act accordingly.

Conclusion

Anyway, the point today is that whilst we might feel we're living in some sort of exile situation, God's promise is that these times don't last. The nations that defy God will face the consequences. It may take generations - the iniquity is visited on the third and fourth generation, but God's blessing lasts to the thousandth generation. We need patience.

Christians are children of Abraham, as we read about in Galatians, and God's promise is that He would curse those that curse Abraham's descendents (Genesis 12:3). God is faithful to the thousandth generation. (Abraham was around 4000 years ago, and if a generation is around 40 years ish, that's only 100 generations so far... If a generation is 20 years, it's 200, still a long way to go.)

We're not rebuilding a temple, but maybe in future, our children will rebuild a culture, and we need to instill in them the promises that God is faithful and will restore the fortunes of His people once again. Those rebuilding Jerusalem were surrounded by nations far bigger and more dangerous than themselves, so Zechariah's vision tells them it's not in vain - God will once again prosper His people and bring to justice those that oppose Him.